

Special Education Funding Testimony in Support of the Kansas Legislature Fully Funding Special Education Services, Written Only:

Kelly Jones, LMSW
USD497 Board of Education President
Lawrence, KS
1/3/2024

Dear Members of the Special Education Task Force Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Committee. I am the Board of Education President for Lawrence Public Schools USD 497, elected at large, serving my second term. The USD 497 Board of Education extends our gratitude for your service to Kansas, particularly the State's children and educators. I am pleased to share with Committee members that USD 497 graduation rates increased by 5% over the past year compared to a statewide average increase of 1%. It is our highest graduation rate in 16 years. Lawrence Public School educators and staff are responsible for our graduation rate success. The Board strives to retain those educators. In 2022-23, the Board made difficult budget cuts to invest \$6,651,703 million into staff wages (16.94% increase to classified staff, 8.1% increase to certified, and 5.5% increase to administration). The wage increase is historic for our district but came at the cost of closing schools and increasing class sizes. It also did not achieve our goal of a \$15 starting wage for classified staff, which includes 220 paraprofessionals, who play a vital and federally mandated role in supporting students receiving special education services.

Our Board requests that the Kansas Legislature fully fund special education as required by current state law. See K.S.A 72-3422. Special education funding must cover the actual cost of providing necessary services to each and every one of our students with an IEP. With over a billion-dollar state budget surplus, continued refusal by the Kansas Legislature to pay for the actual services students need to succeed is a moral, ethical, and policymaking failure by our current legislative leadership. Increase base state aid per pupil to a level that closes the 25% educator pay gap and allows districts to pay competitive wages to support staff. Again, school funding must be tied to the actual, inflation-adjusted costs needed to achieve state requirements for student achievement.

USD 497 provides all the required special education services; but, to do so, we have pulled more and more money away from general education services. In 2022-23, USD 497 special education expenditures were \$25.6 million. The State provided \$17.2 million, which meant a general fund transfer to special education of \$8.4 million. We should not be forced to take away from one group to meet other's needs because we lack the resources our students need to succeed.

Thank you for your consideration,
Kelly Jones

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