

MINUTES OF THE SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE

The meeting was called to order by Chairman Jean Schodorf at 1:35 p.m. on January 10, 2006, in Room 123-S of the Capitol.

Committee members absent:

Committee staff present: Carolyn Rampey, Kansas Legislative Research Department
Kathie Sparks, Kansas Legislative Research Department
Theresa Kiernan, Revisor of Statutes
Shirley Higgins, Committee Secretary

Conferees appearing before the committee: Rochelle Chronister, Chairperson, 2010 Commission

Review of the activities and the role of the 2010 Commission:

Rochelle Chronister, Chairperson of the 2010 Commission, explained that the eleven-member Commission was created to provide the Legislature with nonpolitical input and a new perspective on K-12 education issues over the next several years. She noted that the two nonvoting members include the Legislative Post Auditor and a staff member from Office of the Attorney General and that the nine voting members include three legislators, a former principal from Wichita, current and past school board members, and a CPA from Topeka. She pointed out that the Vice Chairman, Dr. Ray Daniels, recently retired as superintendent of the Kansas City, Kansas, public schools.

Ms. Chronister went on to say that the 2010 Commission held its organizational meeting in early October 2005, and the meetings that followed were primarily informational. Information presented to the Commission included the following:

- Background of Kansas population and demographics by the Kansas Association of School Boards;
- A review of the constitutional and statutory authority of the State Board of Education;
- A review of special education activity by Dr. Alexa Posny, State Board of Education, which included No Child Left Behind, QPA, and the standards created by the State Board;
- An overview of consensus estimates for State General Fund receipts by Alan Conroy, Kansas Legislative Research Department;
- An overview of federal education programs by Dale Dennis and Ron Nitcher, State Department of Education; and
- An overview of special education funding and transportation weighting by Dale Dennis.

She explained that, in the future, the Commission will discuss what can be done to close the gap for at-risk and special education students. In addition, the Commission will discuss teacher mentoring and professional development. At this point, she commented, "I've become a firm believer in the fact that every child can learn. I think that there are very few children that we cannot help move along in some manner." She commented further, "It's interesting that 40 percent of our children are now in an all-day kindergarten situation, and we have not paid for that in the past so it's obviously something that's important to local schools and to parents and to helping children really be ready to start the learning process. Four-year-old-at-risk was started nine years ago. We've had a cap on that. You lifted the cap this last year, and I think that's a very positive thing."

Ms. Chronister went on to say that she had asked Commission members for suggestions for potential topics for the Legislative Post Audit school audit team. In addition, she had asked school superintendents to send her by e-mail the two most valuable that things they felt could be done for schools, and she received approximately 15 responses. Suggestions for audit topics included the following: consolidation, all-day kindergarten; preschool programs; level of funding for at-risk, bilingual, and special education; transportation reimbursement; the mileage limit; mentoring programs for new teachers and principals; insurance costs for school districts (health, liability, and property); salary comparisons by district, region, and nation; low enrollment weighting; local option budgets; disequalization of local sales tax; teacher retention and recruitment; funding for teachers in hard-to-staff schools; smaller urban high schools; nontraditional school settings; and the school leadership issue.

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Ms. Chronister noted that the information presented at Commission meetings also included a report on school finance litigation in other states, a review of the major school finance studies, and an overview of the Kansas State High School Activities Association.

She noted that, in December, the Legislative Educational Planning Committee (LEPC) was given a report on the Standard & Poor's recent study on education, and "return on investment" was the major emphasis of the study. She commented, "Standard & Poor's concluded that we probably couldn't afford to spend ourselves to a 100 percent of proficiency. Therefore, their suggestion, and the reason that they had been hired, was to figure out and identify best practices used by the state's most resource effective schools. They have identified four schools in the state that they considered to be among the most resource effective, and they are a wide variety of schools. One of them was Arkansas City, and that was basically a medium size school district. Geary County, which is a medium size district with a high poverty level. Olathe, a large suburban district. Scott County, a small rural district, and I think that Scott County might be a high wealth district also. They perform better on state math and reading tests than their peers. They are more cost effective than other demographically similar schools. What it was that they said to us was that they didn't want to see just minimizing spending, but they wanted to maximize returns. And that was kind of an interesting idea—that their suggestions were not going to be that we're going to come in and tell you all that we think that you ought to cut here and cut there, and that kind of thing—that they were going to see what is it that really happens in school districts that makes them effective and efficient. The districts that they had seen that made the best results were aggressive in recruiting techniques to get high quality staff. They supplemented their regular teachers with academic coaches, lead teachers, instructional aides. They are using teachers as expert resources for key decisions. They are using staff flexibility to meet student needs, and they have extensive professional development and training for their teachers. They place a premium on students spending time learning core academic subjects, especially math and English. They focus mainly on student learning rather than administrative issues and extend contract years for teachers for planning and training up to 15 additional days on their contracts. They opt for research based programs with strong evidence for effectiveness. They believe in making a heavy investment in academic support for at-risk students and emphasis on early childhood programs also."

She went on to say that, after the review of the Standard & Poor's study, the principals of four of the six blue ribbon schools – McPherson (elementary), Fort Riley (elementary), Arkansas City (elementary), and Baxter Springs (high school) – were given an opportunity to speak to the LEPC. She noted that the schools were not large schools, and one of the most interesting things about them was that the leadership that was provided by the principals was enthusiastic. They cared about their students, and they were passionate about learning. She commented, "I think professional development and building leadership are the things that probably we need to figure out how to fund if we are going to have our kids learn in an efficient and effective manner. We can't just continue to throw money and hope that there is a reasonable outcome. I think that it has to be directed and that we have to be very careful of what it is that we do."

With regard to the Legislative Post Audit cost analysis study of elementary and secondary education, Ms. Chronister commented, "I think that the study has a great deal of information, but I think you are going to want to ask additional questions. Let me suggest to you that one of those questions should be around the assumptions that were made, and they have been very up front about the fact that they did make assumptions. There are two types of studies that were done. One of them is an input, and one of them is an outcome type of study. On page 29 of the audit report, they talk about the assumptions and methodology decisions which resulted in lower costs in the input study. They have been very up front about the fact that they made those decisions, but I'll be honest with you; I don't know why they were made. One of them is they allocated fewer instructional staff than the methodology of the study would have called for. One of them was fewer non-instructional positions than the methodology and that the outcomes would have called for. And the final one was non-salary expenditures at the 33rd percentile. Now, that one I think is pretty clear why it was done if that one was to say, this is how you get to the most efficient. Part of what it is that we saw though, after a long history with school finance in the State of Kansas, the results of an input study, part of it is going to be based on the fact that we underfunded the fourth category of school districts for probably 20 years. You're going to make them more efficient if you under fund them for all of those years in comparison to our smaller school districts and also our larger school districts because we looked at that curve—that curve that came down and then when you get over to the larger school districts comes back up on our costs. So we didn't talk much

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about, these are the most efficient school districts. We just kind of said, oh well, that's the way we pay up and so that's the way it is. If you used that from your beginning, those school districts are probably all going to be the most efficient. That is, as matter of fact, what is shown in the study. Having said that, I would say to you that I think the outcomes study is probably the one that, to me, makes a little more sense. That is just something that somebody who's been around school finance for a very long time can say to you."

Ms. Chronister further noted, "I was surprised to find two brand new categories of funding suggested in this study, one of them being the urban poverty, and one of them being the area cost of living. But, I'll be honest and tell you I think it makes a lot of sense even though I come from Neodesha, Kansas, which has a school district that has less than 800 kids. I think that some of the at-risk kids in our urban school districts have suffered for years, and it's time that we stepped up to the plate. If this is what it is that it takes to do that, I think we should seriously consider it. Senator Schodorf, we're (2010 Commission) going to ask you all to come up with some suggestions also on areas that you would like for us to look at. I'm inclined to try to do it all within a year. So it's time to stop and pace ourselves a little too. We need to get as much financial information to you as we possibly can. On the 27th, we are going to make recommendations to the Legislature on the basis of the very short period of time that we have actually had this year. I hope that, by the time we make recommendations to you next year, we will have a little better understanding of where the best bang for the buck is."

Senator Schodorf requested that each member express what they believed was the most pressing topic for a future Legislative Post Audit study once they had ample time to fully study the Legislative Post Audit study.

Senator Lee commented that the Post Audit study concluded that some small schools over achieve. In response, Ms. Chronister explained that, when compared to other enrollment categories, the students had a higher achievement level in reading and math. She also noted that she thought that it was the Standard & Poor's study which referred to the schools as over achievers. Senator Lee clarified that the Standard & Poor's study did not look at small schools with under 200 students, which she thought was inappropriate. She went on to say that, in her opinion, the Post Audit study penalizes schools with a high level of achievement in order to provide for other schools with a lower achievement level. She suggested that, rather than taking funding away from the high achieving schools, provisions for low achieving schools should be made so that they can achieve in the same manner.

In response to a question from Senator Steineger concerning school consolidation, Ms. Chronister discussed the suggestions for consolidation which she had received from school superintendents. Brief committee discussion regarding consolidation followed. Senator Goodwin commented to Ms. Chronister, "Rather than talking about consolidation of districts and schools, have you talked about administrative or services in schools being consolidated, particularly in small rural areas? Is it beneficial for them to have a district that takes care of their school buses and maintenance, rather than moving the kinds and the school which is very traumatic?" Ms. Chronister noted that this was already being done voluntarily in some places through regional educational cooperatives. She further noted that in some very small school districts, a superintendent is also a principle and teaches as well. Senator Goodwin responded, "Could there be an incentive for more schools to do this rather than voluntary?" Ms. Chronister answered, "I think that there would be, and I think that's why you have a number of schools looking at combining right now because the Legislature made a decision to allow school districts to retain the money for several years that they would each have independently, but you put a time limit on it. I think that's the kind of thing that encourages school districts to consolidate."

Senator Schordorf explained that Craig Grant from Lawrence had requested that a bill regarding the yearly schedule of regular meetings of school boards be introduced.

Senator Apple moved that the bill be introduced as requested, seconded by Senator Teichman. The motion carried.

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

The next meeting is scheduled for January 11, 2005.

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