

Opponent Testimony SB 496
For the Senate Committee on K-12 Education Budget
In-Person Testimony for February 16, 2022 Committee Hearing
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Chairperson Baumgardner and members of the Kansas Senate Education Committee,
I am writing/speaking today to express my opposition to SB 496.

Let me first start by saying that I am a public school teacher of 19 years in Buhler USD 313. I currently teach high school ELA, Journalism, Photojournalism, and Yearbook. I am my district's PDC Chairperson. I am the 2018 Kansas Teacher of the Year. Most importantly I am the mother of three boys - one who is attending Fort Hays State University majoring in Secondary Education/ History, and two who are public school students.

At a time when we face a critical shortage of highly qualified educators, I can't think of a bill to make things more difficult for all educators than this bill.

As written, this bill steals learning time from students requiring their educators to duplicate work. It stifles innovation, creativity and adaptability forcing educators to choose between enriching lessons and the threat of punishment. It makes us less able to respond to individual student needs because- as written- it takes away the ability to individualize instruction.

I am in opposition to this bill because of the harm it will cause our students and educators. Our students need highly qualified educators in their classrooms who can be trusted to make the best educational decisions for their students. Kansas leads this country with one of the most robust and collaborative education programs. But this bill will stifle innovation and creativity and replace those important learning skills with fear of punishment.

Local school boards already have policies in place to "vet" curriculum materials. Schools have department and grade level standards and collaboration amongst colleagues to ensure that learning at high levels takes place. And because teachers are professionals who want to see their students succeed and become contributing members of society, we are very cautious and careful about the material we present in our classrooms.

Parents have never had more access to what is being taught in classrooms than they do now. They are able to contact teachers through telephone calls and emails. They are able to arrange meetings to have their questions answered. They are already able to opt out of a particular novel or assignment. This is nothing new, nor does it need to be legislated. Creating a "transparency portal" will reallocate needed funds and most likely create another position within school districts across the state - taking funding away from students and classrooms.

SB 496 will drive away good educators, not because they have something to hide, but because this bill puts into question the kind of people they are. These educators are the people you sit next to at church, visit with at ball games, and stand in line next to at your local grocery store. They are the people who work to meet the needs of our most vulnerable and our most fortunate children. I would ask you to think about an educator off the top of your head that does not have children's best interests in mind. I know that I cannot come up with any that I know personally. Now I would like you to think of the educators who give their all each day to teach and nurture Kansas' most important resource - our children.

What do schools, communities, and lawmakers need to do? We need organized, grassroots conversations about how to utilize local schools to meet the needs of all stakeholders. This was the whole purpose of redesign - to imagine and create school settings that were most beneficial for students while meeting the needs of stakeholders.

If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is that parents need the safety and supervision that schools provide, communities need schools to offer services like childcare, and educators need to use resources to engage students in critical thinking and innovative learning AND the ability to pivot at the drop of a dime should they need.

In many towns, the school district is the largest employer and the only consistent economic draw from out of town visitors. This is NOT an "either/or" situation - that is simply not sustainable. This is a "together/and" situation. We cannot tie the hands of our educators. We must join hands and work together. We must trust the expertise of our community teachers and leaders. Together we can fix these issues, but SB 496 drives a harmful wedge into our schools and communities.

We can build the schools and communities we need to thrive, but it must be done TOGETHER. And our leaders in Topeka should be doing all they can to make that happen - not tear it apart. Thank you for your time and consideration. I ask you to oppose this bill.