



February 20, 2023  
Susan Willis, Chief Financial Officer  
USD 259 - Wichita Public Schools

Chair Thomas and members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments in support of House Bill 2223. Wichita Public Schools educates over 47,500 students annually. 37,586 of those students, over 79% of our student population, meet one or more criteria to be defined as at-risk. By themselves, those students would comprise be the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest district in Kansas! 60% of our schools have 75% or more of their students defined as at-risk; 98% of our schools have 50% or more of their students defined as at-risk. This extreme level of need requires many layers of support and intervention, and Wichita uses its High-Density At-Risk funding to assist with the significant costs of these services. The anticipated sunset of those funds at June 30, 2024, especially at the same time as historic federal COVID relief funding comes to an end, would be a crushing blow when so many of our students need so much help.

Wichita receives at risk funding under a formula based on its qualifying free meal population, which is sits at just short of 69%. Which means, while we have over 37,000 students who need supports to succeed but we receive funding on about 32,500. It is the concentration and volume of students who live in some level of poverty which creates the need for district-wide High Density At-Risk weighting – it is also why those funds are so important. These funds, combined with At Risk funding and Supplemental General fund support, provide for many at-risk programs, opportunities, and safety nets including afterschool programming, tutoring, homework support, summer school, extended school, credit recovery, learning centers in high schools, alternative instructional sites, intervention teachers, behavior specialists, AVID, JAG-K and drop-out prevention programs, just to name a few. These funds help support staffing and programs for 710 foster care students, almost 1300 homeless students, 150 students in need of positive behavior support, almost 1000 students classified as “newcomers” – and the list goes on.

During the 2021-22 (audited) school year, while under the federal school meals waiver, the district focused its \$14,182,002 million of High Density At Risk funding in the following areas:

Program	Total Expenditure	Evidence-Based Practice/Supporting Personnel
Chester Lewis, Towne East, Gateway, Homebound and high school learning center alternative education programs	\$3,019,047	Alternative school to provide educational services to identified at-risk students, typically social emotional needs causing student to be unsuccessful, repeated absenteeism from traditional setting, and/or not requirements for graduation
WPS Extended Learning Opportunity programs	\$ 570,501	Credit Recovery - Extended Year Services for those not meeting requirements for graduation

ESO Language Support Programs for English Learners (high schools)	\$2,322,102	Direct additional educational services for students identified as an English-language learners
WPS Expanded Summer School	\$ 416,079	Summer School for students not meeting standards/not on academic grade level
Various In-School and After-School Tutoring Programs	\$1,754,247	Tutorial Assistance for insufficient mastery of skills/not meeting standards/not on academic grade level
WPS Positive Behavior Programs – with 125-175 students being served	\$1,605,599	Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports – serving students with social emotional needs causing student to be unsuccessful
Targeted Social Emotional Supports	\$4,420,427	1:1 Counseling, Check In/Check Out, Mentoring Groups, Small group work, Trauma-informed SEL practices, and other direct services to students identified as at risk

And we have success stories!

We served over 5400 students in various alternative programs, with 2546.5 credits earned and 391 graduates. We estimate the minimum impact on our graduation rate to be over 12%! These programs are making a difference!

If High Density At-Risk funding ends in 2024, the District must either cut back on these supports or cut other equally important programs to cover the shortfall. Looking at our list of services made possible by HD At Risk funding, these programs serve our most troubled and challenging students. If we cut those services due to funding shortfalls, impacted at-risk students will have to return to regular classrooms without supports, where they will fall further behind their peers while potentially causing major disruption to their peers' educational services.

Further, cuts would occur while trying to also cut back on about \$40 million of programming funded by the last year of COVID relief, which will include several professional development initiatives, CTE programming, student health support, summer school, behavior liaisons, tutoring support, several evidence-based strategies like BrainPop, I-Ready, Lexia, and AVID, and additional mentoring and behavior supports. Funding reductions at any time are extremely difficult for high poverty/high need school districts, but it's difficult to imagine a worse time for the sunset of High-Density At-Risk funding.

As the largest school district in Kansas with the largest number of At Risk students, Wichita must provide many and varied additional supports to help all students be successful. We understand and embrace this challenge. That said, designing and implementing support for over 37,000 students with individual educational needs beyond those of a non-at-risk student is an extremely tall mountain to climb. High-Density At-Risk funding is essential to our dedicated teachers and staff to fund the steep climb each and every day.

Wichita stands in strong support of HB2223, and we would urge the committee to advance this bill.