

Salina Public Schools

Legislative Priorities

2024



The SPS legislative platform is designed to provide local context to legislative decision makers. It takes leadership at all levels in the state working together to position our public school system to meet diverse student needs, prepare the workforce of tomorrow and grow the population in rural Kansas. Strong public schools have the power to draw people to our rural communities – communities that help define what it is to be a Kansan.

Federal Legislative Priorities

Special Education Funding

All children, including those with disabilities, have a right to a free appropriate public education (FAPE). School districts are required to provide this, including any special education services necessary to achieve a FAPE, to students with disabilities. This is achieved through the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) which mandates special education services be provided to children with disabilities from birth through age 21.

In Salina Public Schools, nearly 21% of our students have a disability that requires special education services and this number continues to trend upward. Special education services are required to be in addition to a comprehensive general education program. While the federal government has committed to cover up to 40% of the excess cost of providing these students their essential IDEA-mandated special education services, most estimates place the federal contribution at 13-16%. The shortfall places the burden of meeting the federal IDEA law on Kansans at both the state and local levels. This causes Salina Public Schools to divert over 3.4 million general fund dollars every year to cover the unfunded excess cost of special education for Salina students.

Specific priority:

- **Fund 40% of the excess cost of special education services.**

State of Kansas Legislative Priorities

School Funding

The school finance formula, as currently written, accounts for adequate and equitable funding of K-12 schools. The weightings in the formula for Career and Technical Education (CTE), bilingual education, transportation, at-risk and high density at-risk funding are critical to ensure equitable funding.

A strong public education system draws people to our state and promotes workforce development. The public schools in rural Kansas serve as the community identity.

Increased funding provided by Consumer Price Index (CPI) adjustments compensate for rising costs. This is critical for Salina Public Schools to maintain services for students and to retain and recruit staff.

Specific priorities:

- **Fully fund schools through the existing school funding formula, including inflationary adjustments (CPI), to address the needs of students and ensure each student and school have the capacity to meet the Rose Standards and foundational structures under the Kansans Can vision.**
- **Oppose programs, including but not limited to, vouchers, education savings accounts and tuition tax credits. Such programs divert public funding from public education to schools that are not required to serve all students, including those who are disadvantaged, disabled or those with the greatest needs.**



Unfunded Mandates

Unfunded mandates place pressure on school districts' budgets. Examples of recent unfunded mandates include the 2023 law that allows non-public school students to participate in Kansas State High School Activities Association (KSHSAA)-sponsored activities at their local public schools and transportation expectations caused by the out-of-district enrollment expectations. Although families that choose homeschool or send their children to private school pay taxes, those tax dollars do not impact school budgets unless the students enroll in public school. Because school funding is based on enrollment, requiring schools to provide extracurricular and co-curricular programming for students who are not enrolled in the public school is an unfunded mandate.

IDEA requires transportation be provided to special education students when it is deemed necessary by the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team. With the provisions for open enrollment provided by HB 2519, this would require school districts to travel well outside their district boundaries to get these students to and from school each day at great cost to the district. While special education transportation costs are 80% reimbursable by the state, this cost is subtracted from the overall state special education budget prior to finalizing the per teacher entitlement districts receive for categorical aid. With increased special education transportation costs statewide, the net effect would be a decrease in categorical aid. Because categorical aid is the primary source of funding for special education programming, this would result in a net loss in special education funds available to districts, further exacerbating the impact of the state's shortfall in funding special education at the required 92% rate by diverting more of the available dollars to transportation and away from special education services in the classroom.

Specific priority:

- **Oppose legislation that places unfunded mandates on the K-12 education system or provide funding as legislation is enacted that places new requirements on Kansas public schools.**

Kansans Can Vision

High school graduates must exit their K-12 education with strong academic, cognitive, technical and employability skills if Kansas is to lead the world in the success of each student. The Kansas State Department of Education has identified five outcomes to measure progress toward the Kansans Can Vision: Social-Emotional Growth, Kindergarten Readiness, Individual Plans of Study, High School Graduation and Postsecondary Success.

Specific priorities:

- **Expand Excel in CTE (SB 155) funding to include technical education courses provided at four-year postsecondary institutions and up to 15 hours of general education courses per student.**
- **Allow districts to count students who earn a GED credential to count as graduates.**



Mental Health

For many students, access to behavioral and mental health services precedes academic success. The Mental Health Intervention Team grants help remove barriers to accessing services, decrease missed class time and increase consistency of services. This grant allows Salina Public Schools to employ mental health school liaisons to support families when students need mental health support. The result is more students receiving needed support for mental health needs in a timely manner.

The restrictions placed on districts' use of non-academic surveys make it difficult for schools to effectively identify students who require mental health services. The law, as currently written, states that no personally-identifiable student data may be collected through any non-academic survey and requires parents to opt-in prior to administration. Universal screeners are an effective way to ensure that students who are experiencing mental health concerns are identified early so the family can provide needed support. Practically, this means that such tools cannot be used to screen for anxiety, depression or suicidal ideation. If allowed, such screeners provide our mental health staff information to begin discussions with the student's parent/guardian to determine the best way to provide needed support.

The requirements and timeline for sharing non-academic surveys with parents are reasonable, but the opt-in requirement is challenging to manage in a district our size.

Specific priorities:

- **Support initiatives to address social-emotional and mental health needs of students.**
- **Continue support for the Mental Health Intervention Team grant.**
- **Amend Sen. Sub for HB 2567 of the 2022 session. Allow the administration of questionnaires, surveys and screening tools with parental opt-out and the collection of individual student results to ensure student mental health and school safety.**

Early Childhood Education

To raise education levels of the Kansas workforce, we must begin in the early preschool years. Early childhood is a time of rapid brain growth and strong preschool programming has a powerful return on investment. Well before students enter K-12 public schools, learning opportunities begin the trajectory to postsecondary success. All Kansas children must have access to high quality early childhood education to ensure every child enters school with the social-emotional and academic skills to be successful.

Specific priorities:

- **Support the state's strategic framework vision for ensuring that every child thrives: All children will have their basic needs met and have equitable access to quality early childhood care and education opportunities, so they are prepared to succeed in kindergarten and beyond.**
- **Fund full-day preschool education for special education students and preschool-aged at-risk students.**
- **Fund half-day preschool for all general education four-year-olds who attend a preschool provided by public school districts.**



Parent Bill of Rights

Public schools in Kansas provide education for students with a wide range of backgrounds and from many different family structures. Religious and moral beliefs of the families we serve vary widely. The development of positive relationships between the child, the child's teacher(s) and the family are central to maximizing learning. This does not happen through legislation.

Teachers must have the ability to adjust lessons in response to student mastery or non-mastery of learning outcomes. Effective teachers are consistently assessing learning progression and adapting instruction for the students during the learning process. This may include adding resources to teach prerequisite skills or extend learning. Having the staff to manage and comply with requests from all parents to adjust instruction, instructional materials or assessment practices for their individual student will require a tremendous increase in funding to schools. Mandating how curriculum and instructional resources are shared with families will divert taxpayer dollars and resources away from the students in the classroom and toward bureaucratic tasks.

Specific priority:

- **Allow local boards of education - those elected at the local level to provide oversight to our schools - to set policies for lesson planning, materials challenge and transparency.**

Special Education Funding

Special education services are mandated by federal law (IDEA) and Kansas regulations and statutes (SEECA, Kansas Special Education for Exceptional Children Act). Kansas law requires that 92% of the excess cost of special education be funded by the state (K.S.A.72-3422). Currently, the state is funding an average of approximately 64% of the excess cost of special education.

The demand for and cost of special education services has outpaced available funding for special education. By law, special education services must be in addition to the general education program provided to all students. The services must be specially-designed instruction to meet the needs of the individual child.

To meet the federal mandate and Kansas statutes that require us to provide special education services, general education funds must be used to cover the cost of special education each year. In Salina Public Schools, this means that approximately 3.4 million dollars are diverted from general education needs each year to allow us to cover the costs and demand for special education services.

Our teachers are faced with the incredible challenge of educating students who have significant developmental disabilities and extreme aggressive behaviors. With special education enrollment up 20% since 2001 and special education students making up over 21% of our total enrollment, increased funding is necessary to ensure all students leave our schools with the skills needed for success after graduation.

Specific priority:

- **Fund special education at the 92% statutory level.**

Recruitment and Retention of Highly Qualified Teachers

Salina Public Schools is faced with fewer highly qualified candidates to choose from as our veteran staff retires. Our district has 751 total certified staff members. Seventy-four (74) certified staff left our employment at the end of the 2018-2019 school year. By last year that number had risen to 87. At this time, over 25% of our staff has 5 or fewer years in education. SPS currently has 28 first year teachers and 87 teachers in our mentoring program.



Salina isn't alone in staffing challenges. According to a survey conducted by the Institute of Education Sciences

- 44% of public schools reported at least one vacant position last year,
- 53% of public schools reported being understaffed when the 2022-2023 school year began,
- 70% of respondents indicated having too few candidates, and
- 64% reported that the candidates who are applying lack the credentials to do the job.

The Kansas Teacher Retention Initiative has identified the following concerns:

- Two-thirds of school districts in Kansas are experiencing teacher shortages.
- Teacher vacancies have increased by over 62%.
- The pool of students in teacher preparation programs decreased by one-third from 2010-2017.
- For the first time ever, a majority of parents discourage their children from becoming teachers.
- Kansas should expect to see 30% of the current teacher workforce exit the profession in the next three years.

As the teacher workforce becomes younger and smaller, we expect those who remain in the profession to deal with the increasing social-emotional complexities of their students. Significantly, those teachers who are currently working are becoming increasingly less engaged in the profession. Forty-four percent (44%) of those who follow the traditional path to teaching leave the profession within the first five years.

The quality of the teacher in the classroom is the strongest predictor of student success that we control. Recruiting and retaining high quality staff is foundational to a strong educational system.

SPS has taken multiple steps to recruit and retain strong staff. We have

1. Used available licensure waivers. This year we have 22 staff who are working on sub licenses filling classroom positions. We obtained waivers to extend the number of days in the year that they could work over what is normally allowed on a sub license.
2. Developed internal support systems for employees who enter the profession through non-traditional routes.
3. Implemented forgivable loans for teachers who join our staff.
4. Developed a pathway to encourage paraeducators who possess the disposition and talent to become educators to pursue their teaching credentials.
5. Participated in the new Kansas Registered Teacher Apprenticeship program.

Specific priorities:

- **Reduce to 30 days the Kansas Public Employees Retirement System (KPERs) mandatory waiting periods for working after retirement.**
- **Establish equitable working after retirement provisions for all public employees. For example, the Deferred Retirement Option Program (DROP) allows eligible members to keep working after they are eligible for full retirement. Instead of losing benefit payments during that time, the member can both continue working (receiving a salary) and at the same time, have his/her retirement benefit deposited into a DROP account each month. When they officially retire, they receive the balance of the DROP account and begin receiving the monthly retirement benefit.**
- **Establish changes to KPERs (Tier 3) to improve the quality of benefits in order to support recruitment and retention of new and out-of-state educators.**
- **Eliminate the additional KPERs fees placed on school districts/employees returning to work after retirement.**
- **Fully implement the Teacher Apprenticeship Pilot program.**
- **Provide local districts with funding to mentor those licensed teachers providing support to those enrolled in apprenticeship or transition to teaching programs.**





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