

HB2738 Testimony in Opposition, Written Only:

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USD497 Board of Education President
Lawrence, KS
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Dear Madam Chair Williams and Members of the Committee on K-12 Education Budget:

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Committee. I am the Board of Education President for Lawrence Public Schools USD 497, elected at large, serving my second term. The USD 497 Board of Education extends our gratitude for your service to Kansas, particularly the State's children and educators.

I am pleased to share with you that under Superintendent Anthony Lewis's leadership, the USD 497 graduation rate increased by 5.4% over the past year compared to a statewide average increase of 1%. It is our highest graduation rate in 16 years—89.6%. Also of note, as of 2022—we operate the State's first public Montessori elementary school. Our Liberty Memorial Central Middle School Redesign Committee is developing a STEAM-based middle school curriculum, which I predict will inspire learning and attract families to the district. Through our nationally recognized College and Career Academy, USD 497 students are acquiring CNA licenses, developing culinary skills, and earning lab hours toward their Early Childhood Education Lead Teacher Certificate. Through our partnership with the University of Kansas, our Jayhawk Blueprint Program offers college credits to high school students at a fraction of the price of normal college classes and is further aided by Lawrence Schools Foundation scholarships. In just six years, 2,000 students have earned college credits before leaving our buildings.

Lawrence Public School educators and staff are responsible for our successes. The Board strives to retain those educators. In 2022-23, the Board made difficult budget cuts to invest \$6,651,703 million into staff wages. The wage increase is historic for our district but came at the cost of closing schools, decreasing middle school plan time, and increasing class sizes. It also did not achieve our goal of a \$15 starting wage for classified staff, which includes 220 paraprofessionals, who play a vital role in supporting students receiving special education services. Like every Kansas district, we struggle to retain paraeducators due to the low wages.

USD 497 provides all the required special education services, but to do so, we have pulled more and more money away from general education services, having done so since 2011—the last year the Kansas Legislature fully funded special education services. In 2022-23, USD 497 special education expenditures were \$25.6 million. The State provided \$17.2 million, which meant a general fund transfer of \$8.4 million to special education. We should not be forced to take away from one group to meet other's needs because we lack the resources our students need to succeed. **USD 497 Board of Education again requests that the Kansas Legislature fully fund special education as required by current state law. (See K.S.A 72-3422.)** Our board, and likely every board of education the Committee members represent, will invest resources realized into our strategic plan goals. That translates to higher wages for Kansas educators, lower class sizes for students, improved special education services, and an overall positive impact on educator retention and recruitment.

I acknowledge the competing budgetary priorities of the State legislature; no locally elected body understands budgetary constraints more than boards of education. So, we have not requested the millions of dollars underfunded between 2011 and 2024. Rather, the USD 497 Board of Education asks the Committee on K-12 Education Budget to build on the work and recommendations of the January 5, 2024, Special Education Task Force. **HB 2738 is not in the spirit of the Task Force's work to comply with K.S.A 72-3422.** For example:

- HB 2738 Section 2 (a) 1-2 would revise the special education state aid statewide excess costs calculation to include all student weightings (page 3, lines 1-12). Although special education students

may qualify for one or more of the weightings, it may not be part of their special education services; an example to illustrate the point is transportation, which may be tied to where a child resides and not to an IEP. All weightings are to provide services beyond standard educational expenses. It is easy to surmise that counting weighting toward special education excess costs limits opportunities for all students. Further, counting all of the weightings increases the regular education contribution, which decreases the amount of special education state aid needed to reach 92% of excess costs.

- HB 2738 Section 2 (4) E (d-e 1-3) appears to set the FY25 appropriations at the FY24 level removing the \$7.5 million appropriated in the 2023 legislative session (page 6, lines 1-33).

- Throughout HB 2738 Section 2, the new cost calculation subtracts Local Option Budget (LOB) funding from excess costs. The LOB is a local contribution, so it is concerning that HB 2738 counts local mill levies as state funding.

USD 497 Board of Education opposes HB 2738. Per the current statute, the State's special education funding must cover the actual cost of providing necessary services to every one of Kansas's students with an IEP. Current law, if fully funded, does not subvert Kansan's moral and ethical obligations to fund public education adequately, nor does it explicitly and or implicitly pass that cost burden on to local taxpayers.

Thank you for your consideration,
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