



United School Administrators of Kansas
515 S. Kansas Avenue, Suite 201
Topeka, Kansas 66603
Phone: 785.232.6566
Fax: 785.232.9776
Web: www.usakansas.org

Senate Education Committee

Monday, February 25, 2013

Dr. Deborah J. Hamm, Superintendent of Newton USD 373

SB 169 – Kansas Reads to Succeed Act

On behalf of the students, teachers, parents, and Newton Board of Education members, I would like to express my appreciation for the opportunity to provide this testimony on their behalf, and on the behalf of United School Administrators of Kansas (USA|Kansas) and the Kansas School Superintendents Association (KSSA) regarding the Kansas Reads to Succeed Act.

I wish I could be with you today to speak personally in opposition to this bill, but the inclement weather precludes that. While I commend the Governor and members of the Senate Education Committee for their efforts to address an issue that impacts student achievement across all curricular areas, *this bill will not solve the problem of third graders who don't read on grade level and it doesn't address the underlying issues related to poor reading achievement.* I believe this bill is a simplistic solution for a complex problem.

After the Council of Superintendents in January, the Governor met with several superintendents, including Dr. Randy Watson, Superintendent of McPherson USD 418 and President of Kansas School Superintendents Association. As a result of that meeting, Dr. Watson asked Dr. Robert Morton, Superintendent of Coffeyville and me to co-chair a task force to discuss the Governor's Kansas Reads to Succeed Initiative. A group of 14 educators were asked to join with us to discuss reading achievement with a goal of all children reading on grade level at the end of third grade.

The educators represented all areas of the state – from small rural schools to larger suburban schools. These educators were selected based on their knowledge of and interest in reading achievement. Due to a request for our recommendation to be returned quickly to the Governor, this task force met only once. However, we were and are willing to commit additional time to this goal. I believe that you have been provided a copy of our report.

We believe that the Governor's initiative has far reaching implications that this bill does not address:

- **Pre-Kindergarten.** Research indicates that substantial language development occurs from birth to age 8, and according to some research the time between age 3 and 5 is particularly important. Pre-school opportunities for many children in Kansas are limited to community-based programs, special education programs, or 4-year old at-risk programs. These programs do not serve all of the children of Kansas.

Senate Education Committee

Date 2-25-13

Attachment 13

There are students who are underserved. Research indicates that quality pre-school programs are most beneficial for students who are underprivileged and/or minority students. A recent study by the Kansas Health Foundation supports this finding for children in our state.

- **All-Day Kindergarten.** While many districts have instituted an all-day program for kindergarten students and this additional instructional time has benefited many students, the lack of full funding is jeopardizing this important intervention. Research supports early intervention – supporting targeted and (eventually) universal pre-school and all-day kindergarten. *In order to impact the greatest number of students who are reading at grade level at the end of third grade, the state will need to commit resources at the earliest ages possible.*
- **Professional Development.** While this bill does address professional development in a limited way, in order to positively impact reading instruction in the state, *attention must be focused on providing pre-service teachers with instruction that will prepare them to assess, diagnose, prescribe, and instruct students utilizing research-based processes.* In addition, many of the state's teachers must have additional professional development to address the reading needs of a very diverse set of students.

Section 4 of SB 169 states that “qualifying organizations” may apply for grant funds for two purposes: 1) developing research-based interventions and strategies for students in kindergarten through grade 3, thereby preventing retention; and, 2) providing professional development for teachers in rural communities. These purposes are laudable. However, *significant research has already been conducted in reading instruction over the last decade, and the resulting interventions and strategies are available to schools.*

Two of these – Response to Intervention (RtI) and Kansas' Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) – provide the frameworks that many districts across the state are already using to positively impact achievement. It, therefore, seems wiser to provide additional support to schools already using these frameworks. Rather than taking on the next great idea, our resources would be better utilized to focus our attention on refining systems that are already showing promise. One of the greatest barriers to school reform and sustained improvement is the next great idea.

While providing professional development for teachers in rural communities will address needs in some Kansas schools, it will not address the needs for professional development in urban and suburban schools. *Professional development has not been supported with state funding in several years and is a statewide need.*

Another element of concern in SB 169 is that is the preference given to “qualifying organizations who provide at least a 30% match of funds.” However, the qualifying organization will not be allowed to use state or federal funds for the match. That means that Title I, Title IIA, Bilingual, ESOL, or At-Risk funds would not be counted a part of the

match. Qualifying organizations would need to use only funds from local sources. This restriction comes at a time when financial resources are seriously compromised. *It is quite likely that some of the neediest schools would, therefore, be unable to apply for a grant due to this factor.*

The bill also provides for the possibility that students retained in third grade could advance to fourth grade mid-way through the year if they have gained the skills necessary to reading on grade level. The authors of the bill do not, however, suggest how these students would have had access to other content such as mathematics, science, or social studies during that same time period. Failure to address these factors and promoting students based on a reading level alone may result in learning gaps in other areas.

In closing, I would like to acknowledge that the bill before you is patterned after similar legislation in the state of Florida. A recent Harvard study determined that there were short-term benefits in reading achievement due to third grade retention. *However, these benefits were found to fade-out over time and to be statistically insignificant after six years.* The researchers also found that while there was a reduction in the retention of students after grade three, there were no discernable differences in absenteeism or special education placement. *The researchers stated that additional research regarding this policy's impact was needed; they were unable to prove that retention is beneficial to students in the long run* (Schwerdt & West, 2009).

Current research clearly indicates that the earlier the intervention occurs, the greater the likelihood that a child will be successful at obtaining grade level competency by third grade. In order for educators to be effective with the interventions, they must be cognizant of and adept in utilizing current reading research. This will require extensive professional development for some of Kansas' teachers and instructional support for others. We must improve our ability to diagnose specific deficits, prescribe the most effective intervention, and provide the instruction necessary for students to be successful.

I appreciate your time, attention, and service to the state of Kansas. A copy of the *KSSA Reading Report to the Governor* is attached to this testimony. Thank you, again, for the opportunity to provide this testimony today.

TO: Governor Sam Brownback
FROM: KSSA Reading Task Force
DATE: February 2, 2013
RE: Kansas Reads to Succeed Initiative

Following the Council of Superintendents January meeting, superintendents were invited to Cedar Crest and entered into a conversation regarding the "Kansas Reads to Succeed Initiative" that was introduced during the State of the State address earlier in the month. Dr. Randy Watson, President of Kansas School Superintendents Association, offered to assemble a task force with the purpose of offering suggestions for the successful implementation of the initiative. Dr. Robert Morton, Coffeyville Superintendent, and Dr. Deborah Hamm, Newton Superintendent, were asked to co-chair the task force. The KSSA Board of Directors were asked to recommend educators from each region to be considered for the task force. Members were selected from regions across the state.

With a commitment to provide \$6 million to "support innovative programs to help struggling readers," we considered our charge was to address several questions:

1. What assessment(s) and what level of achievement should indicate that a student can read on grade level in 3rd and 4th grade to be college and career ready?
2. What support systems are necessary in schools to see that all students can read at this level?
3. What professional development is necessary to achieve this outcome?
4. What targeted funding would be necessary to achieve this outcome?

When making reading achievement a priority, Governor Brownback cited National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results that indicated that 29% of Kansas fourth graders do not read at the proficient level. However, further review of NAEP data indicated reading results were mixed for Kansas students. Although the average scale score for all students in fourth grade reading improved from 220 in 2003 to 224 in 2011, the only statistically significant change occurred in students who were at or above the basic reading level. Currently, seven states out rank Kansas in students who are performing at the basic or above levels: Connecticut, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Vermont.

The committee engaged in a thoughtful and fruitful dialogue regarding how best to ensure all third grade students are able to demonstrate proficiency in reading at grade level. All agreed that paramount to success in this endeavor is a comprehensive approach to the "birth-to-five" and PreK - second grade child. All members of the task force feel strongly that a greater emphasis on early childhood education is critical to achieving the Governor's goal of every child reading at the proficient level by the end of third grade. We also believe that professional development is an ongoing expense that will be necessary to assist educators with the interventions necessary to meet the needs of all children. A literacy coach could provide staff development in a collaborative method by working side-by-side with teachers to foster print rich environments in the early years and assist teachers instructional practices related to the five components (i.e., phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary,

comprehension) of effective reading. To leverage the relatively small amount of funding available at this time, we present the following recommendations.

Recommendations

Given the limited amount of funding available for this initiative, the task force made the assumption that the funds would be distributed through a grant process. Understanding that each school district within the state will have different needs and resources available, we recommend that guidelines for districts be broad and allow for flexibility. Local school boards and district administrators must be able to adapt the guidelines to meet the needs of the students in their districts. Some districts have greater numbers of English Language Learners and At-Risk Students, or fewer or greater numbers of community resources.

Therefore, we recommend that districts applying for and receiving funds for this initiative:

1. establish an advisory council comprising entities such as Head Start, Parents as Teachers, private business partners (i.e., Save the Children) or other organizations in their community or area. This advisory council will meet monthly to oversee the implementation of early childhood education and make key decisions based on community needs. These partners will bring their own funding streams, staff, and expertise to the process and are integral in the planning and implementation of the overall early childhood education for their community.
2. develop comprehensive plans designed to increase parent engagement. State agencies (i.e., KSDE, Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund) will provide support and resources for districts as the comprehensive plan is developed.
3. develop comprehensive professional development plans focused in three areas: reading achievement for children in poverty, increasing the skill level of teachers for teaching reading, and data analysis for diagnosing and prescribing reading interventions.
 - a. Generally, children in poverty, especially if generational, enter pre-school programs or kindergarten at a severe disadvantage compared to more affluent peers. An educator's understanding of poverty and the related educational issues can impact instruction. It is our believe that with increasing numbers of children living in poverty it will be beneficial to the educational system as a whole and reading instruction in particular if educators have a deeper understanding of effective strategies to work with children and their families living in poverty. Districts should look to partner with colleges and universities as well as other agencies to best address this issue.
 - b. It is not enough for schools to identify the students that are not successful. Professional development plans will specifically address skills teachers need to diagnosis the skills that are preventing students from being a proficient reader, prescribe the literacy learning needed for the student to gain proficiency, and provide the instruction necessary for the student to become proficient utilizing effective instructional strategies. As the task force considered the skills of teachers currently in the workforce, it was believed that more professional development was needed in this area.
 - c. Related to improving teachers' skills, professional development plans will specifically address the five components of effective reading instruction:

phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Districts will evaluate their current literacy programs in Pre-K -3 for effectiveness in addressing the key components of literacy instruction and design professional development specific to these areas. Districts should utilize resources from KSDE and colleges and universities for assistance.

- d. The plan will include professional development designed to increase expertise in the classroom specifically as it relates to literacy accountability. This should not start at third grade – administrators and teachers in PreK-2 must have the ability to use data to make instructional decisions. Professional development that furthers the use of data evaluation as a tool for targeted literacy instruction will be implemented in order to predict college and career readiness from an early age and ensure students are presented with opportunities to receive targeted instruction.
 - e. During the 2013-14 school year, professional development plans will target preschool through first grade teachers in order for the current kindergarten class (and those that follow) to benefit from this initiative. In subsequent years, targeted professional development for second through fourth grade teachers will be provided. Additionally, plans will include ongoing, job-embedded professional development to ensure effective implementation and skill development for teachers.
4. implement a more refined, form of Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), Response to Intervention (RtI), or other district designed program during the regular school day for those struggling students who need additional support. District plans will outline what improvements will be made to the system being currently used.
 5. use multiple measures and offer students two to three attempts for success. A suggested process would be: a) an assessment would be given in March of the third grade year; b) if the student is determined to not be at the third grade reading level, an intervention plan will be written to address deficient areas; c) student is reassessed in May; d) if the student is still below grade level, the student will be enrolled in summer school and assessed again at the end of the summer session; and e) if the student still does not reach third grade reading level, and if the student has met all of these requirements, the student will be promoted.

Implications

The task force believes that there are broad reaching implications for this initiative. We believe that consideration must be given to how the state will strengthen Pre-K programs that extend beyond targeted program and move toward universal Pre-K programs. In a study conducted by the Kansas Health Foundation findings indicated that middle and upper class children were highly likely to be ready for kindergarten whereas, low-income children were not.

Therefore, we believe that it is critical that adequate funding be secured to support early childhood education starting with targeted programs. Research clearly supports early intervention and the importance of the earliest years of a child's life. If the state desires to have a long-term impact on reading proficiency, then we must focus attention on children prior to the compulsory attendance age of seven. How will we support children from birth to

age 7? How will we support families of young children? How will we engage our communities in dialogue regarding the learning needs of the very young?

We also believe that state policymakers should fully fund kindergarten. All day kindergarten programs benefit students and provide additional time for students to engage in print rich environments and developmentally appropriate learning opportunities.

We believe that it is critical to engage universities and colleges in our state regarding early childhood and elementary education programs that produce the state's future teachers. Dialogue should include the quality of experiences pre-service teachers receive and how those experiences could be strengthened. We believe that more should be done to increase the knowledge base of graduates in diagnosing reading difficulties and determining interventions. While these topics are addressed in graduate programs, teachers must work with students with difficulties in their first years of teaching.

We believe that if this initiative is based on a competitive grant process there are additional questions that will need to be addressed: Will the criteria be for all districts eventually? Or only for those districts that successfully apply for the grant? If the program is not funded for all schools, how will schools be held accountable? Will there be additional funding to account for increased third grade students as a result of retention? How will instruction change if a student is retained?

Conclusion

The task force appreciates the leadership of the governor in addressing literacy and the opportunity to provide our insights based on our years of experience in the field and understanding of literacy research. We appreciate the leadership of Dr. Randy Watson in organizing this task force and allowing us this opportunity.

We are willing to continue our work in order to provide more guidance and specificity. We recognize that this report is limited in scope and details as a result of the quick response requested.

Lori Alvarado, Kansas Head Start Director
Becky Cheney, Twin Valley USD 240
Deborah Hamm, Newton, USD 373
Elise Heger, Hugoton USD 210
Shelly Kiblinger, Hutchinson USD 308
Charlene Laramore, Derby USD 260
Tonya Merrigan, Blue Valley USD 229
Robert Morton, Coffeyville USD 445

Ruth Mott, Auburn-Washburn USD 437
Bill Siedl, Canton-Galva USD 419
Vicki Schweinler, Emporia USD 253
Janice Smith, The Opportunity Project
Ron Walker, Geary County USD 475
Jane Weiler, Children's Cabinet and Trust
Judy Welter, Paola USD 368
Bill Wilson, Scott City USD 466

