

## **Education Committees briefed on at-risk funding**

The House and Senate Education Committees met together today to hear about how at-risk funding works in Kansas. There are still plenty of people who may be confused by how this system works.

The school finance formula provides for an at-risk weighting of .456 which school districts receive on the basis of how many free-lunch students are enrolled. Free lunch is a common way to calculate this weighting around the county because poverty is accepted as a good predictor of eventually falling behind in school.

But because not every free lunch child is at-risk of failing, the money is spent on children who actually are at-risk whether they are living in poverty or not. The district collects the money based on free lunch eligibility but spends it on programs for all students at-risk of dropping out or falling behind. Some of the indicators of an at-risk student are not working on grade level, not meeting graduation requirements, a high rate of absenteeism, and not meeting standards on state assessments.

Districts also receive additional at-risk weighting for areas of high-density poverty and for students not eligible for free lunch but not proficient on reading or math state assessments.

All of the at-risk money is deposited in the district's at-risk fund account and used for meeting the needs of students identified as at-risk. In recent years the Legislature has required that school districts set aside a portion of the money for early childhood reading and given permission for it to be used to fund all-day kindergarten.

Several points seemed to be of most interest to committee members. A good deal of the discussion went to whether or not all those free lunch children actually qualify for free lunch. They were reminded that the Legislature had strengthened the application process and enacted a "clawback" provision when students were later found to be ineligible.

One legislator asked why the percentage of free-lunch eligible students was rising faster than the growth in student enrollment. He was reminding of the large increase in poverty in Kansas thanks in part to the recession. There has been a significant growth in child poverty in Kansas over the last several years.

Representative Bradford (R-Lansing) suggested that using at-risk funding for all-day kindergarten was like creating a "slush fund" in the district. He went on to suggest that if the Legislature chose to fund all-day kindergarten, they could then cut from at-risk funding.

The House all-day kindergarten special committee will meet Thursday morning.

### **Senate Education Committee to take up charter bill on Friday**

The Senate Education Committee has scheduled a Friday hearing on SB 196, the wide-open charter schools bill that was defeated in the House Education Committee last year.

This bill would create multiple authorizers who could anoint "public charter schools" which would receive state aid. Under current law only local school districts may authorize a charter school. This bill would allow all current private schools to find an authorizer and make themselves eligible for state aid but also exempt them from almost all laws, rules, and regulations.

If Kansas private schools were to suddenly become public charters eligible for state aid, the state would be required to either appropriate enough funds to meet the increased enrollment or cut funds for all schools and spread the current funding out. Further, passage of the bill would set up publicly funded schools that are not accountable to the community via the locally elected school board.

