

Testimony to the Task Force on Special Education and Related Services Funding

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I am presenting testimony on behalf of the six school districts who are members of our special education cooperative: Winfield USD 465 (Sponsoring District), Arkansas City USD 470, Cedar Vale USD 285, Central of Burden USD 462, Dexter USD 471, and Udall USD 463. Our cooperative is especially proud of its commitment to train and support special education teachers in an effort to help provide them with skills and tools needed to work with students with disabilities (e.g., training teachers annually since 2010 to use the Orton Gillingham multi-sensory approach to teaching reading, writing, and spelling; extensive training and mentoring for first and second year special education teachers by our special education instructional coaches). Great things are happening for kids in each of our six districts, and I invite you to visit our schools.

Please view the following information for our cooperative for the 22/23 school year:

1. \$ 13.65 million was spent by the Cooperative to provide special education services.
2. Kansas state categorical aid was funded at 76.4% of excess costs. Kansas law indicates that state categorical aid is to be funded at 92% of excess costs
3. Due to this shortfall in state funding, \$3.27 million was taken from the six USDs' general fund accounts in order to provide the mandated services for students with exceptional needs.
4. 26.4% of students county-wide are students with disabilities. 3.4% of all students receive gifted services.
5. 372 employees worked for our cooperative. This includes 115 licensed personnel, 250.5 para educators, 2 administrators, and 4.5 office staff.

Some of the issues created by the shortfall in federal and state funding for special education appear below:

1. Unfilled positions: 50 para educator positions, 5 Speech Language Pathologists (SLPs), 1 social worker, 1 special education coach position, 6 special education teachers. Our cooperative cannot afford to pay competitive rates in order to attract, hire, and retain licensed staff and/or para educators.
 - a. The beginning rate of pay for a para educator in the 23/24 school year is \$10.75/hour. This rate is actually an improvement over prior years, yet individuals are able to work at fast food restaurants and retail and earn more per hour than they would if they worked with children. 30 of the 66 paras who left their jobs reported that they did so to receive higher pay. Our cooperative still has 49 unfilled para positions in the 23/24 school year.
 - b. SLPs, who are inferior in quality and skills to those that our cooperative employs, are able to sign contracts with agencies that provide teletherapy and then charge school districts \$90/hour for their services. Compounding the problem is the fact that universities are unable to keep up with the high demand for SLPs and simply do not produce an adequate amount of SLPs both in Kansas and nationwide.
 - c. Our special education cooperative is located in a rural area. Many of the teachers whom we hire and train choose to work for our cooperative for two to three years and then move away to more highly populated areas of the state where they receive higher pay and preferred local amenities are available to them.

Taking money from regular education in order to provide the needed funding for mandated programs for special education creates issues for regular education as well. This ripple effect makes it hard for USDs to provide the funding they need for programs for all students and to find, attract, and hire teachers locally as well.

What has not been addressed to this point is the fact that public schools are continuing to receive more and more students with increased levels and varieties of physical, cognitive, behavioral, and neurological disabilities. The increased severity level of the needs of students has resulted in increasing the costs of special education as well. In our cooperative, more students are being diagnosed with severe autism, severe emotional disabilities, and significant intellectual disabilities. Additionally, these students are being diagnosed at increasingly younger ages and require intensive special education services. These challenges make it even more difficult to meet the needs of students with exceptionalities locally.

I hope these facts are helpful to you as consider issues dealing with education finance during the legislative session. If you would like to meet with the administrative group responsible for ensuring that the needs of exceptional students in Cowley County are considered and met, please contact Dr. Sarnacki by email at ron_sarnacki@usd465.com, by phone at 620-218-4488, or any superintendent of the six USDs that are member districts of the cooperative. Thank you for your consideration of this information.

One final caveat, please do not be misled by the following argument. Some individuals argue that the amount of state categorical aid each USD receives should be based on the percent of excess costs ratio for that respective USD, cooperative, or interlocal. These are unfair comparisons. When one views state categorical aid and excess costs from this perspective, the outcome is the Reverse Robin Hood Effect – taking from the poor and giving to the rich. Do not be fooled by this method of analysis. While it may not be 100% applicable in every case, rank ordering entities in this manner primarily shows that entities which are more well-off (e.g., have a higher total valuation per pupil, have a lower percentage of free and reduced lunch students) and are larger in size are able to use local funds to pay their staff more than smaller, less well-off entities. This perspective was gleaned from review of information provided by prior Legislative Post Audit studies.