

Testimony before the

House Committee on K-12 Education Budget

on

HB 2270

by

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Solomon USD 393

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Chairman Campbell and Members of the Committee

Good afternoon. It is an honor to represent USD 393 Solomon Schools BOE, staff, community members and most importantly the students. Solomon is a rural school with a student population of 340 PK-12 not FTE because that only includes .5 Kindergarten and 0 Pre-K. We are located on I-70 in Central Kansas. Although we are a very rural school, we are also a bedroom community for larger cities and towns.

At Solomon we are very encouraged and supportive of HB 2270. This plan allows us to have a vision for our future and a financial plan to achieve that vision. The last few years have been very difficult for students and staff, but we are surviving---barely.

We are not a school district with a large amount of contingency reserve money because we have spent down those balances to protect programs and needs in our district. How does HB 2270 help in restoring the vision of USD 393 and all public schools? For us it is a starting point. Two areas I really think will impact our school and community are: Full funding of Kindergarten and fully funding of Special Education at 92 percent.

There are many areas I am excited and encouraged by besides these two areas, but I want to narrow my focus. I also want to encourage the committee to continue a poverty based At-Risk weightings beyond the second year of the formula. But most importantly understand we need a starting point that can be adjusted over time.

First HB 2270 targets full funding for Kindergarten. This is critical as we vary from 20-33 Kindergarten students per year enrolling at Solomon. Our unique location provides a very transient and unpredictable enrollment for our Kindergarten class. This leads to difficulty in staffing decision. As we can all agree 30 kindergarteners in one class is not acceptable. This even more true now as our new Kansas Vision set forth by the State BOE focuses on Kindergarten readiness. Class size early in the educational journey plays a significant role in the success of every child. With the full funding of Kindergarten we can continue to develop our 4 year program. In fact, this past year through a community strategic planning process we

started an all day 4 year old program that met 5 days a week and is financially supported by local taxpayers but more importantly created because our community recognized the need. So you might be asking how does this have anything to do with funding of all day Kindergarten? It is simple, more money can be directed now at improving and increasing the number of 4 year olds who may attend. Due to cost and size we had to limit the size of our 4 year old program to 20 students. This is not a grant funded nor a Head Start program. This is a program that the community saw as an importance. With the new vision of the Kansas State BOE Kindergarten readiness is a focal point. We were fortunate, at the expense of retirements/reduction of staff, to create a 4 year program. However, we wish we could have 30-40 slots available. All day funding of Kindergarten will NOT be wasted. Our community strongly supports and is encouraged that full funding of all day Kindergarten is in the current bill.

The second piece I am encouraged by is restoration of SPED funding to 92% over a four year period. We are currently a member of the Central Kansas Cooperative In Education known as CKCIE. There are 12 school districts that pool their resources together to provide appropriate and adequate special education to our students. Salina 305 is the host district and the largest school district in the Co-op. Solomon is one of the smallest districts. This is important because we have had to supplement our assessment fees to CKCIE with general fund dollars. Each year that amount increases, which in return leaves less. Funding SPED at 92% required by law instead of the 79-80%) will allow those dollars to be reinvested into classroom needs. At CKCIE we are short year in and year out with staffing needs. There are not enough SLP (Speech) teachers in the State for K-12. Currently they will interview with the school and then go to private industry the same day for an interview. The final factor comes down to money and caseload. Because we are short our SLPs are hit with larger and larger case loads. So what do we do if we can find enough you might ask? Currently Solomon Schools through the CKCIE provide speech therapy over the computer with a para available in the room for help. This is a strategy, but not the best situation for our students. Funding of SPED at 92% will allow us to increase salaries for those high need areas and provide our students with the most challenges the best teachers and in return the best results. Finally this will affect us locally as it will allow us to not have to fund SPED as much through the General or Supplemental fund as much as we currently do. Yes we will still need to supplement, but the decrease can now be used locally to support all students. The restoration will not restore the number of teachers applying for SLP or any SPED job, but is will allow us to be more competitive in a market that is driven even more by private industry. The block grants have significantly affected SPED because the need has only increased. Thank-you for addressing this major issue in HB 2270, our students, teachers, and parents are grateful.

There are many areas in which I am encouraged by this bill. I thank you for your time in addressing the two areas that will most positively impact student learning in our district. I stand for questions at this time or anytime in the future.