



House K-12 Education Budget Committee

Testimony in support of House Bill 2561

by

Dr. Chad Higgins, Superintendent of Schools, Maize USD 266
Steve Williams, Director of Finance, Maize USD 266

March 7, 2018

Mr. Chairman and committee members,

Maize USD 266 stands in support of House Bill 2561.

The Maize Unified School District No. 266 has some unique characteristics, which make transporting students to school a challenge. The Maize School District sits in the northwest corner of the Wichita metro community. Approximately 84 percent of our students reside in homes with a Wichita ZIP code, yet 65 percent of our students attend school in the Maize community. Our district has the highest student density population of all school districts in Kansas. We have gained more than 300 students since September 2016, a rate of 4 percent. During the past 35 years, our district has grown from 1,254 students to nearly 7,100, an average annual increase of more than 13 percent. This kind of growth is not unusual for suburban school districts. However, unlike many suburban districts our size, we do not have neighborhood schools. Of our five elementary schools, four sit within approximately one-third of a mile from each other and can be seen from one location within the city of Maize. This means we must provide bus transportation for almost all of the 2,500 students who attend those four schools.

We currently are in the first year of the district's new policy that directs middle and high school students to attend school based on their residence rather than their preference, as has been the practice since our second high school opened ten years ago. This student placement history represents another unique characteristic of the Maize school district. Over time, we anticipate this will allow us to operate our transportation department more efficiently. Like many districts our size and larger, we stagger our school start times and operate transportation on a two-tier system. This decision is purely financial and managerial. This is done to save money and make it possible to properly and efficiently staff the transportation department with qualified drivers. In our experience, school bus drivers are the most difficult positions to fill.

Like most districts, we transport hundreds of students to school each day who do not qualify for the weighting to offset the cost. Traversing Maize and Tyler roads at any time of day can be a challenge. But as our commuting residential population rushes to or from their jobs, traffic can be dangerous. We are working with leaders of the cities of Maize and Wichita to create safer walking paths and intersections, but funding is just as difficult for them. Regretfully, we still have some students who do not have a sidewalk to use to walk or ride to and from their school. Regardless of the state funding for transportation, we will continue to transport to school those students who we believe do not have a safe path or alternative mode of transportation.

Currently, we estimate that we must transfer \$750,000 annually from our general fund into special education to account for the reduced proration in state support. With our student enrollment growth and delayed funding for new students, we also must wait until next year to access nearly \$1 million in operational dollars. Eliminating the practice of setting a minimum level of transportation funding for high-density districts ignores the unique challenges we contend with and, in Maize, will mean the potential of another \$865,000 being pulled from our general fund and away from teaching and learning. This loss would erase our planned per pupil increase next year, for which we already have hired a significant number of teachers and counselors. Our hope is to improve both our support for students by expanding our counseling program and our career and technical education program. The need to spend general fund dollars to replace lost transportation aid would delay or eliminate this possibility. Additionally, reducing our transportation budget would compound the significant challenges that exist trying to hire and retain qualified bus drivers, a critical role to the success and safety of our students.

The solution is simple, and the cost is nothing if the intent is to adhere to Legislative Post Audit recommendations. I welcome any questions you may have on this issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chad Higgins". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dr. Chad Higgins
Superintendent, Maize USD 266