

# USD 113 PRAIRIE HILLS SCHOOL DISTRICT

## LETTER TO PRAIRIE HILLS USD 113 PATRONS, PARENTS, EMPLOYEES & STUDENTS

*Dear USD 113 Patrons, Parents, Employees, & Students,*

We hope that this fall and the start of school has been a positive time for you and your families! The purpose of this letter is to communicate information about the potential land transfer situation that our district is experiencing with the following school districts: USD 115 Nemaha Central, USD 380 Vermillion and USD 335 Jackson Heights. Curiously these three neighboring districts have recently joined together and filed an unusual legal maneuver requesting intervention by the Kansas State Board of Education.

The collective opinion of the USD 113 Board of Education is that our district is under attack from both outsiders and neighbors. We believe this for a number of reasons, but significantly the three neighboring districts have requested **more than 40%** of USD 113's total square miles. In the 2022-23 school year, Wetmore Attendance Center students accounted for less than **12%** of the district's head-count, and now neighboring districts are seeking to annex **40% of Prairie Hills territory**. This seems unjust. In addition, as we analyze this complex situation it appears that outside interest groups may mysteriously be involved. This involvement is especially concerning because it may indicate a larger agenda than we are struggling with locally.

The following is an update and summary of the situation:

### TIMELINE

In February 2023 after months of study, complex budget and enrollment trend analysis, community input, including six public listening sessions, and the review of the 2015 Kansas Legislative Post Audit USD 113 efficiency study, this Board made the emotionally difficult decision to close the Wetmore Academic Center.

### THE FALLOUT

Afterward a few representatives of the Wetmore Community Action group reached out to neighboring school districts after hiring a Topeka lobbyist and a Kansas City attorney employing political hardball. Early this summer a letter was delivered to USD 113 in which the three neighboring districts proposed annexing **40% of the square miles of the entire Prairie Hills School district**. Such a massive reduction endangers the ability to educate the remaining 88% of USD 113 students. In addition, our neighboring districts are demanding unprecedented payments of money per pupil, not contemplated under current Kansas law.

In contrast, the Prairie Hills School District stands ready to educate all USD 113 students, but we recognized that some of these roughly 100 Wetmore area students might choose to attend school out-of-district. Reasonable efforts were made to ensure district lines be drawn to reflect evolving attendance patterns. In August, an offer was on the table for the parties to sit and visit one on one; superintendent to superintendent to identify district line issues and potential boundaries. However, on August, 30, the law firm representing the three neighboring school boards filed a legal motion requesting mediation and possible intervention in a local issue by the Kansas State Board of Education.

### THE FUTURE

The USD 113 Board of Education is currently preparing for mediation as well as a hearing before the Kansas State Board of Education. This situation is so unusual that the State School Board itself is researching procedures and identifying potential mediators. It's hard to know what the next steps might be; but, rest assured, we are hard at work and ask that you please stay vigilant and informed.

### ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

We question why three neighboring school districts and outside interest groups would form an alliance and file a legal action over what appears to be solvable issues. For example, less than 10 Wetmore area students have chosen to transfer to the Vermillion and Nemaha Central districts combined. These types of student transfers occur on a yearly basis all over Kansas. In fact, Prairie Hills happily educates over a hundred students living in neighboring districts. We have educated students who have transferred from all three of the districts involved and have not asked for nor have we received payment when those districts received funding through the state formula.

It is important to recognize that there could be larger statewide politics at play. There already has been involvement from outside interest groups. Most in our school district have heard about the potential of an additional legal weaponization, a petition for dissolution of the Prairie Hills District. A petition just like this was filed earlier this year in USD 112, a central Kansas school district causing an expensive and time-consuming election. Regardless, this Board is confidently preparing for mediation and a potential hearing before the State Board of Education while continuing to focus on educating all students.

### COMMUNITY ACTION

What can you do to help? Continue to stay vigilant and informed. Ask friends from other involved districts if they are aware of this situation, including the expense of mediators and lawyers. Prepare letters to legislators and State Board of Education Members encouraging them to examine each situation from a district to district viewpoint.

In the face of outside adversity, your local Board is unified and prepared to have reasonable discussions. Transferring significant sections of the Prairie Hills School District is not a reasonable approach to this situation, nor is making unprecedented USD 113 taxpayer-funded payments. As the USD 113 Board of Education we will continue to work to find common sense solutions to our differences. It is our expectation that mediation will provide an honest and controlled and thoughtful environment without the interference of outside interest groups.

With an educated, engaged and motivated Prairie Hills community we are optimistic about our school district's continuing ability to create bright, educational futures for all our students. Please stay informed about our process. We will continue to seek a reasonable resolution to this situation.

Sincerely,

USD 113 Prairie Hills Board of Education  
Leslie Scoby, Kathy Lippert, Phillip Buessing, Stan Keim,  
Doug Renyer, Kent Saylor, and Jim Scoby