



KANSAS NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION / 715 SW 10TH AVENUE / TOPEKA, KANSAS 66612-1686

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2023 Special Education and Related Services Funding Taskforce
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Members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony regarding special education in Kansas.

Thankful for the Opportunity to Testify

KNEA has been very vocal about our disappointment with not being included in discussions regarding issues that impact public education. We're certainly not prevented from testifying in the traditional sense of the process. However, we're not often consulted as a resource to help on the front-end. KNEA has been perpetually stuck in a react and respond posture that frequently results in opposition to many bills that are before this legislature. Often, we're forced to oppose bills that we could've helped fix and pass had we been included up front. This frequently creates unnecessary hard feelings and disillusionment with the process.

However, the 2023 interim has been different. We've been invited to two previous legislative committees to testify on issues that are important to our members. We've engaged in several meaningful conversations with legislators in joint efforts to find common ground. We take our role as stakeholders in the process seriously and **we appreciate this engagement.**

We recognize the importance of working with ALL legislators. We value relationship building. **We want to partner with the legislature on legislation that impacts public education.**

About Our Organization

Kansas NEA is a member-driven organization that represents all 40,000 educators in the state of Kansas. This includes certified teachers and support professionals from pre-K all the way through higher education. We have been in existence for more than 150 years.

We have nearly 22,000 members.

The positions we advocate for are democratically determined by our members who have been selected by their peers to attend our annual Representative Assembly. These positions are congruent with the core values of our organization and are established with resolutions adopted by those in attendance of the annual meeting.

These resolutions are proposed, debated, and voted upon by several hundred delegates from across the state, all with differing perspectives that are representative of the make-up of our state. They have been established based on what our members are experiencing in **KANSAS** classrooms, in their buildings, and within their profession.



KNEA and Special Education

KNEA has several resolutions dealing with special education.

At times we have been accused of being far too focused on the topic of funding on this issue and others. Our resolutions demonstrate a different narrative. We pride ourselves on taking a very comprehensive approach to the issue of special education that goes far beyond the subject of funding.

Our resolutions speak to all levels of government and bureaucracy. Our resolutions either directly or indirectly appeal to the local, state, and federal levels of government. This includes local school districts and boards, all three branches of state government, the Kansas Board of Education, The Kansas Department of Education, and many of the committees, taskforces, agencies, councils, and other related entities that are involved in the process of education policy making.

Our resolutions also speak to all the parties involved. Our process, and the resolutions that are derived from it, always consider the student, the student families, the educator, and the expectations of the community that relies on the public education system.

Through our resolutions, one will see that KNEA believes that special education programs should start far before a child enters the public school system and last throughout the entirety of the student's educational journey.

Our comprehensive approach involves:

- **Appropriate Licensing/Training/Preparation of Special Educators**

KNEA believes that special education teachers, education support professionals, and administrators be prepared properly to deal with the inclusion of students with special needs through such things as college courses, workshops, consultations with specialists, and other similar resources. Additionally, KNEA asserts that special education consultants, hired by school districts to work with individual classroom teachers, be fully licensed and certified and have at least two years of full-time classroom teaching experience. KNEA also advocates for proper compensation for educational support professionals that are required to take additional college hours or training to reach highly qualified status.

- **Appropriate Inclusion of Special Education Professionals in Policy and Decision Making**

KNEA supports the idea that licensed special education teachers that are actively involved in the teaching of exceptional children in public schools to be represented in all processes that include SPED policy and decision making. KNEA states that this representation should be geographically diverse and should include teachers that reside in all areas of the state of Kansas.

- **Student Opportunity for all Exceptional Students**



KNEA promotes the development and maintenance of alternative programs that ensure all students a path of success in the public education system. This includes students that are identified with learning needs as defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Act, students that have been suspended or expelled, and students that are in gifted programs.

- **Appropriate Classroom Setting**

KNEA believes that the professional load for special educators should accommodate optimum performance. This includes proportionately appropriate class sizes as well as appropriate modifications in scheduling and curriculum design.

- **Appropriate Funding**

KNEA supports full funding of the excess costs of special education as set in KSA 72-3422.

It is far easier to find common ground on the issues described in the first four bullets. Unfortunately, the topic of funding results in a far harder conversation that often results in hurdles and pitfalls.

Possible Hurdles and Pitfalls

We've been challenged to provide evidence-based solutions on the topic of special education funding. We respect that charge. However, this is increasingly difficult to do because opposing sides of this issue refuse to accept data and outcomes that do not fit their narrative.

One side believes that more funding is crucial. The other side believes that funding is currently sufficient. As a result, arguments about standardized testing, graduation rates, and career and college preparedness take the forefront. Motives are questioned, emotions run hot, and people retreat to their corners and dig in. And it is my perception that political wins and losses become the focal point of the debate. This leaves teachers, students, and student families on the outside looking in.

If in doubt, consult the real experts.

While it seems **some** politicians allow the political games to guide the debate, and only recognize data that fits their pre-conceived outcome, KNEA's first ask is that the legislature rely on the practitioners that deal with the real-world consequences of the decisions made in this building. We ask you to allow **teachers** to be a resource that guides all of you in these debates. The special educator's voice is critical to this debate.



The Special Educator's Voice

Jerald J. Braun

Special Education Teacher, Hays Public Schools - USD 489

If Special Education were fully funded, my district could hire more paraprofessionals at livable wages to support student needs. Reducing inclusion class sizes would facilitate appropriate learning environments for all students. Additionally, resources and opportunities could be extended not only to traditionally recognized special education programs but also to the gifted population falling under the same special education umbrella.

Thomas Barker

Social Studies Teacher, Lawrence Public Schools - USD 497

In my experience, the best way to provide support for students with exceptionalities is to have special education staff that are working to make sure their needs are being met. By funding special education services at the 92% of state excess cost our district would receive an additional five million dollars in state aid. While I agree that "throwing money at the problem" does not necessarily lead to positive outcomes, the fact that the most important resources we need is that of staff to work with students with exceptionalities, then additional funding is needed to expand, retrain and recruit the number of staff that we need to allow all students to be successful.

Jonathan Eshnaur

Special Education Teacher, Olathe Public Schools - USD 233

...The Olathe Schools District is transferring \$28 million from the general fund to educate students. While the district's decision to spend \$28 million from the general fund is the right decision, it does impact our students in the general education classroom. The \$28 million spent on special education limits the district's ability to develop new career technical education classes, hire more classroom teachers, or provide higher pay to retain classroom teachers and other critical educators like paraprofessionals. In short, failure to fully fund special education impacts our ability to have highly trained educators and the educational resources our students need to prepare them for their futures. Funding the excess special education cost can be a game-changer for our students and provide the educational services they deserve from our public schools

Brooke Wisley

Special Education Teacher, Wichita Public Schools - USD 259

I should say if special education is fully funded, but instead – I will say when USD 259 fully funds special education, more teachers can be hired. The resources that us, as professionals feel we need to do our jobs will be provided and we can better support our students educationally and academically. Students need the programs brought back to support them, their education, their social and emotional health needs. To do this – school districts must be funded.



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Our Ask

We've demonstrated that we take a comprehensive approach to the issue of special education advocacy. Of the several citations that deal with special education in our resolutions, only one deals directly with the issue of special education funding.

It reads:

[KNEA supports] full state funding of special education excess costs.

This simple reference to special education funding is demonstrative of the strong belief that many of the resolutions that we've adopted cannot be addressed without proper funding. Things like class sizes, qualified educators, professional teaching load, and alternative paths to success, all lead back to adequate funding.

In other words, for the classroom practitioner, the true expert, proper funding seems to be obvious.

Here's why:

The supermajority of those in the Kansas education realm, from students to advocates to policy makers and beyond, agree that teacher shortage is a major issue. Furthermore, most of us also agree that teacher shortages cause substantial hurdles for the students affected. Larger class sizes, under-qualified educators in the classroom, behavioral issues caused by unbalanced teacher/student ratios, and several other side-effects of underfunding, all make for a less than ideal learning environment for the student.

Because of the nature of the formula, Medicaid reimbursement aid, catastrophic aid, and transportation aid, all must be funded. Of the four major funding categories of special education weightings in Kansas, special education teacher aid is always the one that gets funded last. As a result, districts struggle to hire adequate numbers of special education educators.

Since the understanding of exceptionality is expanding, caseloads are rising, costs to educate students with exceptionalities are rising, school districts are routinely dipping into general education funding resources to meet the needs of the student with exceptionalities. When this happens, all students are affected.

It seems that these are the last children that we should be struggling to meet the needs of.

To that end, KNEA asks this taskforce to recommend the following for the 2023 legislative session:

- Recommend full state funding of special education excess costs.

We also ask again, to please allow us to be a resource for **ALL** of you.