

Matthew - Please find below our written testimony for the January 5 meeting of the special education task force. Thank you for compiling this information.

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Written only testimony below

Dear Special Education Task Force Members:

"Whatsoever you do, to the least of my brothers, that you do unto me..."

On May 28, 2003, our family grew with the addition of a beautiful baby boy. Adopted from a single mother, this child was a blessing to our family, and a joy to watch grow and thrive within our home. Provided with excellent care and abiding love, our hearts were full of anticipation to have the privilege of being chosen to raise this child. As lifelong Kansans, we knew his future was bright as he would attend our nationally recognized public schools.

As our son grew, it became apparent that he was not meeting goals at the expected rate. Through a thorough investigation of his hospital records and a comprehensive evaluation at Children's Mercy in Kansas City, we discovered that there were definitely challenges ahead. His birth mother had concealed recreational drug use and declined to have him drug screened in the hospital at birth. At just under 2 years, our beautiful boy was diagnosed with autism and intellectual disabilities.

Undeterred, we set out to provide him with the best support possible. We enrolled him in Olathe's early childhood/pre-school program and leveraged programs such as Infant Toddler Services and Parents as Teachers. His "least restrictive" environment in elementary school was soon declared to be a special education classroom and he spent little if any time in classes with his peers.

Still, we knew Kansas had the best schools, right? Little did we know that at relatively the same time (2011-on), that disability service wait lists had climbed to an astronomical number (7+ years at the time) and that schools were already arguing over or under- funding for this very special population of students.

The last 15 years has been a combination of seeking out medical help and advice, as well as diving deep into the world of IEPs and evaluations. Our son received decent educational support from the school system (Olathe School District) but imagine our horror when we find that not only are these special students' needs not a priority but in fact that they have been underfunded for a majority of his time in the system.

"Borrowing" from the general fund to support these children is not an answer, and in fact, is beginning to cause a significant chasm that could lead to not only a complete lack of funding, but a financial "divorce" that leaves these children on the curb, and families to fend for themselves. We have spent thousands of dollars as a family to support this child, but find that the school districts that we thought were "nationally ranked" have long been underfunding this critical service. With the state's budget surplus and legal mandate, there is simply no excuse for continuing to "rob Peter to pay Paul". As

families, we have made difficult decisions to support our child's needs, and we expect that the State and our Schools do the same.

While all this has been going on, the State has also refused to fund disability services or consider expanding Medicaid so that we can provide our son with the support he needs. Next August, he will "graduate to the couch" and age out of the school system with a 10 year wait list for basic disability services like life skills or attendant support. My husband and I will be well into our 70's before he is eligible for an opportunity to establish a home and life for his future, which will leave little time for adjustment or transition - both types of structure he has significant needs for.

So the time is now. The need is great. And the children are the ones suffering. We can pay for road/highway improvements. We can lower the tax on food. But we can't support those of our citizens who have the greatest needs? What are we doing here in Kansas? Only recognizing those who can do for themselves, vs. those who need our love and support to enjoy a full life and meet the challenges of the future?

Truly, that's not the Kansas we grew up in, and we can do better. We challenge each legislator to look to their own families. With one in 36 boys being diagnosed with Autism, you won't have to look far to see a loved one that is in need. Please move quickly to fully fund special education services and use the existing surplus to pay down the Disabilities Wait List. Certainly there are ways if only we will commit to supporting this very important population.

Respectfully,

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