

January 1, 2024

Attn: Special Education Taskforce

Dear Special Education Taskforce:

My name is Rebekah Varvel, and I am currently the Assistant Director of Special Education for USD 453 Leavenworth Public School (Leavenworth County). During my tenure at USD 453, I previously served in a variety of capacities including Special Education Teacher, Special Education Process Coordinator, and Principal. I am also a parent of a child with a Speech/Language delay. I am a proud supporter of the Special Education programming we provide at USD 453. We have experienced a variety of successes including the creation of a Multi-disciplinary Early Childhood team, continued success with our Special Day School transitions (students successfully transitioning back to general education buildings) being between 50-60%, and developing a robust training program for all Paraprofessionals. While a variety of challenges have plagued the educational system, the topic of funding for Special Education in particular, cannot go unnoticed.

Every school year in my district, we use approximately \$2.7 million dollars from our general budget to pay for special education services that are required by state and federal law, but aren't being fully funded. By spending our general dollars on special education, it makes it harder to keep and hire the best teachers and staff that we need for all students. More specific to the staffing challenge, our Special Education Department currently has 17 certified vacancies and 22 classified vacancies. We frequently receive feedback that higher pay elsewhere is a leading factor for not being able to retain staff. Many of the retail stores in our area pay \$2 to \$3 more per hour than our classified staff make.

As the cost of education continues to rise, we must pause to look at some of the newest challenges that are facing educators. First, there has been a marked increase in the significance of behavior challenges and the severity of disabilities when students enter the school system. At a young age, we see students with mental health concerns that have a significant impact on the child's ability to function in a school setting, as well as at home. This population of students require intensive programming with a low student to staff ration (ideally no more than 5 to 1). These staff require high levels of training and knowledge in order to work with the intensive needs of the students. Staffing these classrooms is very challenging. This will increasingly impact all districts once Open Enrollment goes into effect next school year, and students are allowed to attend the district of their choice. Some schools will not be equipped to provide the required services for students. To ensure these students are successful, districts need to have the funds available to hire specialized staff, provide high-quality resources and training, and ensure students are in a safe environment.

Second, the education system has witnessed a marked decrease in the number of staff who are willing and able to serve our most vulnerable population of students. As such, districts have been tasked with increasing wages, being creative with staffing, and in many cases, contracting employees from third parties and outside companies to provide educational services. These changes have taxed the dollars of the Special Education budgets around the state. For example, one contracted virtual school psychologist costs a neighboring school district \$97.00/hour [40 hours per week]. Another local example includes a contracted BCBA (Board Certified Behavior Analyst) position, which costs the district \$96.00/hour [40 hours per week] and a Special Education Teacher that costs the district \$69.00/hour [40 hours per week]. Comparably, if these positions were staffed in-house, the hourly rate would be closer to \$35.00-\$45.00 per hour [depending on experience, pay scale, and job duties]. Due to a decrease in staffing availability, contracted services have led to large increases in Special Education staffing costs. Consequently, this leads to the decreased availability of funds for other resources that are required by students with disabilities, as well as the general education population.

Third, districts continue to face staffing concerns when it comes to paraprofessionals. Paraprofessionals serve in a multifaceted role and provide services to students to ensure they are able to access the general education curriculum and be successful.

One of the biggest challenges is the salary for these critical individuals. There has been little to no change in the state's reimbursement for paraprofessionals. As such, the rate of pay for paraprofessionals has continued to be less than desirable. Many of these staff members chose to go work in the private sector, choosing jobs such as fast food, retail, etc. with higher rate of pay and benefits. This lack of staff hurts students and does not enhance the learning experience.

Last, with the increase in complex student needs and lack of trained individuals to provide services in the public education sector, many districts have turned to private placements for students. The availability of such programs leads to further complications, as many students are required to ride on buses and in taxis for over an hour each day. The cost of a private placement averages out to approximately \$250,000 per year. As such, districts continue to grapple with how to best serve kids without 'breaking the bank' and also remaining compliant with all state and federal guidelines and regulations.

Fully-funded special education is good for all Kansas students. A dedicated special education budget funded by the state and federal government would allow districts to establish local programs that benefit students in every school. For example, we would be able to enhance our afterschool programs, recruit and retain high quality staff, develop additional programming for students with challenging behaviors, and provide additional CTE options for students.

My professional belief is that the state legislature should strive to meet its statutory obligation to reimburse special education service costs at the mandatory rate of 92 percent of excess costs to ensure student success. If left underfunded, students with special needs across the state will continue to suffer from the impact and districts will have less flexibility to address other areas of need or community requests. Furthermore, the taxation on the General Education funding to continue to support the Special Education budget will become more noticeable. If the expectation is that "Kansas

leads the world in the success of each student," I would highly encourage addressing the funding gap, directly in the area of Special Education.

Thank you for your consideration of this testimony, as well as your commitment to ensuring that "Kansas leads the world in the success of each student."

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