

Open Letter to Our Education Community ***By Karen Godfrey, KNEA President***

This is a critical moment for education in our state. We see the legislature and the Governor doing terrible harm to public service and public workers in an overwhelming number of ways, and public education is no exception. At a time when we know we will face new challenges brought on by this legislative session, we are being torn apart by an effort to dismantle collective bargaining.

The perspective of teachers was never sought or considered. The first concrete hints of the attack on our rights came with the Governor's Efficiency Task Force recommendations for change not supported by public testimony or documents, but "private conversations" committee members had individually and out of the public eye. KNEA initiated conversations with other education organizations soon after that to share concerns about the upcoming legislative session. While a difference of opinion on evaluation procedures as part of the bargaining process was acknowledged, no one indicated any serious interest in further changes to the current law.

As KNEA dealt with a vicious attack on its ability to collect dues through payroll deduction--a clear and publicly stated effort to cripple us, USA, KSSA, and KASB did not step forward to support us. Then suddenly KASB testified in favor of HB 2085, a brutal assault on collective bargaining. Again, KNEA reached out to KSSA and KASB to understand their perspective, but without success. I also contacted Representative Kleeb to state our desire to be involved in discussion; he assured me we would be at the appropriate time.

Without any warning or prior discussion, we were informed that Kleeb had received KSSA's input advocating for a drastic reduction of even permissible topics, let alone mandatory ones. Only after their input was sent to legislators was I able to meet with a KSSA leader. Soon afterward, the Commerce Committee with no prior announcement created Sub for HB 2027. Somehow both KSSA and KASB knew to be there to testify, but KNEA had no indication the bill would be brought forward.

Again, I personally made contact with the leaders of KSSA and KASB in an effort to find some way to avoid this damaging battle. Neither group has made any effort to work with us at all instead telling us that we should be grateful for their effort to "save bargaining." Remember this effort to save bargaining through 2027 offers only a travesty of collective bargaining—five mandatory topics, a list of "permissible items" that the board may refuse to negotiate, and an outright ban on a number of items. We've had no meaningful opportunity for dialogue over their concerns with the current law.

Additionally, KSSA and KASB have made no effort to oppose provisions in the bill specifically designed to de-certify recognized bargaining agents – a section of the bill intended to end effective representation of teachers before the board. Nor have they opposed the immediate nullification of our contracts mid school year.

Only on March 11 did KASB even offer explanation of their stand other than their long-standing legislative agenda and a vague reference to flexibility and efficient use of resources. Ironically, their long-standing legislative agenda apparently has value, yet now our long-standing practice of bargaining is labeled as outdated.

Most districts do seek teacher input for many decisions, but that practice has developed hand in hand with the collective bargaining process, often as a step in the bargaining process leading to better decision making. The suggestion that bargaining with the teachers who deliver the educational program "limits the board's ability even to act in the best interest of students" is quite hurtful. Surely we can at least all recognize each other's commitment to providing quality education.

Considering the lack of interest in collaboration at the state level, it is hardly surprising that our teachers don't trust that collaboration will be valued at the local level. Expecting teachers to accept their reassurance that we can trust their good intentions isn't reasonable under the circumstances.

Some superintendents and school board members have expressed frustration that we would question their goodwill. We believe many superintendents and individual school board members don't support this bill. But KSSA and KASB represent those groups, and our assertion that the level of support is uncertain has less impact when no one speaks up differently.

Will some districts continue to collaborate in a meaningful way? I certainly hope so, and I think that many sincerely believe they will. Unbridled power, however, is always a dangerous thing--- just look at the actions of some of our legislators who clearly believe they can do whatever they want.