

Bills, bills, bills

Well, things are beginning to go under the dome. Bills are being introduced and hearings are just starting.

The bills requested by the K-12 Student Performance and Efficiency Commission have been introduced. HB 2027/SB 32 would require school districts to conduct compliance audits on efficiency standards to be set by a new commission.

HB 2028/SB 33 would establish a commission to determine education standards in light of the increased focus on the Rose standards.

The House Education Committee also introduced the anti-collective bargaining bill requested by Dave Trabert, Mike O'Neal, Dennis DePew, and Sam Williams as part of their "minority report" attached to the Commission's report. This bill, HB 2034, would effectively end collective bargaining for teachers on all issues other than salary and hours. While it would permit negotiation on other items, experience shows that boards of education rarely agree to negotiate items on the permissive list of topics.

House Bill 2035 is being described as "technical amendments" to the corporate tax breaks for private school scholarships. We are reviewing these changes carefully. A quick reading of the bill tells us there might be more than mere "technical" amendments.

Senate Bill 2, which has a hearing in the Senate Education Committee on Thursday, would permit districts to offer two or three-year employment contracts to teachers with a certain number of years of experience. KNEA will be testifying on the bill. While we have no particular issue with multi-year contracts, we have concerns about fair implementation of any plans to grant such contracts.

Transparency and hypocrisy

We suppose the most interesting bill introduced this week was proposed by Rep. J.R. Claeys, (R-Salina).

The bill would mandate that public employee contract negotiations - and Claeys

specifically referenced KNEA and school districts - be conducted in open meetings. In calling for the bill, Claeys announced, "We're going to shine the bright light of day on these back room deals being struck at taxpayer expense. Transparency is good for negotiations and serves taxpayers shut out of the process."

"Transparency is good." We couldn't agree more. But let's consider for a moment how necessary this bill is. Claeys' bill would mandate that all negotiations be held in public meetings. Claeys says his bill is not an "attack on teachers," but rather "an attack on back room deals that appropriate taxpayer resources." Trouble is that Claeys doesn't understand that current law in Kansas already requires all negotiations meetings and discussions are public meetings. That's right - negotiations are already conducted in open meetings and taxpayers are encouraged to attend.

Claeys simply picked up an ALEC bill aimed at what he calls "teacher union cronies" and introduced it. Now Kansas taxpayers will be footing the bill for staff time, committee time, printing and publishing a bill that is already covered in state law. We wonder how this fits in with the whole demand for government efficiency.

But a few other thoughts about "transparency." Rep. Claeys had no problem voting for a provision in law last year in the wee hours of the morning over an April weekend - a provision that had never been introduced in a committee, never debated in a committee, never subject to public hearings. No, stripping Kansas teachers of their right to due process was part of a "back room deal" by legislators to skirt transparency in government.

We wonder how Claeys feels about the non-transparent appointment to the Appellate Court made by Governor Brownback. Once the Legislature gave the Governor the authority to make such appointments on his own, the public has been denied the right to even know who else was considered.

We wonder how Claeys feels about the non-transparent appointments to the Saline County Commission made by Governor Brownback. The Governor has refused to publicly release the names of candidates he considered. He is being sued by three Kansas newspapers including the Salina Journal over his refusal to be "transparent" in the appointment process. "It's sad that it takes filing a legal action against the governor and his office in order to get information," Salina Journal Editor and Publisher Olaf Frandsen said.

So we are happy to conduct our contract negotiations in public meetings. It's what the

law already requires and it's what we have always done.

We suppose that Rep. Claeys would classify this article as carping by "union thugs" or "teacher union cronies."

But let us be completely transparent about this: the 23,000 teacher union cronies that Claeys disparages will continue their advocacy for their students, their schools, and their profession. They will do so publicly and in the light of day. They only ask that the legislature take transparency as seriously as they do.

Links

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