

## **Testimony in Opposition to HB 2180**

Madam Chairman Roers and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to address you regarding HB 2180, which mandates public comment at all meetings of public entities. As a superintendent of a rural school district, I feel compelled to share my concerns regarding this bill's potential impact on school board meetings and the ability of school districts to function effectively and fairly.

### **Risk to Due Process and Legal Exposure**

A school board functions as a jury in matters of personnel and other sensitive issues. Allowing unrestricted public comment at meetings opens the door for individuals to discuss topics that could prejudice the board's impartiality. For example, if a community member were to bring forward comments about personnel issues, it could jeopardize the due process rights of the individuals involved. This interference would not only undermine the integrity of the board's decision-making but could also result in lawsuits against the district for failing to ensure a fair hearing. The financial consequences of such litigation could be devastating for school districts with negative impacts on student outcomes.

### **Existing Procedures for Public Input**

Our district, like many others, already has procedures to ensure that community members can engage with their elected officials. Per our board policy, the superintendent, in consultation with the board president, prepares the meeting agenda. Anyone wishing to address the board may request to be included in the agenda by contacting the superintendent or board president at least 24 hours prior to the meeting. This process ensures that comments are relevant and that discussions occur in an organized manner.

Additionally, constituents often have direct communication with board members and the superintendent. Our emails are all available on our website but needless to say in a small town, people know how to contact one another. The public has opportunities to engage without the risks associated with unrestricted public comment.

## **Amplifying Community Tensions**

In small, tight-knit communities like ours, school board decisions often have far-reaching social implications. Personnel decisions, disciplinary actions, and even issues like student athletics are deeply personal to many families. This bill risks turning public meetings into platforms for airing grievances, which could escalate tensions rather than resolve them. Proper channels exist to address such concerns, and bypassing these channels undermines our ability to maintain civility and focus on student needs. Often, relationships are built in a positive manner when protocols are followed because there is two-way communication handled at the lowest level.

## **Upholding the Purpose of Public Meetings**

Public meetings are designed to conduct the business of the public entity, not to serve as open forums for any topic. The agenda ensures discussions remain focused and productive. I urge you to consider how this would impact your own committee meetings if public comment were allowed on any subject, rather than limited to the topic at hand.

As a school superintendent in a small town, I navigate complex social dynamics involving families, close-knit relationships, and long-standing generational friendships. Decisions related to personnel or discipline—such as hiring, firing, or expulsions—can ripple through communities. This bill risks amplifying tensions by creating an additional avenue for grievances, exacerbating local disputes rather than resolving them locally.

## **Conclusion**

Our system of governance provides mechanisms for public accountability. If community members are dissatisfied with their elected school board's policies or actions, they have the right to vote for change. HB 2180 threatens to disrupt the functions of school boards, increase legal and financial risks for districts, and create environments of conflict rather than collaboration.

I respectfully urge you to oppose HB 2180 and instead support existing frameworks that balance public engagement with the need for effective governance.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Leslie Bieber