

Thank you for allowing me to speak today while my amazing para team and a sub steps up to support our students. I'm going to talk fast to finish in five minutes, but I encourage you to take time to genuinely pause - take a moment - to see what's happening in special education so you can truly see the need.

Anyone who is advocating for budget reductions should be required to do what we do with the budget we have. But since that's not happening, I'll invite you virtually into my school for a day, keeping in mind that I work at a school you would deem well-staffed. We are incredibly collaborative and creative when it comes to supporting our students with disabilities. I'm lucky. I love my job. And I'm tired.

My morning starts at home when a para calls in. We have a statewide sub shortage, and we don't staff for absences because funding doesn't allow for it. Not that we could even, if we wanted to, since there's also a statewide para shortage. **Recruiting and retaining quality staff requires funding.** We figure it out, but we're running out of ways to ask what staff we do have to do more "for the kids" at the cost of their own well-being.

We change diapers with gloves and wipes purchased with funding, grab multi-thousand-dollar tablets loaded with critical communication programs to give our students a voice, push a student to class in a \$4,000 activity chair and pull her \$1,600 communication device mount along for the ride. We gather all other materials we need to implement their legally required individualized education plan. It all adds up. **Individualization requires funding.** We figure it out, but it is mentally exhausting.

Then we have related services. We're currently facing a statewide shortage of professional related service providers who are willing to do the work required for the pay offered in Kansas schools because of a lack of state funding. **Quality funding brings quality staff**, not just staff who believe so very much in the future of these children and this state and will do more for less because of it. We figure it out, but our students get our stretched-thin efforts.

Going back to paras, one just had to change clothes because the diaper change got messy. Another got verbally berated to the point of tears by a child who doesn't know what to do with all the frustration of having an invisible disability. Some days, that's the job. But. . . their pay (para pay statewide) is a disgrace.

**Respectable salaries require funding.** So, I attempt to create an environment for them that is valuable beyond a grossly unfair paycheck. I figure it out, but there are only so many times I can expect my husband to look the other way while I fill our carts with morale boosters so my paras feel like this challenging job is worth their own financial investment.

I have watched our teachers, paras, related service providers, continually do more with less with our most complex, high-needs community, to be *guilted* by those setting these abhorrently low funding percentages into being okay with it because if we ask for appropriate funding, we must not be in it "for the kids" - trite rhetoric when it perpetuates an expectation for us to get second jobs and donate to our profession as if it were a charity because of the gaps left by those who refuse to fully fund special education.

These students, we educators are people. Deserving of dignity, respect, and resources - not a hidden clearance rack, an afterthought, an erasable line item. When we fight a segregation narrative, when we include everyone and meet the needs of **all** those we claim to want to support, everyone benefits. **But individualization and inclusion require funding.**

I made a teacher contract in grad school. Presume competence; include everyone; make the least dangerous assumption. Doing this takes investment and sacrifice, just like those four years of grad school did for me and my family. When legislators in 2024 choose not to invest and decide that our most vulnerable population - those who have to fight daily to get leftovers - are worth closed-minded, prejudicial, 1950's-style budget decisions, when they expect caviar but pay for a can of tuna . . .

Beautiful things still happen.

Not because of a grossly underfunded budget set by those who sit comfortably behind desks that have no educational purpose but because we all have personal teacher contracts. We all figure it out.

But the final bullet point in *my* teacher contract?

We can't pour from an empty cup, and you control the pitcher. We're doing our job "for the kids." We're calling on all of you to do yours.

