

## MINUTES OF THE SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE

The meeting was called to order by Chairman Jean Schodorf at 1:35 p.m. on February 8, 2007, in Room 123-S of the Capitol.

Committee members absent:

Committee staff present: Sharon Wenger, Kansas Legislative Research Department  
Michele Alishahi, Kansas Legislative Research Department  
Theresa Kiernan, Revisor of Statutes  
Shirley Higgins, Committee Secretary

Conferees appearing before the committee: Senator Laura Kelly  
Lynette Poolman, Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund  
Nancy Armstrong, USD 501 teacher  
Dr. Tony Sawyer, Superintendent of Topeka Public Schools  
David L. Miller and Andrew Schmucker, representing Amish  
and Mennonite congregations in the Hutchinson area  
Senator Chris Steineger  
Josh Shald, President, Washburn University Student  
Government Association

**SB 207 – Mandated attendance of kindergarten; lower age of eligibility to six**

Theresa Kiernan, Revisor of Statutes Office, distributed a balloon of **SB 207** showing amendments needed to accomplish the intent of Senator Laura Kelly, the author of the bill. (Attachment 1) She went on to say that the bill lowers the age at which a child would be eligible to attend from age six to age five, lowers the age at which a child would be required to attend school from age seven to age six, and would require children to attend kindergarten.

Dale Dennis, Interim Commissioner of Education, informed the Committee that a very high percentage of children eligible to attend kindergarten currently attend; therefore, the bill would affect a small percentage of children. He confirmed that all school districts must offer kindergarten, but there currently was no requirement that children must attend kindergarten.

Senator Laura Kelly testified in support of **SB 207**. She explained that she requested the bill after participating in a roundtable discussion with teachers at a recent KNEA meeting. During the discussion, Nancy Armstrong, a USD 501 teacher, commented that Kansas needed to make kindergarten mandatory. Senator Kelly noted that, before that discussion, she did not know that kindergarten was not mandatory. After the meeting, she called the six school superintendents in her area to confirm that they would support a bill to make kindergarten mandatory, and all of them agreed that the bill would be a good idea. She commented, "I firmly believe that, if we as a state are going to invest as much as we do and are pushing to do even more on early childhood development and education, then it makes absolutely no sense for us to have a loophole in our law that allows parents to not start the education of their children young enough so that, when they get into the first grade and beyond, they are falling so far behind."

For the Committee's information, Lynette Poolman, representing the Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund, gave an overview of the science of brain development from birth to age five. She explained that a neural tube begins developing on the 16<sup>th</sup> day of conception, that the brain begins to fuse at the spinal cord on the 28<sup>th</sup> day, and that the brain is the only organ that is unfinished at birth. She noted that the only way that the brain begins to develop and grow after birth is through life's experiences. She then explained how brain cells interact, and she discussed how developing neurons are changed by what a child experiences. She emphasized that it is very important that children from birth to age five are in predictable, nurturing, non-chaotic environments because their experiences and relationships tell their brain how to grow, and the foundation for later in life is formed. In conclusion, she noted that increasing isolation, decreasing resources, and electronic care giving combine to make it more difficult for families to provide optimizing experiences for children. (Attachment 2)

Nancy Armstrong, a kindergarten teacher in Topeka (USD 501), testified in support of **SB 207**. In her

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personal experience, the reasons parents gave for not sending their child to kindergarten all related to inconvenience. In her opinion, the inconveniences they cited do not validate the expense school districts incur to employ student improvement teams and reading and math specialists needed to tutor these students in an attempt to bring their knowledge base up to the level of first grade students who did attend kindergarten. She emphasized that all students need to come to first grade with the strong foundation that kindergarten provides and that it was time for Kansas to join other states which have recognized the need to get their students off to the best start possible. ([Attachment 3](#))

Dr. Tony Sawyer, Superintendent of Topeka Public Schools, testified in support of **SB 207**. He pointed out that one of the critical challenges for educators is a child's lack of prior knowledge when entering school. He contended that changing the mandatory age for school attendance to six would ensure that all parents understand the importance of their child attending kindergarten. He noted that maximizing school participation will give school staff more time to prepare students for a promising academic experience in this age of standards-based instruction and high stakes testing. ([Attachment 4](#))

Senator Schodorf called attention to written testimony in support of **SB 207** submitted by Terry Forsyth, Kansas National Education Association. ([Attachment 5](#))

David L. Miller and Andrew Schmucker testified in opposition to **SB 207** on behalf of the Amish and Mennonite congregations in the Hutchinson area. Mr. Miller explained that he became interested in the bill after reading an article in the *Hutchinson News* earlier in the week. He noted that the article indicated that the number of children at risk was relatively small, perhaps several hundred. He explained that his community has a population of approximately 500, and some members of his community recently moved to Lyndon. Those members also opposed the bill. A member from Lyndon was present but did not speak. Mr. Miller went on to say that he met with several members of the Amish community to prepare a written statement expressing their concern that it is sometimes not in the best interest of every child to make a uniform ruling. He informed the Committee that a group of Mennonites known as the Church of God in Christ consisting of 3,000 to 4,000 members asked that he also express their opposition to the bill. Mr. Miller then introduced Mr. Schmucker, who is a high school teacher and the parent of three children age 6 and younger.

Mr. Schmucker read the prepared statement which clarified that the Amish-Mennonite community did not desire to deprive any child of the opportunity to attend kindergarten in cases where that is clearly in the child's best interest; however, the community has serious reservations about mandating kindergarten for every child in the state because disagreement exists among educational professionals regarding the benefit of early childhood educational programs. In addition, the statement explained that the community's Christian school does not offer kindergarten; but instead, the school has identified specific readiness criteria that is verified by testing before a child enters first grade at the school. Parents are allowed to make the determination of overall readiness, and any family that desires to send their children to kindergarten has the option to send them to a public school. The community requested that the bill be amended to exempt children in religious communities such as theirs from mandatory kindergarten attendance. ([Attachment 6](#))

There being no others wishing to testify, the hearing on **SB 207** was closed.

### **SB 212 – Kansas Youth Civil Service Credit Act**

Theresa Kiernan, Revisor of Statutes Office, explained that **SB 212**, introduced by Senator Chris Steineger, would establish the Kansas Youth Civil Service Credit Act, which would be a program similar to other state service scholarship programs. It would be administered by the State Board of Regents. A qualified student would be a resident of Kansas who is under the age of 25. The basis is providing volunteer service or military service, and the awards are based on need. The service scholarship could be awarded for two years or its equivalent. The student could go to school on a full-time or part-time basis, and the service obligation would be one year. A student could actually complete a service obligation prior to being awarded the credit. The State Board would have the authority to adopt rules and regulations in their administration of the act.

Senator Steineger explained that approximately one year ago he noticed that assistance was given in Kansas only to persons who joined the military services. The intent of the bill was to give incentives for public

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service for persons who are not in military service but who join the U.S. Health Service, Peace Corps, or AmeriCorps. For every year served up to two years, young Kansans would get two years of free college tuition at any Regents college, community college, or Washburn University. (Attachment 7)

Josh Shald, President of the Washburn University Student Government Association, testified in support of **SB 212**. He observed that national service is becoming increasingly more important in addressing the needs of a changing America. Through the bill, Kansas would have an opportunity to send its young people outside the classroom to make a difference in all parts of the country. Further, the skills and knowledge gained through national service could be used by these individuals to improve local communities. He explained that he had committed to the AmeriCorps Teach for America program after he receives his bachelors degree, and having this type of state recognition for his service would provide an incentive for him to return to the state to serve his local community and the state. (Attachment 8)

Senator Schodorf called attention to written testimony in support of **SB 212** submitted by Lorrie Beck, Group Leader, The Organization of Returned Peace Corps Volunteers. (Attachment 9)

There being no others wishing to testify, the hearing on **SB 212** was closed.

The meeting was adjourned at 2:30 p.m.

The next meeting is scheduled for February 12, 2007.