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By ROBERT PIERCE

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The Kansas Legislature recently allowed a few school districts across the state to try something different, but the state's teachers union finds it objectionable.

During the last Kansas legislative session, House Bill 2319 was approved by the legislature and signed into law by Gov. Sam Brownback.

The law authorizes a process in which a local board of education may apply for status as a "public innovative district."

Ten districts in Kansas, including Hugoton's USD No. 210, have applied to become an innovative school district.

According to the Kansas National Education Association, these districts, if accepted as innovative, would be allowed to opt out of most state laws that regulate school districts.

State Representative Reid Petty, though, said the main purpose of the new law is to see how school districts do when they don't have government in their way.

"It gives districts who participate as an innovative district a lot more local control and opens opportunities for districts to be creative," he said.

Among the laws KNEA claims districts can opt out of are those pertaining to certification and licensing, continuing contracts and professional negotiations.

The Kansas Association of School Boards has supported the law designating districts as innovative, however.

The KNEA likewise says HB 2319 allows districts to hire individuals without licenses to teach.

Petty said being in Southwest Kansas makes it tough for districts such as Hugoton's to find good teachers to come and teach in this area.

“One of the things an innovative school district can do is if they find someone who has a degree in math or science, but who didn’t go to school to be a teacher, it allows the district to still hire them to teach what they were trained in,” he said.

USD 210 Superintendent Mark Crawford said the law would simply help level the playing field for out-of-state teachers the district hires.

“We hire a lot of teachers from the Oklahoma and Texas Panhandle as well as Colorado,” he told the Leader & Times. “Those out-of-state licenses are not being recognized. It’s not a level playing field for those teachers to be considered highly qualified.”

Crawford estimated that more than \$79,000 has been spent by USD 210 in the last seven years trying to help teachers become highly qualified.

The state teachers union also contends that under the new law, continuing contract rights can be withheld from teachers who have not yet earned the right to a continuing contract.

KNEA also stated that districts need not negotiate or honor the previous agreement, and determine teacher pay and pay teachers differentially and determine teacher hours and the length of a school year.

“KNEA believes innovative districts must follow special education laws, teacher due process for those who have earned it and the evaluation law that is specified in the waiver,” a statement from the union read.

Petty said he commends Hugoton for giving HB 2319 a chance.

“I think it is an exciting opportunity for a handful of districts in the state to become creative and potentially test some ways to better education in our state,” he said. “I’m excited to see what we learn from this opportunity from districts that will be giving it a try.”

