

January 3rd, 2024

Re: Special Education and Related Services Funding Task Force

TaskForce Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to address this esteemed task force today. My name is Kellen Adams, and I am the Superintendent at USD 453-Leavenworth. Our current delivery model for Special Education services is self-operational for our district exclusively.

I stand before you today to shed light on a critical issue that requires our immediate attention – the underfunding of special education within our state. The repercussions of this underfunding not only affect the students receiving special education services but also have significant ramifications on the General Fund.

Kansas has long been committed to providing a quality education for all students, including those with special needs. However, the current state of special education funding is a cause for concern. The inadequate allocation of resources directly impacts the ability of schools to deliver the necessary services for students with disabilities, leading to a compromised learning environment for them and their peers.

The most pressing issue contributing to the challenges faced by special education programs in our state is the insufficient amount of categorical aid. The *total funding* allocated for special education falls far below the actual needs of these programs. This shortfall places an undue burden on the General Fund, which is forced to divert resources from other essential areas to bridge the gap.

The consequence of this underfunding is twofold: First, it hampers the provision of necessary services for students with disabilities, hindering their academic and personal growth. Second, it places a strain on the General Fund, affecting the overall budgetary priorities of our state. We must recognize that investing in special education is an investment in the future of our state – a commitment to ensuring that every student has the opportunity to succeed.

To address this critical issue, I propose a comprehensive review of the categorical aid amount that is allocated to special education. We must work collaboratively to reassess the current funding structure and identify areas where adjustments can be made to better reflect the actual needs of special education programs in Kansas. To be clear, while there will never be a “perfect” formula, the current formula that first prioritizes expenses such as medicaid replacement, catastrophic aid, and then transportation, followed by the reimbursement of categorical aid to districts is far from broken. I’m of the belief that the current model has created a progression of reimbursement that is both logical and pragmatic.

However, herein lies the primary issue - the current rates of Categorical Aid, averaging at approximately \$31,500 per FTE over the last few fiscal years, are essentially derived from reverse arithmetic in which the final reimbursement number to districts and cooperatives/interlocals is finalized in June after all other expenditures have been paid per statute. This amount, which is designed to supplement the excess costs that come with providing Special Education are provided to pay for the salaries and benefits of those providing services to students.

Examples of how these amounts fall far short of providing for those expenses are detailed below, with three different employee classifications for USD 453-Leavenworth. While our district may not represent the actual costs expended by all districts in the state within these three categories, it should serve as a good proxy for consideration.

Example 1 - Average Para Compensation

Categorical Aid Reimbursement: \$31,915 * .4 (FTE) = \$12,766

Total Expense to District (average): \$29,198 - \$12,766 = \$16,432

Item	Average Para Salary	Mid Point of Para Salary	Average of the 2 Para
Hourly Rate	\$15.48	\$14.99	\$15.24
Para Salary	\$18,962.81	\$18,362.75	\$18,662.88
FICA/MDCR	\$1,450.65	\$1,404.75	\$1,427.71
Medical Fringe	\$9,107.88	\$9,107.88	\$9,107.88
Total Fringe	\$10,558.53	\$10,512.63	\$10,535.59
Total Salary & Fringe	\$29,521.34	\$28,875.38	\$29,198.46

Example 2 - Average RBT (Registered Behavior Technician) Compensation

Categorical Aid Reimbursement: \$31,915 * .4 (FTE) = \$12,766

Total Expense to District (average): \$40,651 - \$12,766 = \$27,885

Item	Average RBT Salary	Mid Point of RBT Salary	Average of the 2 RBT
Hourly Rate	\$22.84	\$25.00	\$23.92
Para Salary	\$27,976.28	\$30,625.00	\$29,302.00
FICA/MDCR	\$2,140.19	\$2,342.81	\$2,241.60
Medical Fringe	\$9,107.88	\$9,107.88	\$9,107.88
Total Fringe	\$11,248.07	\$11,450.69	\$11,349.48
Total Salary & Fringe	\$39,224.35	\$42,075.69	\$40,651.48

Example 3 - Average Teacher Compensation

Categorical Aid Reimbursement: \$31,915 * 1.0 (FTE) = **\$31,915**

Total Expense to District (average): \$71,592 - \$31,915 = \$39,677

Item	Average SPED Teacher Salary 4(MS)/10-11	Midpoint SPED Teacher Step/Column 4(MS)/11	Average SPED Teacher Salary 5(MS+10)/12	Average of the 3 SPED Teachers
SPED Teacher Salary	\$58,218.98	\$56,984.00	\$58,931.00	\$58,044.66
FICA/MDCR	\$4,453.75	\$4,359.28	\$4,508.22	\$4,440.42
Medical Fringe	\$9,107.88	\$9,107.88	\$9,107.88	\$9,107.88
Total Fringe	\$13,561.63	\$13,467.16	\$13,616.10	\$13,548.30
Total Salary & Fringe	\$71,780.61	\$70,451.16	\$72,547.10	\$71,592.96

-- The average SPED Teacher salary data is only for the base contact of 186 days.

As the three examples above illustrate, in each case, there is a cost borne by the district that in each case is over half of the total personnel cost for the individual providing these services. This becomes extremely problematic due to the statutory requirements of providing services within this department of the district, thereby leading to staffing costs that are in many cases not optional. As alluded to earlier, this shortage of reimbursement leads to higher expenditure amounts that directly impact district coffers.

While programming/personnel cuts are certainly a viable and realistic option in the general education programming of a district when the General Fund is facing a reduction, that same option often does not exist within Special Education. The net result - rates of compensation are often severely compromised for an area of the district that is already difficult to fully staff. This in turn leads to a detrimental impact to the quality of services provided to students.

In conclusion, I implore the Special Education and Related Services Funding Task Force to prioritize the review and adjustment of categorical aid for special education, specifically as it relates to the overall amount set annually that falls far short of the liveable wages needed for those that are serving our students. Let us work together to ensure that every student, regardless of their abilities, receives the education they deserve.

By addressing the underfunding of special education, we not only improve the lives of individual students but also strengthen the foundation of our state's future. Thank you for your time and commitment to the betterment of education in Kansas. I am available to answer any questions you may have.



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