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Special Education and Related Service Funding Taskforce  
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Chairperson and Committee Members of the Special Education Task Force,

My name is Thomas Barker and I am a 6th and 7th grade social studies teacher at Billy Mills Middle School in Lawrence. I have been in my current position for the past eleven years and have the privilege of teaching and being associated with the students and families in my immediate neighborhood. Additionally, I have a Ph.D. from the University of Kansas in Curriculum and Instruction, which has allowed me to be an adjunct instructor within the School of Education at the University of Kansas and the Continuing Education for Educators program at Baker University. My professional service includes being a former board member for the Kansas Council for History Education, a member of the Kansas HGSS Standards Revision Committee, Treasure for the Midwest World History Association, and a number of building and district committees.

I love teaching and working with middle school students. Though I embarked on a career working as an educational researcher and higher education instructor, I chose to come back into the classroom. I did this because despite many of the challenges and difficulties I have to face, the ability to form relationships and mentor students is something I thoroughly enjoy and cannot quite put into words how much I love my job.

As a public school teacher, students come into my classroom who have a variety of talents, struggles, accomplishments, failures, interest, and apathy. No matter who shows up in my classroom it is my responsibility to do my best to help them be successful. Some of the greatest joys I have had in my career come from seeing students who have an exceptionality succeed and show them that they can indeed do it. Just this past semester one such student received an A in my class, and exclaimed that I was the first class they have ever had an A. The amount of time we spent working one-on-one, time after school, and encouraging this student to not give up when they were discouraged paid off in the end. The increase in this student's self-esteem did so much in changing their own view of school as a place where they could be successful.

In reflecting upon this student success, the biggest resource that I could provide this student, and all students for that matter, is the ability to work with them one-on-one and provide instruction that will help them. This sounds easy, but is actually very difficult when you consider that most of my classes have thirty or more students, have 8 or more IEPs in each class, and have little special education support. What further complicates the situation is that these exceptionalities vary greatly to students with autism, developmental delays, intellectual disabilities, emotional disturbed, a specific learning disability, and/or non-English speakers. This means that most of my support

for these students has to be individualized and even when we work within a group I have to make sure no one is left behind. There are times when I simply cannot work or help everyone, which also includes those students who do not receive special education services. This is the biggest challenge I face as a teacher in that the much needed resource of special education support staff is simply not available. The student mentioned above was lucky enough to be in my class where I could better manage student needs and give them the guidance they needed. In my other classes, students are not as fortunate.

The lack of an adequate amount of special education staff to support our students with exceptionalities is not limited to our district, but is an issue that several districts, if not all districts in the state, are facing. Our district administration and school board this past year has worked to combat this by providing a stipend for special education teachers, and giving a more than \$2 raise to classified staff in hopes of retaining and recruiting those who work with students with exceptionalities. The cost to provide this additional salary increase was over two million dollars, which led to the cutting of several items from our district budget's general fund. Our district currently spends 85% of our budget on salaries and maintains a contingency fund that is less than 1% of our annual budget.

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.

In short, I hope that the committee members understand that the greatest resource that students with exceptionalities need are individuals to work with them. This has a direct cost that impacts my district budget often meaning our district administration and school board have to make painful decisions. It is my hope that the committee will come to a conclusion that funding special education at the 92% of state excess cost will allow districts to do this, while not having to take funds out of the general education budget to give students the support they need.