

2014 Legislative Update No. 8 from Ron Highland, Representative of the 51st District

There were three events of major interest for me this week. The first was the Constitution Bee held in Manhattan last Sunday. The legislative activity was minimal this week, but on Wednesday several bills were “blessed” by the Speaker of the House. On Friday, while on my way to participate in a forum with the Topeka Chamber of Commerce, The Kansas Supreme Court handed down its ruling on the Gannon vs. State law suit.

The Constitution Bee was once again very enjoyable and encouraging. In spite of the bad weather, 15 of the 18 finalists participated for scholarships. I was asked to speak and took the opportunity to congratulate them all on studying such an important document for our nation, and explained the meaning of oath taking. I also encouraged them to get involved in the political process. Three of the finalists were from District 51. Mitchell Rawson Porter represented Rossville HS, Jacob Monroe Milham represented Rock Creek Jr/Sr HS, and Kasey Lyn Holle represented Wamego HS. The winner of the competition scholarship of \$3500 was Chandler Dean Huddleston from Rolla HS, second place of \$1500 was earned by Jacob Paul Nicolet from Burlington HS, and Kasey Lyn Holle from Wamego HS received third place honors of \$750. Congratulations to them all. Those students who are still in high school next year are eligible to compete again. This year’s winner competed the last two years and with all that experience he prepared an excellent impromptu speech this time around.

The Speaker of the House is able to move bills in and out of committee. He used that authority to move several bills into exempt committees the week before turn around. On Wednesday he moved several of those bills out of exempt committees back into other committees for further deliberation. This move is called “blessing” of the bill. If he had not done this, they would not be eligible for consideration again. The Education Committee was assigned the Financial Literacy bill for re-consideration. The work begins in earnest again this next week. The committees will be considering the bills sent over by the Senate, along with the bills reassigned by the Speaker. Bills that are receiving a great deal of discussion around the Capitol include bills on Liquor Laws, Mortgage Fees, and a couple Education bills on Financial Literacy and Sex Education.

The big event we all have been waiting to hear about was the Supreme Court’s decision. Everyone thought the decision would center only on funding for education. Their focus was limited to equity when discussing the money issue for now. They referred back to the three judge panel to enforce the affirmed rulings on equity, fashion appropriate remedies, and apply the correct constitutional standard to plaintiffs’ claims as to adequacy. They gave the deadline of July 1, 2014. Fully funded, the capital outlay provisions and supplemental state aid provisions will require the state to provide \$129 million. The current, very complicated, funding formulas are in need of review and change to make the funding more easily understood and transparent. The Local Option Budget is capped by the legislature as to how much a school district can tax the local community. Because of the differences in valuation across the state and a district’s ability to raise taxes, the districts in poorer areas are unable to raise funds as easily as in the more prosperous larger population areas.

Some have been arguing that it is only a matter of money. Others, like me, have argued that outcomes have to play a role in determining if we are being successful in educating our children. The court agreed on this day that outcomes have to be considered, and they referred to a 1989 Kentucky Supreme Court ruling, *Rose vs. Council for Better Educ., Inc.* That court decision listed specific standards that constitute an adequate education. The Kansas Supreme Court

further affirmed that other monies directed towards education can be counted as education spending. That includes the KPERS money along with federal and local money. Currently, that total average for Kansas was \$12,738 per student for the 2012-2013 school year. That represents a 33% greater increase than the inflation rate from 1997-2013.

None of us are against funding our schools. But what is important is how the money is being spent and if we are adequately educating our children to enter either the workplace or an institution of higher learning. This will be debated at great length in the coming weeks, of this I am sure. I am on the side of providing a great education for our children and rewarding those teachers who are proficient at doing so.

According to many parents and teachers from whom I am hearing, we as a state are not doing our job and changes need to be made. It will be difficult. This is one of those times when you need to get involved with your local school systems. By law, in Kansas you have local control of the educational process. Ask to see the curriculum used, along with the instructional materials. Then take an interest and follow through with the election cycle to elect individuals who represent your values and the goals you have for your children when voting for school board members. If your student has plans to attend a university, community college, or trade school, make sure their high school course work will meet the requirements for entry. For some university career paths, the new standards will not have adequately prepared students, according to expert committee testimony. University Presidents testifying in the Education Budget Committee have told of increasing numbers of high school students having to enroll in remedial courses. This adds increased costly time spent on course work for no credit at the university.

As we hear testimony and study the schools in our state, an area all can agree upon is that the achievement gap for Kansas students, as a whole, is widening. That large gap is apparent in the earliest grades, and if they are not brought up to the same level as other students early on, they may never be able to achieve an adequate education. The most important skill that limits learning is reading. Reading to children at the beginning of their lives is so important to their future education. All of the experts who testify before us, to include the Commissioner of Education, stress that children must enter school prepared to learn. That is the greatest predictor of future achievement. We as a society must deal with this, and find ways to encourage parents of the important privilege they have of giving their child the foundation that prepares them as a student so they too can achieve their dreams. This is a personal responsibility we have as parents. I believe it can be done. It puts the emphasis back on the parents and students, where it should be, and on rewarding good and great teachers.

As always, it is an honor and a privilege to serve you. Remember, this is your government and your Representatives and Senators need to know how you feel about issues before them. I can be reached by email, mail or in person at the Capitol. My office phone is 785-296-7310 and my email address is ron.highland@house.ks.gov.