



Testimony on SB 144, high-density at-risk (written only)

Senate Education Committee

John Allison, Superintendent, Olathe Public Schools USD 233

February 19, 2021

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today in support of SB 144, which would remove sunset on the high-density at-risk weighting. The Olathe Board of Education appreciates the legislature's investment and interest in working with us to ensure that each child has the opportunity to learn.

Olathe Public Schools is the second largest school district in the state, with a student population of nearly 30,000 students. We are known for excellent student results, including high graduation rates, high ACT and SAT scores, consistently performing above state and national averages. We are a school district committed to narrowing achievement gaps and providing an excellent education to our students.

In 2019-2020, Olathe identified approximately 11,646 students eligible for at-risk services based on the Kansas State Department of Education criteria. 5,530 of those students were counted for funding based on their free lunch application status. The district supplements the at-risk funding we receive with federal title funds and district general operating funds to ensure all students have access to the programs and services necessary to support their academic learning.

Olathe Public Schools will receive an estimated \$12.5 million in at-risk funding for FY 2021, including our 4-year-old at-risk program, and an additional \$647,000 in high-density at-risk funding. The district will invest approximately \$20.9 million this year to ensure high-quality staff and appropriate programs and services to meet our at-risk students' needs.

High-density at-risk weighting

The Olathe Board of Education supports extending the high-density at-risk weighting. Our district is one of the districts that received increased funding due to changes to the way eligibility for high-density at-risk funding was determined in the most recent school finance plan. Rather than limiting eligibility to districts as a whole, the change allowed our district to qualify individual buildings. In our district, there are 12 buildings at the elementary and middle school levels whose percentage of free lunch students make them eligible for the high-density at-risk weighting.

Some of our buildings will facilitate learning for more students than the total enrollment in some of our smaller school districts across the state. This is one of the reasons our district supported changing the formula – we recognized that while our entire district may not need these additional resources, there were pockets of deep poverty within our community and that many of those students required further assistance.

Pervasive and deep poverty for families and children creates experiential differences in students' preparation academically and sometimes socially. This is particularly challenging when the poverty in individual neighborhoods and schools is especially dense. It takes additional staff and support services to achieve school readiness and prepare these students for success in their post-secondary education or the workforce.

At-Risk programs and services

Olathe Public Schools supports **accountability and transparency**, and we rely heavily on data to help assess student progress and help guide instruction throughout the year. We appreciate the complexity of how different methods and practices work together to achieve an outcome and how that may evolve throughout the academic year.

Individualized instruction and support services are vital to meeting the needs of these students.

High-quality teachers are the most important factor in helping students succeed. This is why the Olathe district invests heavily in recruiting and retaining the professionals we have. Our teachers and support teams can **assess and evaluate what strategies, methods, and programs are most effective for our students**. They are also in the best position to modify those instructional plans as student needs change.

In addition to high-quality teachers and staff, we also invest in **programs and strategies** that have proven results for our students. Below is a list of some strategies and programs we have implemented for at-risk students. Keep in mind that students may engage in one or more of these programs at a time.

- **Expanding early childhood education** programs to provide Intervention and support services, especially those in poverty, allow us to identify unique learning needs early. It increases the likelihood these children are kindergarten ready.
- **Reduced class size in K-3 and in those school with dense poverty** provides more opportunities for individualized learning to aid students in the acquisition skills.
- **Supporting additional math and reading teachers (and coaches) at all levels K-5**. This is in addition to the Title 1 funds we use in our Title schools.
- **Providing summer school**, which is important in minimizing the ‘summer slide’ and enhancing skills for at-risk students. Additional time is important in addressing the learning gaps for students.
- For some secondary students, the district provides **alternative settings and programs** to provide pathways to high school graduation and enhanced skills.
- **Expanded mental health services** are provided in partnership with community organizations to address students’ social emotional learning needs.
- **AVID (Advancing Via Individual Determination)** identifies students in middle school with academic potential. This creates a student cohort that receives staff support, tutoring and sets expectations that students will be enrolled in rigorous classes to be prepared for college. The majority participating would be the first in their family to attend. Hundreds of Olathe high school students each year participate in AVID.
- **Extended Learning** provides specific tutoring and intervention support to students K-12 focusing on math, reading, and ACT preparation.

What Olathe Public Schools can assure you is that even with the number of at-risk students almost tripling over the last 20 years, our overall success remains high. Our attendance rate is 96 percent and that means we are continuing to engage students in their learning process – a must for at-risk students. They are also graduating. Our graduation rate in 2020 was 92.4% percent, and our ACT composite average was 22.6.

We know we are making a difference in the lives of these students. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. The Olathe Board of Education remains committed to working with you to address the needs of at-risk students. If you have any questions, please contact Brent Yaeger, Assistant Superintendent for Learning Services, or me at (913) 780-8022.