

Special education statement draft

I appreciate this opportunity to present my thoughts about the importance of funding special education programs in the state of Kansas. My name is David H Westbrook. I speak to you today as a private citizen. I speak to you today as a lifelong Kansas resident. I speak to you today, too, as an individual who has recently enjoyed election to be an At-Large member of the Shawnee Mission Board of Education. I am in that enviable position where I remain an independent citizen and will be sworn in as a member of the school board on Monday, January 8. What I present today then are remarks expressed in my individual role as a Kansas citizen with particular interests and life experience that enable me humbly to claim some authority on the topic of special needs. As a blind man, I have special needs. As someone who graduated from a K12 education in the Shawnee Mission District, I know what public schools are like and I know what a public education can bring to an individual. For me, it brought all the opportunity enabled by skills and critical thinking nourished by a higher education. All of this contributed to what became a blessed career.

This is not the first time I've enjoyed the opportunity to address the Kansas legislature. Some years ago, I came to you as the chair of the Overland Park Chamber of Commerce. I came to you as an individual who had organized the creation of a not-for-profit Institute funded by a dozen or so of top corporations in the state of Kansas. These were multibillion-dollar organizations who pooled their resources to conduct research so the impact of proposed tax policies could be measured by the independence of an analytical instrument designed by respected scholars and tapped into by lawmakers concerned with public tax policies. You were kind enough to welcome my testimony then. The benefit of the Kansas Tax Policy Foundation was simple. Through a respected econometric model, the foundation could subject proposed tax policies to a respected analytical model so the consequences of those policies could be projected before lawmakers adopted them. The tax policies adopted by lawmakers as a consequence of that foundation's work proved to be good for the economy, good for job creation, good for taxpayers and citizens.

Today I am coming to you with a plea to deal with data again. I'm coming to you not with a conversation about tax policy, but with some questions and cautions I would like to raise about lawmakers' consideration of proposed cuts in special education funding.

As artful arguments go these days, special education, according to critics, is a vast wasteland. It is a complex area of public education that school people have used for sinister purposes. Because there is strong sentiment behind the special needs of the special education program, critics suggest school people have used such sentimentality as an excuse to hide wasteful spending by calling it or assigning it to a special education program. By hiding monies in the special education plan, as critics go on to say, school people are liberated from requirements of financial accountability. Monies spent on special needs kids after all are invulnerable to criticism given the sentimental content and character of the kids who are helped.

The solution proposed by some critics: cut the budget. Cutting the budget, educators will be forced to squeeze the waste out of the system and spend money more efficiently. The argument is asserted because these critics believe special education is really not that all complex. Complexity is just an excuse to create ambiguity. And underneath the clouds of ambiguity, public educators hide funds that are not being spent on special education services nor spent well on additional education. Those funds are just being wasted. Or – to cite an even more sinister view – those funds are actually being spent on so-called regular kids and being characterized as special education funding to avoid the scrutiny that would enable the transparency servicing of wasted money enabling long overdue budget cuts.

I respectfully suggest that the way we regard a special needs child in the state of Kansas sends a signal to a generation of people we will never meet. Special education children are the conscience of the community. The care and attention we give to a special needs child should be an instrumental piece of evidence regarding the respect and care and service we offer to all children. What a point of pride it would be for Kansas to be known as the most successful state in the nation when it comes to the issue of taking care of the special needs child. Special needs children are not competitors in the classroom. Rather, a special needs child enables collaboration in the classroom. But such collaboration does not exist unless proper resources are deployed.

As a blind citizen who went to public school, I can tell you the special needs I required for my education to be successful were extraordinary. There were issues related to mobility training. Issues related to finding alternative ways of digesting the content of classroom information, textbooks, notetaking with lectures, and all the rest. There were ways of getting around school independently. There were ways of going to the cafeteria on my own. There were ways of getting along with sighted students so they would not treat me with a stigma because of my blindness but rather cut me slack where I needed it and inspire greater courage and discipline when it was called for. These things don't just come naturally to kids or teachers. These things require training and insight and leadership. That takes money for the training. It takes time for the training. It takes commitment. It costs more.

As an outcome though, the kids who are brought up with special needs children being educated alongside them take on a wholly different healthy attitude toward a special needs person. The special needs child graduates from school with these supports are more confident, a more able graduate. The kids who don't require special needs services have a more enlightened attitude toward a special needs person. Those kids will someday be employees and maybe even employers or maybe even entrepreneurs. The different attitude they take toward a special needs student could very well lead to the enlightenment of employment opportunities for special-needs graduates.

I stand before you as a man who spent 50 years in a successful career. Over the years, I employed hundreds of people. I served multi billion-dollar companies throughout the Midwest region, the nation, and even in Europe. I enjoyed that successful career because of the opportunity given to me by education.

But as I stand before you humbly claiming this success and assigning it to public education as its source, I also must tell you 70% of people in my special needs category today stand unemployed. Yes, 70% are unemployed. And in that unemployment status, this population receives money in the form of social charity or welfare payments so these folks can survive if not thrive. I will tell you the investment made in special education – when it produces good citizens who can make a contribution as a result – is a far more productive investment than underfunding special education, so people lack the training and experience they need to achieve independence and productivity. The economics are far better for the state if special education receives full funding rather than not.

Now our critics suggest it is not that special education should be funded, but rather that special education is a source of waste. It becomes an iconic source of waste somehow supporting the claim that public education itself receives far too much money.

Just as I asked this legislature years ago to use research and analysis as the source of insight for public policy on taxes, I ask this organization, I ask you as lawmakers to rely on solid research. Yes, solid research. I ask you to rely on solid research as you formulate policies for the funding of special education.

I invite you to find out what it takes for a special education teacher to receive training necessary to become a certified instructor taking care of special needs students. It's usually five or six years of a college education. That's an expensive investment made by someone.

I ask you to find out what we pay these special education teachers. Are we paying these teachers enough to attract them to come to meet the needs of those students? Or are we instead seeing a drain of classroom teachers at all levels, particularly at the level of special education?

I ask you to liberate yourself from the temptation to believe that federal mandates are the reason for special education programs. I ask you to let go of the idea that some federal funding of some of those programs will become an incentive for those programs to be adopted by local school boards, who will somehow lose their independence and become addicted to the funds created by the federal government to finance programs that really don't need to be offered for these special needs kids. If you don't want federal funding to support the justifiable mandates for special education, then I invite you to turn to the citizens of Kansas for tax dollars to fund those programs here rather than finding funding elsewhere. Fact is there are some critics who fight special education because some federal funding may be attached to it in the federal funding can be an addictive disorder. Really? I think not.

But you will investigate these things and you'll get to points where you can find facts and find assertions. I hope you will be transparent as you conduct further research. I hope you will use true academic rigor, true scientific research to determine the facts from the

fantasy. I hope you will measure outcomes that are available to you so you can see the investment especially in special education – just as the investment of public education itself – truly pays off for the economy and for society.

I look forward to the opportunity to build a relationship with you. I look forward to a partnership that can draw from the needs and expertise of local school districts and local school boards and local educators to help shape state policies that will respond to local control and make fair and equal opportunity for good public education everywhere in the state. This is a complex enterprise. But the complexity of it should not be used as an excuse to cut funding because we don't understand how the money is being spent or we think that because it is complex the money is somehow being spent imprudently. Let's first focus on what's right for our kids. Let's first focus on how we deliver what's right for our kids so we can deliver the outcomes best for those kids and, in turn, best for this state.

If your mother has just been diagnosed with symptoms of cancer, is your first question about her diagnosis related to what will be the cheapest way to give her the minimum treatment she requires? Which test we skip? Which procedure is unnecessary for her treatment? And when you get the diagnosis and understand the treatment plan, will you again turn to the cheapest provider? No. You will go to those whose reputation and whose outcomes are going to give your mother the very best. And you want the healthcare system that guides all of this to give everyone incentives to achieve the very best.

That's what it should be all about in public education. Our kids deserve the very best. Our kids don't deserve the cheapest nor do they claim a right to the most expensive. They deserve the value enabled by best teachers in school supported by best communities all devoted to best outcomes.

Special education then is the conscience of all this. I urge you to improve the funding of special education in Kansas schools and thank you for your consideration of these views.