



**Making public schools great for every child**

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**Karen Godfrey, Kansas NEA President**  
**Senate Education Committee**  
**February 20, 2013**  
**SB 176 Testimony**  
**Coalition of Innovative Districts Act**

I will leave it to others to address the serious losses possible with this bill in terms of curriculum and standards—graduation requirements could be substandard and bullying and drug prevention standards could be deemed unnecessary, for example.

I will focus on what this bill does well. It ensures that the teachers working in these so-called innovative school districts have no voice in the education program of the district or in their own hours, benefits, wages, and working conditions.

The bill consciously leaves the teachers out – the application is based on a partnership between the district (that would be the board of education and superintendent), the parents, and the community. Teachers are statutorily denied a voice in the application—even though teachers are the ones who actually carry out the education programs.

If the application is successful, then the district is free to toss out the collective bargaining agreement, refuse to recognize a bargaining agent, eliminate any salary agreements, drop health benefits, fire any and all teachers at will, and abandon any other state rule, regulation or statute. Let's be up front about the laws and regulations likely to be ignored in these districts.

Why does that matter? Teachers want to innovate in their classrooms and schools. Many of them do all the time. Innovation, however, means taking risks, and teachers have to know that they are supported and empowered to try new things. They have to have the district's trust. That is partly what our laws and rules and regulations do, laws and regulations that have served us well for many years. Teachers need to know that if they try something and a parent complains or the result isn't perfect, they won't lose their job without a fair process.

If we want to improve schools, look to the teachers. If we want innovation, remove the fear to innovate from teachers. Look no further than Finland – the top performing nation in the world in education. Finland, with a highly unionized teaching force, has stopped demonizing teachers and given them the freedom to teach without fear of termination because the superintendent doesn't like seeing her in pants or him without a tie.

For teachers to be successful, they have to know they'll have working conditions that support that success. They won't be told to work every Saturday or lose their job, they won't fear that if they question a curriculum decision they will lose their job, and they won't see some teacher compensated more handsomely even though they are just as significant to the school effort toward excellence.

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Will teachers stay under those circumstances? Let me tell you about a teacher in Wisconsin where bargaining was lost. Her salary was reduced from over \$65,000 to \$30,000 with a chance to earn merit pay in \$5000 increments. She was inducted into the National Hall of Fame in 2012—obviously an outstanding teacher. She chose to leave that district, however, because of the lack of respect shown to teachers. For students to receive excellent education, they need excellent teachers. Removing the laws that have served us well in Kansas won't promote that.

Why is the assumption that exemption from laws is necessary for innovation? Look at the innovation you've seen across the state. I traveled with many of you to visit Walton Rural Life Center. Our current system produced that school. Teachers there worked together on innovative project based learning under the laws this bill wants to strip away. They know they are valued and empowered to come up with new ways to make their students and school more effective.

Walton is only one example. You also heard earlier from the Kansas Teacher of the Year team. You were impressed by the innovative work they are doing. You heard Colleen talk about her Saturday School where her kids traveled the community and learned in real-life situations. You heard Dyane talk about her project with Treasure Island where they researched for 10 weeks including skyping with people across the world. What more innovation could you ask? The current system allowed their approach. Our KTOY team knew trying something different would be supported.

Let me add a few more examples. Your committee went all the way to Oklahoma City to see an innovative career oriented school. I hope you also take the time to go across town to see Washburn Tech of some of our other fine Kansas vocational schools—they are equally impressive. Look at some of our KCK schools. New Stanley Elementary and Northwest Middle School both now operate as year long. They worked out an agreement for that innovation under the current law. Concordia, where the relationship between the administration and the association is strong, has teachers embracing the challenges of an innovative and challenging evaluation system because they know their efforts are supported. All across the state we see amazing innovation using technology. I visited an elementary school where the kids were ecstatically using iPads in a variety of ways to learn the content; children could select the activity that fit their learning style. We wanted to bring in a teacher who recently wowed educators at a conference with her innovative use of technology, but she hasn't been in her district very long, and we didn't want to jeopardize her position by asking to testify in a way her school board might not approve.

I'd recommend you look at research on schools that have been exempted from laws and regulations before you make a decision. Schools that are free to ignore laws in other states have not outperformed other schools. So why would we blindly follow a path that doesn't lead to improvement?

We have seen bill after bill this year with no purpose other than to make sure that teachers are seen and not heard. There are bills to deny teachers access to payroll deduction, to prohibit teachers from speaking in the political realm, to strip teachers of the modest job protections they have now, and to statutorily deny them a seat at any table – not just the negotiations table – but any table at which the functioning of a school district is discussed.

At a time when repeated cuts to school budgets, large layoffs of teachers and support personnel, and years of frozen salaries have reduced teacher morale to an all-time low, it is offensive that so many seem bound and determined to make teachers feel threatened and insulted, calling them “union thugs” because they dare to stand up for their students and schools.

You could not ask for a more dedicated group of professionals. Teachers spend their evenings grading papers and preparing lessons. They accept frozen salaries year after year. Teachers spend their own income to make up for reductions in classroom supply budgets. Teachers around the nation have even put themselves between gunmen and their children –giving their lives to protect your children and grandchildren.

If we really seek innovation in our schools; if we really want higher achievement and more post-secondary success, then it's time to stop telling the teachers to sit down and shut up.

These actions – be they bills, proposals, agendas, or public statements – are a shameful stain on the history of Kansas. For the first time in our more than 150 years, we seem content to turn our backs on the men and women who strive every day to deliver the best quality education possible for every child in this state. And Kansas teachers deliver every day. Despite dramatic funding reductions and staff layoffs over the past several years, student achievement has stayed strong. Even the American Legislative Exchange Council – a group not noted for praising public schools – has determined that Kansas schools are the seventh best performing schools in the nation.

So, if your goal is to create innovative, high-performing schools, SB 176 is not the way to do it. By ignoring the voice of the teachers and by stripping them of the protections that allow them to create and innovate without fear of retribution, you will have the opposite effect. If you really do want innovation, empower your teachers.