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Testimony before the
Senate Committee on Education
on
SB 103 – Definition of At-Risk Pupil
By
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Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on **SB 103.** This past December, the Delegate Assembly of the Kansas Association of School Boards overwhelmingly adopted plan called "First in Education, the Kansas Way," with the goal of making Kansas the top state the nation for college and career-ready students. One of the specific priorities in that plan is to maintain the current system of using free lunch as the primary factor in determining the level of funding for services to at-risk students. We also believe other factors should be used to supplement this factor, which means we support the current non-proficient weighting. We believe that maintaining the "Kansas Way" of serving at-risk students is one of the keys to moving Kansas from number seven to number one in achievement. Therefore, we oppose **SB 103.** Please consider the following reasons why.

Use of free lunch eligibility is an appropriate indicator of at-risk students

There is overwhelming evidence that economic disadvantage is negatively correlated with academic achievement. Low income students (usually measured by free and reduced price meal eligibility) have lower test scores and graduation rates than their middle and higher income peers. This is true on state assessments for public school students; on state assessments for participating private schools in Kansas, on the National Assessment of Education Progress for states and private schools, and other state and nation reports for educational attainment, such as graduation and drop-out rates.

There are numerous reasons for this fact, but perhaps the most important is that education levels are strongly associated with income. Low income students are more likely to have parents with relatively less education, which means they are less able to provide academic help at home and less able to provide a stable environment that meets basic needs. There are, of course, many examples of low income students who thrive academically and higher income students who struggle. The current at-risk weighting system uses the number of free lunch students to determine the ***amount*** of money a district receives to provide at-risk services. The district then determines which ***actual students*** will receive services, and at what level.

The current system is working effectively meet the needs of at-risk students.

Because the school system cannot compensate for all of the factors that negatively influence a child's academic performance, an achievement gap for low income students will probably always exist to some degree.

Fortunately, schools under our current system have made progress in helping these students succeed. State assessment data shows that Kansas has begun to narrow the gap between low-income students and their peers, despite a significant increase in the percentage of Kansas students qualifying for free lunch.

In additional, Kansas is one of the highest achieving states in the nation, despite a higher percentage of low income students than 29 other states, and spending less per pupil than 26 other states. Kansas ranks especially high in performance of low income students. On the 2011 National Assessment of Education Progress, only six states had higher average fourth and eighth grade reading and math scores than Kansas, and all six spent more pupil than Kansas and had much higher percentages of low income students to serve with those dollars.

State	Percent of Low Income Students At Basic or Above (2011)	Percent of Low Income Students at Proficient or Above (2011)	Current Spending Per Pupil, 2010	Percent of Students Eligible for Free or Reduced Lunch
Massachusetts	72.8%	28.7%	$14,350	32.9%
New Hampshire	70.4%	28.6%	$12,383	23.5%
Vermont	70.5%	28.6%	$15,274	34.6%
Montana	72.1%	28.7%	$10,497	40.0%
North Dakota	70.9%	24.8%	$10,991	33.8%
Wyoming	71.3%	26.8%	$15,169	35.2%
Kansas	69.8%	25.5%	$9,715	45.7%

In fact, as we have previously presented to the committee, Kansas ranks seventh overall on four separate measures of educational attainment. The highest achieving state with a higher percentage of free lunch students than Kansas is Illinois, which ranks 18th in achievement and spends almost $2,000 more per pupil than Kansas. No other state with as many lower income students does as well as Kansas, especially for the amount of resources provided. Quite simply, the Kansas system is working effectively and should not be changed unless there is clearly a better system.

SB 103 would create serious problems for the state, school districts and students.

Because **SB 103** would shift the basis of at-risk funding at grade four and above from free lunch eligibility to students who are not proficient on state reading and math tests, those districts which have had the ***most success*** with low income students would ***lose the most money***. Last year, it was estimated that this concept would reduce at-risk funding by over $100 million.

That reduction would not occur generally across the school system, but would be taken from at-risk programs which are required to be targeted to at-risk students, regardless of whether the students are low income or not. In other words, this bill would reduce funding for ***all*** at-risk students.

Because this bill would significantly reduce funding for programs specifically designed to help students reach proficiency, we believe the most likely outcome would be more students failing to reach proficiency. In that case, the Governor and Legislature would have to increase at-risk funding, quite possibly back to the same levels as before. Unless the legislature has set aside the "savings" initially achieved by this bill, new money for at-risk funding would have to come from cuts to other education programs, such as base state aid, other areas of state spending, or tax increases.

Students are often at-risk because of long-term individual, family or social problems. These problems cannot be fixed with one-time intervention. The current system gives districts a relatively stable source of

revenue to help at-risk students before they take state assessments, and continue to provide support to maintain proficiency. Under this bill, districts would not receive funding for most students until after they fail the test, and would lose funding once the student passes the test – at least until they next time they fail, when they would again have qualify for funding.

Finally, remember it is the students who will bear the real impact of this bill: larger classes, loss of special services and less additional time for learning. We urge the committee to maintain support for a program that is working.

Thank you for your consideration.