



## — Morris County Public Schools —

November 22, 2016

In response to the offer from the Kansas Governor, USD 417 submits the following comments in regards to a new school finance formula for the State of Kansas. It merits mentioning four considerations before sharing our thoughts in regards to a new school finance formula.

First, USD 417 does not believe that there were any significant problems with the old finance formula that could not have been readily resolved. One issue had to do with adequacy of dollars for the formula. This will likely continue to be a problem regardless of the formula put in place unless the state meets the criteria for adequately funding public schools. If the intent is to create a new formula without adding more money then there will likely be another court challenge in the future. Also, if the old formula truly caused problems for the legislature to plan for the state's annual education allocation in their budget process then again this problem could easily be resolved without having to develop a whole new finance formula.

Second, whatever formula is developed there has to be a hold harmless year to allow schools to adjust to the new formula. It is exceptionally likely that a decision will not be made by the legislature until well into or beyond May. By that time it is too late for school systems to adequately plan for personnel changes or other budget adjustments. With the shortage of teachers in our state, personnel decisions will have to be made early in the calendar year in order to find teachers to fill vacancies. Further, there are other monetary commitments that districts may need time to adjust if significant changes are made to the capital outlay fund or bond & interest fund.

Third, if one is to believe the rhetoric coming from Washington and there are reductions in federal funding due to the closing of the Department of Education or other cuts to federal assistance for schools then again districts will need time and additional funding to adjust. Even if the federal government were to turn federal assistance into a less regulated block grant system to states, how the State of Kansas allocates these funds may cause significant issues for public schools.

Last, any changes to the current funding formula should take into consideration the research on effectively educating students, any state and federal mandates placed on public schools, and the new educational goals established by KSDE for public education. If designing a new finance formula is worth doing then design it right! Don't design it based on a political ideology or the premise of lowering school funding. The future workforce of Kansas will be impacted by this decision for years to come. A well-educated workforce will have more of an economic impact and will attract more businesses to Kansas than any current state policy efforts in place.

So for all of these reasons and others not mentioned here, having a hold harmless period of time should be a significant consideration in the development of a new finance system.

Now, we have read other recommendations being shared with the governor and legislative leaders. We echo and support many of these recommendations. To repeat all of these here would be a waste of your time. So, with all of this said, here are thoughts that USD 417 would like to emphasize regarding a new school finance formula.

- While student population is the foundational piece for a formula, allowing for the base number to have a “smoothing” feature like the previous system is a significant feature for schools with a declining enrollment. This provides time for adjustments that need to be made. Considering that the legislature does not finalize school funding decisions until May or later, it is hard for districts to adjust their budgets within this timeframe when 80% of the budget is personnel or fixed costs.
- Significant at-risk funding weighting has to be included in a new formula. The research is clear when it comes to educating students of at-risk families. It adds to educational costs. And while some in the state legislature continue to not want to include the costs for counselors, nurses, and social workers in the consideration for “classroom” expenses, these positions are vital to helping our students succeed in school.
- Fully funding the excess costs of special education is truly necessary. USD 417, like many other school districts, are seeing a growing percentage of our budget going to pay for special education expenses. Some of this has to do with the increasing numbers of students being identified and/or having significant disabilities. Some has to do with an increase in costs for special services such as occupational and speech therapists. Also, for our cooperative, and likely others, the dollar shuffle that took place during the last recession has actually contributed to this increase in local dollars going to pay special education expenses. I would be glad to elaborate on this if anyone actually reads this and wants to know more. One more thought on this issue, a second federal mandate that causes additional expenses for schools is Section 504 of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1973. Local schools have always funded this mandate and we are seeing more students in need of assistance under these regulations.
- Invest more in early childhood education through fully funding of all-day kindergarten and at least half-day 4-year old pre-school for all children. Too, eliminate the red tape that exists and allow all early childhood providers to fully share information so we can provide for a more coordinated early childhood assistance program for parents and children. Go back to funding the Parents As Teachers program in a manner where the state pays for these services for all children to participate and not just those deemed to be at-risk. A proper investment in early childhood programs can help to offset many of the problems we see with our at-risk students as they enter school.
- Continue to fully fund and even expand the Kansas Reading Roadmap program.<sup>1</sup> So many at-risk students need after school and summer intervention programs. Our experience with KRR has been exceptionally positive. This program tracks achievement data so they can show the student growth that occurs through this program.
- Funding for professional development programs that specifically lead to enhanced subject content knowledge for teachers and helps schools to meet the state accreditation system. A quick look at the teacher development programs for countries whose student achievement tops international comparisons tells the story here. If colleges of education will not adjust based on this research then provide for our schools to offer this training for our teachers.
- Fully fund and expand on the technical college incentives at the secondary level to attract more students to attend area technical colleges while in high school. Approximately 25-



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30% of our students will not attend any post-secondary institution in any given year. When left to flounder after high school graduation (if they do indeed graduate), many of these students will typically not develop the employment skills needed to be productive citizens in today's economy. Do more to incentivize students to take technical college course work while in high school. Proactively develop a skilled workforce that will attract business to Kansas.

- Provide for a statewide interactive distance learning instructional system that will allow smaller and/or rural and/or low wealth districts to offer expanded, high quality selections of courses for students. Economy of scale makes a difference in being able to offer an expanded curriculum for students. The state can take the lead developing such a system for schools across Kansas so we can better support rural Kansas children.
- Last, with whatever system that is designed, allow for local control in providing for additional funding as needed.

<sup>1</sup> What schools lost as a result of cuts to education that were never restored since the recession are programs that were good for kids and teachers but could no longer be afforded. These include summer school opportunities for students in need of additional assistance; after school child care programs; art programs in elementary school; targeted dollars for professional development; and counselor/librarian positions.

We are sure that you will receive ample feedback, which is good. We hope that the state is sincere in reviewing this feedback and will use it as decisions are made in the coming year. We stand ready, and would welcome the opportunity, to answer any questions in regards to our comments.

Sincerely,  
Doug Conwell  
Superintendent  
USD 417