

# Rural students converge on Capitol full of ideas, criticism

Five seniors share thoughts on bills

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By **Aly Van Dyke**

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Five Bucklin High School seniors left their southwest Kansas homes at noon Sunday in a Suburban to make the 270 mile journey to the state capital.

The five students walked into the Capitol promptly at 7:45 a.m. Monday, prepared for a full day of meeting with representatives and senators to discuss their concerns with current legislation.

"We wanted to know we have a voice, even in southwest Kansas," said Cole Hailey, 17.

"Our generation does care," said Adam Carr, 18. "These decisions affect our lives and our children's lives."

The seniors came from Unified School District 459, a district of 240 students, but they didn't focus their discussions Monday on school funding or the struggles of rural districts.

Superintendent Kelly Arnberger wouldn't have had it any other way. The Capitol already is full of people paid to give opinions, he said. And the seniors don't listen to him, anyway.

"I, as superintendent, want as many people in this building to show the students of rural America, of western Kansas, are bright and articulate and deserve to be supported financially and academically," he said. "We underestimate these young people. We can't do that."

The five seniors, ranging in age from 17 to 19, covered topics from farm bills to Gov. Sam Brownback's controversial decision last month to rescind an executive order that offered protections to state employees based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

The students spent the past month preparing for their visit Monday, spending their downtime reading the background and texts of the bills they wanted to talk about.

"They're issues we all care about," Carr said. As such, none of them needed notes: Everything was "heartfelt," he said.

Hailey, Tanner Collins, 19, and Colton Downy, 18, focused their discussions on Senate Bill 56, which would open up educators to criminal prosecution for sharing materials some consider to be offensive. To do that, the bill would delete an exemption from criminal prosecution held by K-12 public, private and parochial school educators regarding presentation of material "harmful to minors."

The three seniors worried the bill would affect how they learn about several subjects, from anatomy to psychology.

"The threat of prosecution could hinder teachers," Hailey said.

"Kids are clicks away from that these days anyway," Collins said of what students learn in school about sensitive subjects.

The three met with three legislators, including Sen. Dan Kerschen, R-Garden Plain, who voted

in favor of the bill. The senator told them the bill specifically lists what kind of material could result in prosecution, the students said.

The seniors didn't buy it.

"It's vague," Collins said of the bill's language.

"We read it before we got here," Hailey explained.

The three also delved into different farm bills that would tax farmers at a higher rate.

"Rural school districts are affected by that," Collins said. "Farmers are forced out because of higher taxes."

"That's bad for our whole state," Hailey added.

Carr spent his time talking about Gov. Sam Brownback's decision to reverse the executive order that protected state LGBT workers.

"His actions are a sidestep to progress forward," he said. "It's become very dangerous in the workplace for people with LGBT affiliations."

And Curtis focused on campaign finance reform.

"Democracy has been hijacked by larger corporations who dump a whole lot of money into campaigns," he said. "No one will be represented except for a few corporations, and rural schools will be dead, because no one cares."

The five, though passionate about their thoughts regarding the bills, were noncommittal about their future political careers. One thing was abundantly clear: They all will be voters.

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