

Dear Special Education Task Force Members,

I'm writing to share my family's experience with special education in the state of Kansas in order to shed more light on the dire need for special education to be fully funded.

I have a 10-year-old daughter named Beatrice in the Shawnee Mission School district. Beatrice is autistic and has severe mental health and behavioral needs. Her need for extra accommodations became clear in 2018 when she started kindergarten at Ray Marsh Elementary, although she was not evaluated and found eligible for a Section 504 Plan until January 2020.

Over the next several years, it became clear that a 504 was not sufficient for her needs. Beatrice was struggling with aggression toward staff and peers, and was frequently eloping from the classroom and school property. My husband and I requested that Beatrice be evaluated for an IEP so that she could start receiving additional accommodations. She was evaluated in the fall of 2021 and found not eligible for an IEP. Instead, she continued on with the 504 plan, receiving daily interventions from the school social worker and principal. When these two staff members were occupied, she was sent to the school nurse's office, the school administration office, or another classroom. When we asked about help from a paraprofessional in the classroom, we were told that they were understaffed and that 1:1 student to para assignments were not a possibility.

Beatrice's behavioral needs continued to become more and more severe. I was called almost daily to come pick her up from school because of her behavior, especially on days that the principal was too busy to help her because of his full schedule. On at least one occasion, Beatrice eloped from school property and required the city police to locate her. All of this culminated with Ray Marsh staff determining that Beatrice would only be allowed to attend school from 7:50 am to 9:30 am each day, due to her intense staffing needs. During that time, she was isolated from peers, receiving instruction from 2 staff members.

We again requested an evaluation for an IEP. The principal of Ray Marsh, Kasey Weishaar, requested that her evaluation be expedited, citing the mass amount of data already collected on Beatrice and pointing to her immediate need for an IEP. The director of Special Education for Shawnee Mission denied his request to expedite the evaluation. She was evaluated in her isolated classroom, which was very triggering and upsetting to her. At one time, Beatrice complained that nobody was listening to her and that they were only looking at their phones. When I asked about this, the staff told me that she was correct, because they were constantly recording her behavior on their phone. They were more concerned with documenting her failures than actually providing help.

Finally, on September 29th, 2022, Beatrice was found eligible for an IEP. She was immediately transferred to Arrowhead Day School, a therapeutic special education school within the Shawnee Mission district. Beatrice still struggles with aggression and elopement, but is able to maintain full days of school because of the staffing and set-up of the school. We are very happy

with her current placement at Arrowhead, but Beatrice desperately misses being around her peers (she's one of 3 students in her current classroom, and the only female student in all of elementary).

Even if Beatrice's behavior were to drastically improve, I don't see how she could ever return to a general education classroom without more special education staffing. I feel that she might have been able to stay in general education longer if there had been a sufficient presence of paraprofessionals in the school to give her the daily help she needed. I'm frustrated with how many years it took for my daughter to even qualify for special education services, even though she was in clear need.

The lack of special education funding in Kansas has resulted in my child being isolated from peers and in unsafe situations, sometimes requiring police involvement. It has put undue stress on the general education teachers and administrators, who are unable to fully address her needs. It also negatively impacts the other students, who are dealing with constant interruptions and often unsafe interactions with students needing more services. Please fully fund special education in Kansas!

Sincerely,
Ashley Muehlbauer
Shawnee, Kansas