

Unified School District #101



205 S. Main Street
Erie, KS 66733
(620) 244-3264

Scott Palser, **Superintendent**
Connie Buskirk, **Board Clerk**
Tracy Tromsness, **Board Treasurer**

January 3, 2024

Kansas State Representatives to the Special Education Task Force

RE: Unified School District No. 101 – Erie/Galesburg

Special Education Funding

To whom it may concern,

USD101 Erie-Galesburg is a small district in Southeast Kansas with 459 students. Erie is the county seat for Neosho County and is very typical of rural Kansas schools. Our schools are steeped in tradition and the community prides itself in the quality of education that we provide to our students. Our students graduate from Erie High School with the knowledge and skills to ensure their success no matter what their next step may be. However, like many small school districts, we must make hard decisions in terms of what programs and activities we offer to our students. Budget shortfalls and staffing shortages mean that there are times that our students miss out on educational opportunities that they would otherwise enjoy. Recently, one of the major causes of that financial strain has been the excess cost of special education.

Over the last three years, USD101 has had to make General Fund and/or Local Option Budget Fund transfers to the Special Education Fund totaling \$1,371,917.37. That average of \$457,305.79 per year is almost 10% of my total budget authority. Put another way, that is almost \$1000 per kid in my district that we are having to spend on special education to cover the shortage. I would like to point out that this \$1000 per student is my entire student population, not my special education identified population. It is not my intent to have my students compete with each other or take from each other. My special education students need the services that they are provided in order to be successful. The whole point of the law mandating the state reimburse 92 percent of excess cost is due to the fact that ALL students are entitled to the highest possible educational experience that we can provide.

The money that USD101 is currently spending to cover excess special education costs that could be spent on developing programs such as our automotive pathway. This career pathway would prepare students for a high wage, high demand occupation in our region. We are still in the developmental phase for this program but students are already excited about the opportunities that might become available. They have even formed a "hot rodders" club that meets before and after school. This funding could also be spent to help fund a new art teacher position. Currently, I am unable to provide an elementary art teacher so my classroom teachers are trying to include occasional art projects for their students as a supplement to their core subjects. Art is highly important for students in terms of both physical and mental development as well as the emotional outlet that it provides. I had a meeting shortly before Christmas to discuss the possibilities of starting an emergency services pathway in partnership with local community colleges. In rural Kansas, we are highly dependent on our volunteer fire departments and are extremely understaffed in terms of first responders. A partnership with local community colleges to try and meet that need requires additional funding from both the college and the school district. I attended small schools growing up and have spent almost my entire educational career in a small school setting. I am used to seeing my students go without many of the programs and opportunities that their urban and suburban counterparts get to enjoy. This is the opportunity cost of being in a smaller setting and getting the smaller class sizes that come with being in rural Kansas. However, there are

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geographic and demographic specific programs that would highly benefit my students if Special Education were to be funded at the 92 percent as mandated by state law.

The bottom line is that we are all duty bound to provide for the students in the state of Kansas. It is not just about the law. We should all strive to do what is right. In this case, the right thing is to ensure that ALL students are put in the best possible position to be successful. As a parent with three children in USD101 I can tell you that I spend hours and hours talking to my personal kids about giving their best effort in everything they do. As a superintendent, I talk to my teachers and administrators nearly every day about making sure that our students are getting our very best. I humbly ask that you do the same. Give your very best to our students. They deserve it.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Scott Palser

USD101 Superintendent