2024 Legislative Agenda

USD 259 – WICHITA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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WICHITA PUBLIC SCHOOLS | 2024 LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

SUMMARY

Our Students

Individualized and Blended Learning Models: The district supports individualized learning models, emphasizing the importance of personalized education and the benefits of blended learning. We also propose the establishment of an accredited blended learning school that combines virtual and face-to-face instruction, removing limits on remote learning for students enrolled in such schools.

All-Day Pre-K for At-Risk Students: We support all-day Pre-K programs for at-risk students, emphasizing the benefits of extended learning opportunities and skill development.

Career and Technical Education: We ask to expand and re-evaluate the funding formula for career and technical education.

Our Teachers

Flexibility in Hiring and Licensure: The district emphasizes the challenges of hiring and retaining teachers and support staff, urging for flexibility in requirements for paraeducators and substitutes. The district also calls for greater flexibility in teacher licensure, both within the state and across state lines, addressing concerns about redundancies and high Praxis score requirements.

Alternative Teacher Programs: We support creating alternative pathways for individuals with backgrounds in high-need areas like science, math, and special education to become educators.

KPERS Retirement Penalties: We propose easing retirement penalties for KPERS retirees, allowing them to return to work on a limited basis. This not only serves students, but provides mentorship opportunities to new teachers from veteran educators. We also propose moving eligible employees from KPERS Tier 3 to Tier 2 in order to recruit and retain quality educators.

Our Resources

Sharing Resources: The district supports funding parity between traditional and blended learning students, aligning funding for the latter with the Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) x Base Aid model.

Special Education: We ask the state to fulfill their commitment to special education funding, aiming for 92% state coverage of "excess cost."

State Aid for Bonds: We support adjustments to the formula for state aid for bonds, with a minimum of 75% base state aid.

PROSPECTUS

The mission of Wichita Public Schools is to be the premier district of choice, and inspire each student and staff member to thrive and become future ready within the greater community.

The district emphasizes its support for individualized learning models, student engagement, and personalized experiences while rejecting a "one-size-fits-all" approach to education. We propose establishing an accredited blended learning model, recognizing the benefits of combining in-person and virtual instruction. We also back all-day Pre-K programs for at-risk students, emphasizing skill development in areas such as literacy, mathematics, and social-emotional growth.

For our teachers, we stress the challenges of hiring and retention. We call for greater flexibility in hiring paraeducators and substitutes. We also call for greater flexibility in teacher licensure, addressing redundancies and restrictive Praxis requirements. Additionally, we support creating pathways for individuals with backgrounds in high-need areas like science, math, and special education to become educators. We also suggest easing retirement penalties for KPERS retirees, providing opportunities for mentorship from experienced educators.

Finally, we support funding parity between traditional and blended learning environments, using the full-time equivalent (FTE) multiplied by the base aid to determine funding. This encourages innovation, accountability, and cost-effectiveness. We also emphasize the importance of the state fulfilling its commitment to special education funding and call for adjustments to the formula for state aid for bonds and assessed valuation per pupil (AVPP), aiming for a minimum of 75% base state aid.

The legislative agenda for Wichita Public Schools promotes student-centric, flexible learning models; addressing teacher recruitment and flexibility; and ensuring resource parity, support for special education, and state aid for bonds.

OUR STUDENTS

Individualized and Blended Learning Models: The district supports individualized learning models, emphasizing the importance of personalized education and the benefits of blended learning. We also propose establishing an accredited blended learning model combining virtual and face-to-face instruction and removing limits on remote learning for students enrolled in such schools

- We promote student engagement. Students who control the pace and style of their learning are more motivated and actively participate in learning. Increased engagement leads to higher retention rates and deeper understanding of the material.
- We also foster a personalized experience for all students. Education should cater to individual interests, strengths, and challenges. This enables students to explore subjects they are passionate about while providing support in areas where they may struggle. This approach nurtures well-rounded, confident learners.
- We oppose a "one-size-fits-all" approach to education. The leaves many students behind and stifles those who excel. The individualized learning model allows students to progress at their own pace, fostering a deeper understanding and mastery of subjects.
- According to a recent poll, if given the option, 48% of parents prefer a hybrid approach to learning for their children, combining on-campus and remote learning.[1]
- The state funding base for calculating aid for virtual part-time students dropped from $4,045 in 2015-16 to $1,700 in 2016-17.[2] In 2023, this moved to $2,800 for part-time students. Traditional part-time students generate a fractional part of the full base aid. A .9 traditional student generates $4,579 in state aid, while a virtual student generates only $2,520 in state aid. Yet each requires almost the same resources as a full-time student.
- Blended learning, which combines online or digital components with face-to-face instruction, has several benefits. It provides a personalized experience for learners, increases engagement, and improves experiences. It also allows learners to access content anytime, anywhere.[3]
- Blended learning represents a fundamental shift in instruction methods and has the potential to optimize outcomes for individual students in ways that traditional instruction cannot.[4]
- This model helps districts bridge staffing gaps and cut facility costs.
- In a post-Covid era, to ensure a good student experience, these learning models should be used in a complementary manner. Complex subjects can be taught in-person (blended or hybrid learning), while other subjects can be taught online (virtual learning). As we navigate challenges in talent and staffing, flexibility in these areas is critical for the success of student learning.

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[1] Ingraham, Keri D. (2023, May 16). *K-12 Hybrid Learning Is the New Parent Preference*. Discovery Institute. https://www.discovery.org/a/k-12-hybrid-learning-is-the-new-parent-preference/
[2] Clarkin, N. (2015, July 26). *Changes in funding could change online offerings in Kansas.* Associated Press. https://www.ksl.com/article/35668592/changes-in-funding-could-change-online-offerings-in-kansas
[3] Spiro, C. (n.d.) *6 Benefits of Blended Learning and Why You Should Use the Approach*. EasyGenerator. https://www.easygenerator.com/en/blog/blended-learning/benefits-blended-learning/
[4] Biewener, D. (2023, September 1). *5 Big Benefits of Blended Learning*. SimpliLearn. https://www.simplilearn.com/benefits-of-blended-learning-article

OUR STUDENTS

All-Day Pre-K for At-Risk Students: We support all-day Pre-K programs for at-risk students, emphasizing the benefits of extended learning opportunities and skill development.

- **Joy of Learning**: Children develop a love of learning and confidence in themselves through activities such as music, art, use of engaging and age-appropriate technology, drama and role playing, and vigorous outdoor play. These all enhance the curriculum and help children become able learners. Benefits include:
    - Teacher-led small groups to help students work on specific skills.
    - Intentionally designed learning centers for children to choose from engaging in purposeful play.
    - Independent support around curriculum through engaged learning centers throughout the room.
    - Literacy, math, and scientific instruction increases and inspiration for the quality of young children's play.
    - Observation opportunities and individualized instruction strategies are built right into the daily routines.
    - Combining child-centered and teacher-directed learning helps strengthen the entire learning process.
    - Providing individualized support using data to drive instruction.
- **Social & Emotional Skills**: Children are nurtured and guided to develop self-regulation, effective communication techniques, positive behaviors, and the ability to successfully form and sustain social relationships with adults and other children. Examples of this in public education are:
    - Building on family foundations, the classroom community continues to develop important social-emotional skills for use outside the home.
    - Collaborating with other students helps students make friends, identify feelings, and solve problems.
    - Helping students with self-regulation strategies to thrive within their home and school community.
- **Language and Literacy Abilities**: Children in school have daily opportunities for language and literacy development and enrichment through book readings, print-rich environments, letter and word recognition activities and games, and word play such as rhyming and identifying letter naming and sounds.
    - Breakout teams facilitated by instructors who guide practice on specific literacy skills.
    - Increased opportunities for oral language development through purposeful play.
- **Mathematical and Scientific Thinking**: Children develop investigative and problem-solving skills through daily hands-on exploration of real materials. They are encouraged to formulate problems, ask questions, research solutions, and report findings through real world exploration.
    - Informational texts and stories used in the context of science and math learning experiences for a more authentic approach.
    - Reasoning and problem-solving skill development.

Career and Technical Education: We request an increase in funding for career and technical education (CTE).

- An increase in weighting from 0.5 to 0.75 provides students with necessary resources enter, develop, and grow the Kansas economy.
- CTE provides a direct pathway to develop practical skills and knowledge relevant to the Kansas workforce and encourages economic growth in the region, as employers can readily find a pool of skilled talent.
- This attracts new businesses, promotes entrepreneurship and investment, and ultimately stimulates economic development.

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OUR TEACHERS

Flexibility in Hiring and Licensure: The district emphasizes the challenges of hiring and retaining teachers and support staff, urging for flexibility in requirements for paraeducators and substitutes. The district also calls for greater flexibility in teacher licensure, both within the state and across state lines, addressing concerns about redundancies and restrictive Praxis score requirements.

- Hiring teachers and support staff is challenging and state mandates for hiring make it more difficult. The requirements for paraeducators in high-need schools limit our ability to recruit and retain these essential positions. The vacancies this creates leaves districts struggling to meet student needs and turning away teachers interested in teaching in the future through programs such as Grow Your Own Teacher.
- When the district is unable to fill teacher vacancies with licensed teachers, we rely heavily on substitutes. The licensing process for these essential personnel is extensive and costly to those that are not working in a full-time status. Opening the one-year license to a two- or three-year license helps recruit and retain these positions for those wanting to work indefinitely.
- Licensing requirements vary from state to state, and while KSDE has made concerted efforts to be more accepting it has still left a gap in meeting needs for educators looking to teach in our state. The most common feedback we hear is about redundancies in the application process. These include not only uploading a license and transcript but also verification of recency, testing scores, and contact information for the licensure officer or program director of their respective college/university as well as every district they have ever worked for.
- If the individual has a current out of state license, the district believes that eliminates any recency or previous district contact information. Additionally, with online resources being readily available, information from a college/university program representative can be accessed once a transcript has been received by KSDE.
- Kansas has one of the most restrictive Praxis requirements for licensure. It would increase retention of new educators if these were aligned to meet that of surrounding states. With an increasing number of new educators struggling to meet these requirements, the cost of retesting has them feeling drained emotionally and financially.

Alternative Teacher Programs: We support creating alternative pathways for individuals with backgrounds in high-need areas like science, math, and special education to become educators.

- There are many alternative programs introduced in the past seven years which greatly assist hiring efforts for districts across the state. Unfortunately, districts still struggle to fill vacancies in high needs areas such as science, math, and special education. Many times, individuals have a science or mathematics/engineering background and knowledge base but have been refused by programs such as Transition to Teaching. Ensuring we have pathways for these individuals wishing to pursue education as a career would make a large impact.
- Several employees in our district would enroll in a special education program but have not yet completed a bachelor's degree. If the state works with universities to develop an undergraduate alternative program for these interested individuals, we will see an increase in educators available to meet growing student needs.
- We also request the Legislature and the Board of Regents develop bachelor-level special education programs in the state's universities.

OUR TEACHERS

KPERS Retirement Penalties: We propose easing retirement penalties for KPERS retirees, allowing them to return to work on a limited basis. This not only serves students but provides mentorship opportunities to new teachers from veteran educators.

- Removing these penalties would greatly increase the ability to meet student needs, not just in Wichita Public Schools but in schools across the state. Moving employees from Tier 3 to Tier 2 would help retain educators. Lifting these penalties would allow those interested to return to the classroom without losing their benefits.
- Additionally, teachers meeting the requirements for retirement are highly experienced in their field and could potentially become mentors and impart their knowledge to the next generation of educators in our state.
- Retirees from other state departments would also be able to work for districts more easily in supporting and other roles.

OUR RESOURCES

Sharing Resources for Blended Learning: The district supports funding parity between traditional and blended learning students, with funding for the latter determined using the full-time equivalent (FTE) multiplied by the base aid.

- Post-COVID, we acknowledge that high-quality instruction includes combining online and in-person instruction. It is essential to treat students who use this format fairly and provide them with resources comparable to traditional learners.
- This funding model encourages innovation. Public education is changing. This encourages schools to invest in technology, curriculum development, and instructional tools catering to the learning needs of all students.
- Importantly, the funding model encourages districts to be accountable. By restricting funding to the number of students served, the district is committed to maintaining the quality and effectiveness of the program within the limits of their budget.
- This is a cost-effective program. Even though the delivery mode is different, the educational resources and support for students are still present. Recognizing the need for these resources and support means schools can effectively allocate resources and meet the needs of traditional and blended students.

Special Education: We ask the state to fulfill their commitment to special education funding, aiming for 92% state coverage of "excess cost" within five years.

- Special education services are required by state and federal law. The national and statewide percentage of students receiving special education services is on the rise, and the district is no exception. More than one in six students in our state receive special education services.
- K.S.A. § 72-978 calls for 92% of "excess cost" to be covered by the state. The legislature committed to this responsibility in 2006, and the last time the funding level was met was 2011. Actual funding to districts as recorded by the legislature has varied between 75-80%.[5]
- Per KSDE, Excess Cost is a long-standing IDEA requirement that determines the average annual per-pupil expenditure by deducting all special education expenditures from the district's total expenditures.
- By not funding special education as outlined in K.S.A. § 72-978, all students are negatively impacted. Millions of dollars in local funds are used to offset the funding gap when it could be used elsewhere to benefit all students.

State Aid for Bonds: We support adjustments to the formula for state aid for bonds and assessed valuation per pupil (AVPP), with a minimum of 75% base state aid.

- The formula for state aid has changed in the past eight years. For bonds passed before July 1, 2015, the median district (based on their AVPP in relation to all other districts) was eligible to receive 25% state aid. For every $1,000 in AVPP above, state aid decreased by 1%, but for every $1,000 below state aid increased by 1%.
- The next change was the new capital improvement aid rate was the number of payments due multiplied by the state aid rate. The district's bonds are locked under this formula at 52%.
- Under the current formula adopted, for every $1,000 higher AVPP state aid is reduced by 1%. The district's state aid rate under the current formula is approximately 3%.
- This formula excludes many districts from receiving any state aid for bonds. These same districts continue to struggle with aging facilities, emerging technologies, and safety provisions.

[5] Kansas Legislative Research Department. (2023). *Kansas School Finance System*. https://www.kslegresearch.org/KLRD-web/Publications/Education/2023-School-Finance-System-Overview.pdf