



**Written testimony on HB 2594**

**House K-12 Education Budget Committee**

Dr. Brent Yeager, Superintendent, Olathe Public Schools USD 233

January 29, 2024

Chair Williams and members of the committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony in opposition to abolishing the special education and related services funding task force. Olathe Public Schools spoke in support of this task force when it was introduced last year and continues to believe that it *could* be a valuable mechanism for advancing ideas about funding special education programs and services in Kansas.

Olathe Public Schools is the second-largest school district in the state and the largest in the Kansas City metropolitan area, with a student population of approximately 29,000 students. Our vision is to prepare all students for *their* future from early childhood to our 18-21 programs.

Our student population is diverse with over 58 attendance centers. This school year, we have over 92 languages spoken by our students districtwide. We have 19% of our students whose first language is not English and approximately 30% of our students receive free/reduced lunch services. Within our district, we have schools that are low as 1% qualifying for free/reduced lunch to schools that have almost 90% of their students receiving free/reduced lunch. As you can see, we proudly serve a wide demographic of students with purpose, intention, and fidelity working to meet their individual needs.

**Olathe Public Schools proudly provides special education services to approximately 6,000 students pre-K through 21.** Within those numbers, nearly 10 percent are gifted. We work alongside each of these families to determine what programs, services, and personnel are both appropriate and necessary to help students excel while considering the least restrictive environment, which in some cases, requires outside placements to best meet their needs.

Though we are the second largest district in the state serving a special education population that is larger than most districts in the state, **our percentage of excess cost reimbursement is one of the lowest in the state. Oftentimes the lowest.** As a district, this is not sustainable. Under federal law, our district must provide students with disabilities with the specialized instruction and support they need.

Olathe Public Schools is matching, almost dollar-for-dollar, the amount of special education funding received from the state. **This is one of the reasons we supported the establishment of the Special Education and Related Services Task Force.**

Olathe Public Schools recognizes that special education funding is only part of the overall K-12 education funding formula and that legislators may be interested in looking at the entirety of the school finance system as we approach 2027. That said, our district believes that special education is an area of school finance that warrants its own study. It is, arguably, the most prescriptive of all programs and services we deliver given the requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities (IDEA) and state laws. Often, it requires the coordination of both medical and educational services for the students and families we serve. Unlike other areas of school finance, special education funding is largely calculated based on the number of teachers and paras we employ *and not* on student headcount or cost per pupil.

Special education is exceptionally complex and nuanced. Getting this portion of school finance right will free up resources to support programs and services for those students not receiving special education services. **As the only superintendent appointed to serve on the Special Education and Related Services Task Force, I hoped we would examine how other states funded special education and that we might be able – over time – to have a real conversation about the inequities in the existing formula.** I fear that if this issue becomes just a part of what another task force is charged to do, we will not allocate an appropriate amount of time to study this issue.

Beyond that, as we look at the **composition of the newly proposed task force**, there are two education professionals – a superintendent from an urban district and a superintendent from a rural district. Given that there is no definition of “urban” in state statute and that the definition varies among other entities, it is unclear whether Olathe Public Schools would be eligible to participate – even with the diverse and large special needs populations we serve.

But we also note that it does not include other professionals who could contribute in meaningful ways, such as school business officers, curriculum leaders and special education administrators. If we truly want to discuss funding education in Kansas, these individuals could truly offer unique perspectives on programs and services for students, as well as operational challenges and opportunities that may exist when working within the current formula.

**We acknowledge that the Special Education and Related Services Task Force got off to a rocky start and that our only meeting was not as robust as it could have been. That said, we are asking all groups to commit to working together to come up with a solution that ensures all students have access to the programs and services they are entitled to.**

As you consider this legislation and other policy issues this session, know that Olathe Public Schools remains committed to working with you to support Kansas students. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at [byeagerec@olatheschools.org](mailto:byeagerec@olatheschools.org) or (913) 780-8132.