

**January 3, 2024**

**Written-Only Testimony for the Special Education Task Force**

**NAME:** Sarah Mackay

**TITLE:** Parent - Shawnee Mission School District, Leawood

**EMAIL ADDRESS:** [sarahmackay28@gmail.com](mailto:sarahmackay28@gmail.com)

Dear members of the Special Education Task Force,

As the parent of two school-age children, one attending a private Catholic high school and the other attending public elementary school in the Shawnee Mission School District, I am writing to share my story and to voice my support for fully funding special education.

I have seen firsthand how general education funds restored under Gannon and additional COVID federal funds have been put to good use in our schools. However, COVID funds are coming to an end, and Gannon funds are being undermined as school districts must use more and more of their general education dollars to cover the growing shortfall in state SPED funding. I fear our schools will soon not be able to meet many of the basic needs of Kansas students if the legislature does not address the underfunding of special education.

Let me share with you how my family was positively impacted by the Gannon & COVID funding and how fully funding SPED could provide even more benefits to all Kansas students.

I'll start with my son Sawyer who began having seizures at age 1. He had brain surgeries for the seizures at ages 2 and again at age 4. This started our family down a path that ended up with Sawyer needing Special Education services. Sawyer's second brain surgery caused damage to his frontal lobe. The brain damage and the seizures impact Sawyer's ability to regulate his emotions and he has a severe processing delay in taking in verbal information. Two years ago, he was officially diagnosed with autism. He is also incredibly intelligent – taking 3<sup>rd</sup> in the school spelling bee last year.

I write this to say that I didn't envision us as a Special Education family. Sawyer just started receiving special education services in 5<sup>th</sup> grade. This was the same year that Covid funding enabled our elementary school to have a full-time social worker on hand to help him (and the teachers) with big emotional breakdowns. Increasing funding to enable social workers changed my son's life – and also changed the lives of his teachers to have support and the other students in the classroom to not be interrupted – as there was a trained safe person to work with Sawyer during breakdowns. Special Education funding is now critical to his daily life and quality of education and safety.

But as unique as his reasons are, he is not alone in needing special education services or additional supports. Many kids with ADHD or trauma or anxiety, need additional help while in school. Their teachers also benefit from the availability of these resources.

We cannot let the ever-growing special education funding shortfall result in our schools not being able to provide for the needs of all children.

I would also like to share our older high school aged daughter's experience as she has been attending a private Catholic high school after 10 years of public school. It was a good move for her but it really

highlighted to me how important it is to fully fund our public schools and how the underfunding of special education impacts all students, even those not utilizing SPED services.

My daughter's school has dedicated college counselors - one for every 300 students in the school, as well as two social emotional counselors that are available to students. They are able to do this because they have the proper funding. As we toured colleges for the past 18 months, all admissions counselors stressed the importance of personal letters of recommendation from one teacher and the most highly rated - from the school counselor.

My daughter did her freshman year at a top public Kansas high school, but the counselors were stretched so thin that they didn't know who she was and it was sometimes difficult to get timely responses when she did need help with an issue. Counselors in our public district are overwhelmed and have a ratio of students that is much higher than recommended. We just found out that our daughter just got into her dream University in Boston, and the fact that her private school counselor was able to write an accurate and glowing letter of recommendation from personal knowledge of her and from the fact that they keep a file on every student and update it throughout their high school years with their accomplishments, was a major factor in her application. This is one of the six criteria that colleges base admissions on and Kansas public school students are missing out on collegiate opportunities without having a relationship with counselors.

By fully funding special education, our public schools could use those freed up general education dollars to provide students with more assistance by guiding them through the college acceptance process or helping them identify other interests and the steps needed to ensure postsecondary success.

I ask that the legislature prioritize the success of all Kansas kids by meeting their obligation to fund 92% of special education costs. Student needs cannot be fully met when general education funds are depleted to cover an ever-growing shortfall in special education funding.

Kansas schools will not be fully funded until special education is fully funded.

Thank you for your consideration,

Sarah Mackay