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Special Education and Related Services Funding Taskforce

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Hello chair and committee, thank you for the opportunity to express myself and give testimony today. My name is Brooke Wisley and I am a Special Education Teacher in the Wichita USD 259 School District.

I am in my eleventh year in the education field, seven of which have been as a licensed teacher in USD 259, specifically at South High. I joined the teaching profession seven years ago after being a para-educator for four years. I enjoyed being a paraeducator, so I decided to pursue my master's degree in special education. I joined the teaching profession because I truly feel like I make a difference in students' lives daily. In addition to being a special education teacher, I am also a mother of three biological children and two bonus children. My two bonus children are also on the path to becoming special education teachers. Their biological mother, my best friend, is also a special education teacher in the Wichita district. Despite my challenges and tribulations in education, I still am a believer in education and what impact teachers have on students.

When teachers are required to work outside of contract hours, this impacts our family life, which negatively impacts our students and overall leads to burnout. When teachers are burnt out and stressed, students sense it and they become stressed. When teachers are stressed, they are less likely to be effective teachers (41% of teachers are less effective at their jobs according to edweek.org). When covid hit the Kansas area and schools shut down, it is almost as if educators were expected to continue being these all-star amazing humans that were already underpaid – and do more. Since returning to the buildings, it is still expected to make up for the deficiency of students and continue making miracles without any appreciation, compensation, or adequate resources to do our jobs. The stress level of teachers has increased, the demands continue to be put on educators and the lack of resources are unreasonable, and the administration claims they don't have the resources to pull and support teachers. As responsibilities grow, expectations pivoted, teachers pivoted to support students because we care. That is what we are here for. While teachers are struggling, and expressing the struggle, advocating for help – which is what we encourage our students to do – teachers are met with an endless number of excuses as to why we can't be supported. So, teachers are ultimately treading water waiting on a large wave (or two) to come along and take us all out. At what point does the teacher suicide rate skyrocket and we lose valuable resources for students?

While teachers are stressed out, the shortage of adequately trained and supportive staff to help with the stress is only growing. We have so many long-term substitutes that have no idea of the content they are expected to teach. We have a shortage of substitutes and rely on teachers to pick up the slack, yet again. In my school, rather than the administration stepping in and taking some of the stresses off of teachers, they would rather spread the wealth of stress amongst staff. For example, the administration had a perfectly capable paraeducator that is pursuing his

Master's degree, rather than hire him for a long term substitute position at the school, they did not even give him an interview. I would like to tell you this rarely occurs, but then it happened with my son, who was a graduate of this high school – wanted to work in the same place he went to high school. They did not hire him. Instead, gave the math position to a long-term sub, who cannot write IEP's, and does not have a caseload. When my son specifically, could have taken a caseload and written IEP's starting in January (because it is his second semester in his master's program). These are small examples of what administration is doing that is not supportive of teaching staff. When discussing long term subs not being certified to teach a specific content area, this impacts students daily. When students have questions about the content or are unsure about something, if the substitute doesn't know, how are we furthering the educational growth for our students? If the shortages of teachers continue, the stress level and educational deficiencies are going to only increase for these vulnerable students of ours. While it is hard to attract people, the schools are filling spots with long term subs because it is cheaper for the districts.

While education has changed and evolved, not necessarily for the better, we have to hold the adults accountable before we can focus on the students. If adults are not doing right, and being addressed appropriately how can we change the behavior of them? Once that changes, then we can focus on the changing and evolving the expectations of students and their behaviors in school. Each morning, at South high during the announcements, it is said to “be nice”, but adults aren't nice to one another, how can we encourage and hold students to that expectation when adults are not held to the same standard?

I should say if special education is fully funded, but instead – I will say when USD 259 fully funds special education, more teachers can be hired. The resources that us, as professionals feel we need to do our jobs will be provided and we can better support our students educationally and academically. Students need the programs brought back to support them, their education, their social and emotional health needs. To do this – school districts must be funded. Teachers have to be paid their worth and appreciated for what they do on a daily basis. I am one of the many teachers asking for help, begging for a change. If change doesn't happen, I am one of the many educators that will have a changed perspective from one foot out the door to two feet out the door. I must take care of me and my mental health so I can care for my family.

While I understand not all legislators are equal in this commitment and understanding of funding for public education, it is imperative to become knowledgeable, understand the need for funding. I appreciate your time and your commitment to filling this gap in our broken education system and fixing, or starting to fix, the wronging of our education funding.