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Special Education and Related Services Funding Taskforce  
January 5, 2024

Members of the Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on the critical issue facing our public schools. I am Jonathan Eshnaur, a high school special education teacher in Olathe Schools, who works to empower my students as they transition through four critical high school years to become active participants in their education. My sole focus is empowering my students to develop a vision of what their lives will look like after high school in a total team effort with families, fellow educators, related service providers, and community service providers.

As a special education teacher working to provide a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for my students, I have a laser focus on the individual educational needs of my students in collaboration with each student's family. As a teacher with 17 students, a caseload number smaller than many of my colleagues throughout the state, I work to coordinate their education services. Each student may have one to five or more individual education goals that can focus on reading comprehension, speech-language services, and occupational and physical therapy, mobility, deaf and hard of hearing services, or social-emotional support.

One of the consequences of the State of Kansas failing to fully fund Special Education is that districts are not able to recruit and retain special education educators providing services for our students as districts are not able to compete within the labor marketplace. These highly trained educators provide individualized lessons ranging from phonics to math, physical and occupational therapy services, and sessions for navigating social stations or mobility challenges. Whenever a district struggles to find a professional trained educator in these skills, students are missing out on the building blocks needed to support students in reaching their individual goals.

Another critical member of the school team are the special education paraprofessionals. These educators work alongside general education and special education classroom teachers to ensure that our students have access to a general education curriculum with appropriate, individualized support. These educators are invaluable with responsibilities that can be helping a student toilet, supporting a student who is non-verbal, or de-escalating a frustrated student to meet their individual needs. These educators are key to ensuring every student is prepared for their future, but districts across Kansas cannot recruit or retain them.

Districts struggle to compensate paraprofessional staff adequately due to a lack of funding from the State of Kansas. A perfect example is my district, which pays \$15.00 an hour and yet currently has 98 paraprofessional openings in the middle of the school year. We compete with companies like Quick Trip, which can offer \$18.00 an hour for starting employees to ring up that morning coffee and donut. When we do not fill these paraprofessional positions, we, as the Great State of Kansas, tell students and their families that their right to a free and appropriate public education does not matter more than our morning coffee and donut.

Finally, as we have made great strides in returning funding to Kansas Constitutional levels from the Gannon Decision. Yet Kansas schools still have one group not receiving the funding required: special education students. 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.

In closing, I want to thank the Committee for your commitment to our public schools. Kansas has, since its start 163 years ago, committed itself to providing Kansas students access to our public schools. I have a special connection to this Kansas history with my grandmother, Genevieve Eshnaur, who taught in a one-room schoolhouse near Alta Vista, Kansas. Just as she once taught to prepare students for their future, I do so now in the 21st Century as a special education teacher. With all of us doing our part, we can do so much more together for our students.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jonathan Eshnaur", followed by a large, stylized flourish that extends to the right.

Jonathan Eshnaur  
High School Special Education Teacher