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To: Special Education and Related Service Task Force-

Honorable Chair Williams and Committee Members,

As an educator of almost 40 years, I can attest that schools are facing societal issues that are extremely challenging and adding stress to the educational environment. More and more students are entering the system with academic and social emotional delays, and we have fewer qualified applicants in the work force.

Teacher shortages are real and at a crisis point. We are also challenged to pay our staff competitive wages. As an organization, we are operating in a significant financial deficit this year that will compound in future years without funding increases.

Effective and well-staffed special education programs contribute towards stronger communities. While I acknowledge and actively advocate that federal funding is a problem, so is funding in Kansas. There are so many federal and state regulations that we are truly struggling to implement. Being short staffed does not diminish our responsibilities to students and families to provide mandated services.

At the SEK Interlocal in the corner of Southeast Kansas, we have 6 professional and over 40 classified openings in our schools. Classified staff can make more at McDonald's than they can working for a school. Special education professionals can avoid the many challenges of special education and often receive higher pay by working in regular education or the health industry.

As Kansas and Federal dollars lag, greater burden is put on our member districts budgets. This creates challenges for school boards to decide on how to best utilize funds that were meant for programs for ALL students. I worry that early intervention and MTSS initiatives are sometimes reduced to cover expanding special education costs.

That needs to change. We need the best people to work with our most needy students. I truly believe after nearly four decades in the business that funding special education is an investment that provides Kansas with a return on every dollar spent.

As mentioned, one time money doesn't solve the problems that a long-term plan does, and 95% of the revenue we receive goes directly to staff salaries. I'd also mention that our organization provides needed supports to students in public as well as private schools.

I thank the Special Education and Related Service Task Force for addressing this issue. Kansas students need and deserve leaders that don't dodge the difficult issues. Thank you for your consideration of this brief testimony.

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