



**Senate Education Committee  
Senator Steve Abrams, Chair  
SB 103 – Redefining At Risk Pupils**

February 12, 2013  
*Submitted by: Diane Gjerstad  
Wichita Public Schools*

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee:

We rise in opposition to SB 103 which would change the definition for at-risk funding from poverty (free lunch eligibility determined by USDA guidelines) for grades four and higher to students not meeting proficiency on either state reading or math assessments.

Poverty remains a strong influence on a student's academic career. Poverty influences school readiness. Child development in general and school readiness in particular are influenced by poverty including the depth of poverty, duration of poverty, the timing of poverty (age of child), community characteristics (e.g. concentration of poverty and crime in neighborhood), and the impact poverty has on the child's social network (parents, relatives and neighbors who would be supporting the child's development).

University of Kansas study by Betty Hart and Todd Risley entitled "*30 Million Word Gap*" explained what educators have known for decades: poverty is a huge influence in a child's formative experience. The study found a child with professional parents on average would hear almost 45 million words by age 3 while a child living in poverty would only hear 13 million words. This foundation of literacy disparity is compounded by the findings of the ratio of positive (encouraging) words to prohibitions (discouraging). By age 4 a child in a professional family hears about 32 affirmatives and 5 prohibitions per hour (6 encouragements to 1 discouragement). Children from poverty have an average of 5 affirmatives to 11 prohibitions per hour (a ratio of 1 encouragement to 2 discouragements).

Students in poverty are more likely to live in situations where learning is difficult compared to their peers – home without computers or Internet, few books to read to improve literacy, lack of health or dental care, lack of home support for school and academic success, homelessness, drug or substance abuse, eviction (which may result in changing schools several times in an academic year), and unstable living environments which are not conducive to learning. A student who is proficient living in these conditions is likely to need additional support to maintain proficiency as academic standards increase each year.

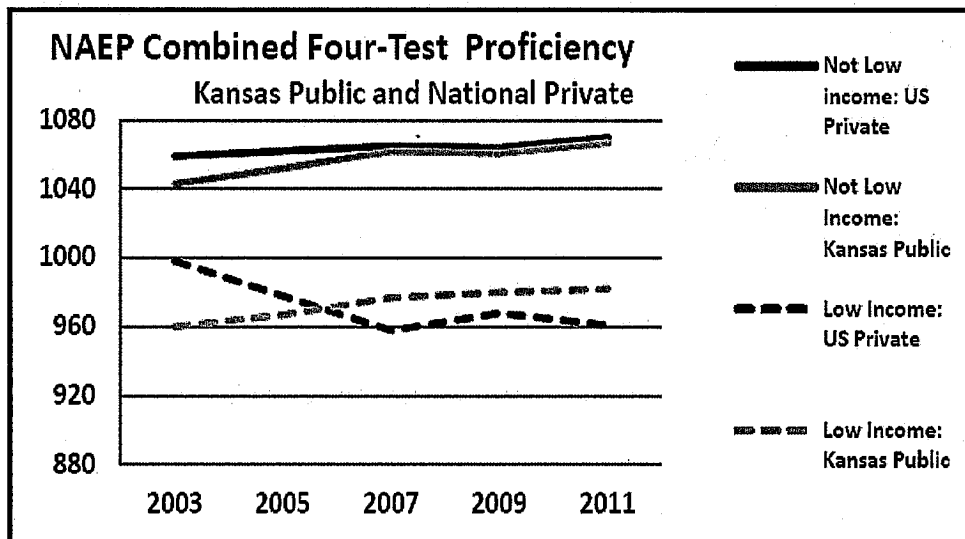
Our schools are finding children of the working poor are tasked with many adult responsibilities including getting siblings ready for school (breakfast, dressed and on the bus) and working to help support the family. Students thrust into the role of parenting all too often sacrifice their own studies and attendance as they focus on younger siblings.

*Wichita Eagle* article last month described the growing homeless population in Wichita Public Schools already exceeds 1900 compared to 1733 total last year. Some families are generationally poor, some were making ends meet until the recession resulted in job losses. The students are thrust into a difficult living environment and emotional strain. A proficient homeless child will require additional support and services from our schools.

Wichita West High School is located south of Delano, just west of the river. The school has 1300 students; 86% are free or reduced lunch eligible. There is never difficulty finding a parking space at West because so few students have cars. West High uses additional at risk funding to support full-time Communities in Schools coordinator who assists students with basic needs: clothing, food, shelter, childcare, access to medical care, or mental health needs. CIS brings mentors into the school to support and encourage students to complete their education with an eye to a productive future. West High provides tutoring services during seminar, lunch, after school, in-class and on most Saturdays. At Risk funds employ 13 college students and 7 certified teachers who assist students through tutoring. Since September 1860 tutoring contact hours have been made during the week and 150 one-on-one Saturday contacts. West High is increasing graduation rates, the number proficient on state math and reading assessments, and increasing the scholarship awards for post-secondary education.

The Kansas school finance formula has targeted at risk funding, grounded by the LPA Cost Study, based on poverty and the results are found in increased achievement.

- NAEP: Kansas public schools exceed private schools nationally on achievement of low income students.
- In 2011 during a Senate Education Committee hearing a representative from the Goldwater Institute commended Kansas for ranking 5<sup>th</sup> in the nation for the achievement of students in poverty as measured by NAEP.



## **Past studies by the legislature:**

**Legislative Post Audit 2006 Cost Study** on school finance outlined the academic difficulties economically disadvantaged students experience compared to their peers. The legislature has on numerous occasions studied the at-risk component of the school finance formula. Each study has confirmed the current policy which appropriates funding based on the number of students eligible for free lunch and allows districts the flexibility to spend those dollars on the students who need additional support.

***LPA Cost Study Analysis: Estimating the costs of K 12 Education, January 2006, page 37:***

Urban poverty is associated with a variety of more serious social problems, including drugs and violent crime. Because our consultants cited evidence suggesting inner-city poverty has more of an effect on costs than rural poverty, we included an additional measure of inner-city poverty in our cost model—

***LPA Cost Study***: ‘Variables that are outside a district’s control’ included “working conditions. Education research shows that teachers prefer to teach in good working conditions with students who are ready to learn. Inner city districts with high poverty rates are likely to be less attractive to teachers, so we’d expect these districts would need to pay higher salaries.”

**The 2007 At Risk Education Committee**, chaired by Dr. Andy Tompkins, and included former Education Commissioner Bob Corkins, was charged with a thorough examination of the system of identifying and funding the education of at-risk students. From their report:

- The Council continues to believe that the best state proxy for identifying at-risk students is poverty, whether measured by free, or free and reduced price lunches.
- The Council believes that a single tool, such as state assessment scores, is too narrow to determine if a child is at risk.
- The Council affirmed differentiating at risk funding with the core funding being decided on poverty, the second level taking into account density, and found the third level based on proficiency as “interesting and potentially effective approach which needs further study”.

The work, the focus, the effort does not stop when students from poverty reach proficiency on one test. The funding for students in poverty is tremendously important for Wichita Public Schools.

Mr. Chairman, we urge the committee to not pass this bill which would undo an effective system of targeting dollars to meet the needs of economically disadvantaged students. Thank you for your consideration.

