

Testimony before the  
**House Committee for K12 Education Budget**

on

**HB 2119**

by

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Madam Chair and members of the committee

I am proud to be a 5<sup>th</sup> generation farmer from the beautiful Flint Hills of Kansas. And I am even prouder to be a husband to my wife Sarah and father to 4 kids between the ages of 9 and 18. I sit before all of you today in this committee hearing as an opponent of HB 2119 in its current form.

To begin, I would like to personally thank each of you for affording me this opportunity to share my perspective on HB 2119. As our school district's name truly indicates, USD 475 is located in greater Geary County. We serve several communities within our county including both rural and urban children. We also are very proud to be considered the home school district for our wonderful neighbors on Fort Riley including the Big Red One. In totality, on any given year, we serve between 6,500 and 7,500 students of which over 50% and historically upwards of 60% are students of military and/or military impacted families. Because of this, we are truly a school district within the State of Kansas that has a global reach while providing critical educational needs to a population of students that are as diverse in their cultures, languages and backgrounds as they are in their needs, talents and aspirations. I could spend the rest of my time with you all today and beyond bragging to you about what it means to my wife and I to be able to raise our 4 children in this amazing district along with describing to each of you the worldly advantages and experiences they will have as they enter this global society as young adults having a high school diploma from USD 475.

Alas, we are here today to focus on HB 2119 and the impacts, both intentional and unintentional, that it could have on our district and numerous other districts across our great State. As you can tell in my opening, like many of our fellow districts in Kansas, at USD 475, we are extremely proud of our school district, our facilities and most importantly, the staff and students that ultimately form the foundation for our community

as a whole. Outside of our friends on Fort Riley, we are the largest employer in Geary County which inherently positions us at the core of the economic engine for the communities and county we serve. So like any many other great examples in our State, as our school district goes, so goes the economic well-being of the municipalities of which we serve. This is a well known fact that I believe we can all agree upon regardless which side of the aisle each of us may choose to sit on. With this in mind, as committee members on this important Kansas House committee, you all often hold the keys to not only the educational success of our students but also, in a large part, the economic engine that drives our State, especially outside of the 3-4 most populated counties. I believe this is a challenge you all have openly accepted by being on this committee and one that you are up to facing and improving upon every day that the Kansas Legislature is in session, and beyond.

That being said, everyone in this discussion today is aware, having lived it in one means or another, the recession in 2009 and the years to follow were difficult for the majority of the school districts in Kansas and beyond for that matter. Like many others, USD 475 had to make some tough decisions in order to stay viable and still conduct the business for which we are blessed to do – educating children. Prior to the paradigm shift in March of last year thanks to COVID, we were clipping along and making things happen every day for our students, their families and our staff. We have a new high school in the works, we have greatly expanded an already amazing early childhood program and we had a renewed focus on providing for our students' needs, not only from an educational standpoint but from a social and emotional development standpoint. As a Board of Education member that was on the front lines of the initial COVID response, it was gratifying to see our district come together with our community to put our children's needs first and find solutions to problems we as a collective had only considered on whiteboard sessions if even that. To this day, we continue to flex and adjust with each new opportunity that COVID throws at us. As an outsider looking in, not being an educator myself, I stand in awe of how our staff and students have adapted and excelled well beyond what we considered 'normal' some short 11 months ago!

So in getting to the point of me being here today, based on my research and conversations, both with my colleagues and several colleagues of yours on both side of the aisle, it would appear that HB 2119 is structured in a way that would provide allowances that would weaken our State's critical public-school system. The approach of this specific bill would basically put out a mindset of its now every family, even every student, for themselves. And that concept concerns me given the vast diversity of social and economic make up of the families we all serve across Kansas today. If I may, in the beginning, I failed to share a key aspect of what makes me tick. In addition to being blessed to be able to raise our kids on a 5<sup>th</sup> generation family farm, I just so happen to be an engineer by training. As an engineer, we are taught 2 key things: 1) always begin with the end in mind and 2) drive to determine the root cause of why something didn't work so that a better path can be determined. With these key guidelines in mind, I believe I understand the end goal that the writers of this bill would like to achieve given what it is intended to provide. And I also feel I know the root cause of why it will fail to accomplish that same end goal.

As a fiscal conservative and firm believer in the benefits of small government, I feel that, ultimately, we all want the same thing, a great education for Kansas' kids. Unfortunately, I feel HB 2119, as it stands today, will do nothing to accomplish that. In fact, I fear it may likely have the counter effect. In closing, I will share with you one key takeaway that I have learned both as a parent and as an elected member of the USD 475 Board of Education. Throwing darts at a dart board to see what sticks might work in other service industries but it does not work in our chosen industry of service which is educating the next generation of Kansans. They don't deserve to be experimented on to see whether the concept proposed in HB 2119 might or might not work. They have already had enough to work through given the ongoing COVID pandemic and just recent recovery from the last recession. We, as leaders in this great State, can do better than this. That I am very certain. And, be it as it may, special interest groups be damned, it is our kids that we need to focus on to make certain they enter adulthood with the tools and skills needed to be productive and respected citizens of the communities in which they will call home, ideally in our State.

To be respectful of the committee members' time, I will bring my testimony to a close today and will be more than happy to try and answer any questions or provide any clarifications to my statements should any committee members so choose. Thank you again for your time and attention today. And most importantly, thank you for taking on the challenges of not only being on this committee but also those challenges that naturally exist with being an elected representative in our State. I too can commiserate with your efforts to fight the uphill battle that comes with being openly elected to lead by a growing general population that would rather complain about problems instead of assisting with developing solutions. My best wishes for you and your families.

Respectfully submitted,

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