

March 14, 2019

Dear Education Committee,

My name is James Sutton, Superintendent of Belle Plaine USD 357. We are a school district of about 650 students near Wichita. I voice my concern and opposition to House Bill 2395. As I read through the highlights of the bill I was deeply concerned about the lack of direction in the bill, the decrease in local control, and the continued resistance this bill represents to adequately fund education.

There is a concerning lack of direction in House Bill 2395. For instance, it creates a task force to study district policies and the impact of bullying while it simultaneously creates a law that is intended to solve the problem yet to be researched, a law that appears to enable some to misuse the bullying problem to divert public funds to private schools. This “bullying scholarship” approach will not solve or even assist in solving the complicated bullying problem that all schools wrestle with. It will simply complicate the current problem and create an additional, larger one. Collectively, this bill has so many additional requirements and restrictions that it is not going to be beneficial to anyone. I’m confident that this is not the legislature’s intent.

I have a concern about the multiple ways that this bill erodes the local control of districts. This bill would limit support for bilingual students, limit cash balances that often enable small districts to address planned and unplanned budget challenges, establish additional graduation requirements while appearing to ignore the current State Department attempts to improve schools, complicating the use and effectiveness of bond initiatives, and restricting districts from making local transportation decisions. Some of these new stipulations would impact my district. Some would not. It is uncertain what the various financial impacts would be to each district, but it seems clear that the multi-directional approach of this bill will have a negative financial impact on us all.

I continue to be concerned and awed by the desire of some to resist the call to adequately fund education. House Bill 2395 appears to be another attempt to do that. The courts have repeatedly reviewed both sides of the issue and have repeatedly found that we, as a state, should be doing more to support education. Why does the collective approach of the legislature seem to be, how to sidestep the multiple court rulings. Our goal to fund education at a level equivalent to the base state aid of 2009 is not a lofty one. At a time when we need legislative support to improve the salaries of teachers, the wages of noncertified, to address the growing social and emotional needs of our students, and to improve our graduates’ success, please, please, please, just provide us with additional funds so we can address our individual needs. We all want to improve the educational environments of our students and staff. It is a common goal every district and the legislature share. If you simply provide us with the stable support we seriously need, we, the local districts, will do that for our communities and for the state as a whole.

House Bill 2395 appears to be a convoluted, collection of individual or small group concerns, not a thoughtful, legislative, research-based answer to a problem. It will complicate the condition of individual school districts when we simply, honestly need your support. It will actually make some of the problems that are being addressed, worse.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
James Sutton, Ed.D.
USD 357 Superintendent