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Testimony to the Special Education Task Force

NAME: Claire M. Reagan

EMAIL ADDRESS: clairereagankc@gmail.com

ORAL or WRITTEN ONLY TESTIMONY: Written-Only Testimony

Dear Special Education Task Force Members,

Thank you for providing the opportunity to submit written testimony. I am writing based on my experience here in Olathe as both a parent as well as a current substitute teacher; I am also a former public and private high school teacher of 14 years. I appeal to you today on behalf of my three young children and other Kansas kids who currently or will one day attend our much sought after public schools.

When special education isn't funded to the state's full obligation, the re-allocation of resources within each individual district to meet that obligation impacts ALL of our kids. In our district, the state's failure to fully fund special education resulted in over \$30 million being transferred from general funds to fill the gap. I can only imagine what that \$30 million could do to support our professionals and serve our kids.

Our family understands this special and general education balance acutely. Our 9-year-old son is autistic; the resources available to us through our public school district have made a life-changing difference for him and our family as a whole. While our son's journey hasn't been without its speed bumps, we know the diligence, compassion, and expertise of the educators and service providers have helped him continue to thrive. Our 7-year-old daughter and 3-year-old son are typical in their development and are equally deserving of having all of their educational needs met.

Individual family stories, such as our own, don't necessarily capture the impact of underfunding special education, however. Over the last three school years, I've been a substitute teacher. I've subbed all over our district, but have often chosen jobs in special education classrooms. One common thread from building to building is the strain placed on all of our educators when positions (substitutes, paraeducators, service providers, fellow teachers) go unfilled. Until you're in the buildings, seeing the stress, feeling the weight, it's hard to grasp. Educators are doing everything they can to fulfill IEPs and meet the needs of all of their students, but that work has become far more difficult in recent years. It's clear the toll that has taken.

I started teaching when I was 23 years old. Those first years were so hard. Every new teacher at some point questions the profession. I was fortunate to be supported and encouraged by seasoned and stalwart professionals. The collective tanks of our education workforce are near empty. The fumes they are running on aren't enough to power a system that is vital to our state's shared prosperity.

With more financial resources coming from the state, districts would be able to offer more competitive compensation and investment in professional development in order to attract and retain staff. And we need staff.

We are fortunate in Kansas to be experiencing an unprecedented and ongoing budget surplus. Unfortunately, rather than make an investment in our children's future by fully funding special education, it seems that special education funding has become a carrot of sorts to get legislators who are staunch supporters of public schools to vote on bills they wouldn't normally support. Public education is far too important to be used as any sort of political football.

It is with the utmost respect and appreciation for what our great state has provided our family thus far that I appeal to you now. Doing right by our children is humanity's most sacred covenant; I trust you will proceed with their very best interest in mind and recommend the full funding of special education.

Thank you for your careful consideration.

Claire M. Reagan
Olathe, KS