



Senate Select Committee on School Finance
Testimony in support of Senate Bill 44

Dr. Chad Higgins, Superintendent of Schools, Maize USD 266

February 6, 2019

Madame Chair and committee members,

Maize USD 266 stands in support of Senate Bill 44.

Our business of educating children is reliant on caring, compassionate human beings and driven by data and research. An investment in public schools makes it possible to recruit, retain, and reward teachers and other staff members, who are significantly influential in the quality of our state and country's future.

The benefits of increasing funding for schools, as outlined in Senate Bill 44, include:

- **Teacher Recruitment and Retention:** The Maize School District has been blessed for decades at being able to recruit and retain the best teachers in the state. Our proximity to Wichita, the advantages that accompany constant enrollment growth, and the outstanding support by our parents and community always have made Maize a destination district. However, in 2017, due to a shortage in qualified teacher candidates, we were compelled to begin to actively recruit teachers. These efforts were never necessary in the past. Additional funding would provide districts like ours the resources to fairly compensate teachers and encourage young people to consider the profession as a viable career.
- **Operational Efficiency:** After a decade of budget cuts, in an effort to continue to provide an exceptional public education, schools are operating at an extremely high level of efficiency. As funding has improved during the past two years, our district has invested in compensation for our employees and additional teachers and much-needed instructional support staff members in an effort to reduce, or at least maintain, class sizes. We are in our second year of a two-year contract with our teachers that moved them five steps on the salary schedule. Three of those steps had been frozen in previous years.

- **Expanding Opportunities:** During the budget-cutting years, our district was able to expand career and technical education programs through targeted SB 155 funds. We have partnered with local industry to develop an innovative course that allows students to work with engineers in the construction of a fully functional airplane, thanks to support by the Airbus Foundation. This is good for our students and for our economy. Those funds will expire in two years, and continuation of this expensive program is dependent on state educational support. In the past year and for next year, we will expand counseling support by seven licensed staff members. Optimistic additions for future programming, dependent on funding, includes adding art and music teachers and elementary science teachers and reintroducing licensed librarians into our secondary schools to support reading, writing, and research.
- **Cost of Education:** During the last decade, the cost of educating students and running schools has increased and, in some cases, become nearly impossible to support. Hiring adults to work in education, especially as bus drivers and paraprofessionals, is difficult, as we have never been able to compete with the private sector. In the past four years, we have yet to fill all vacant positions in these two areas. In some cases, we are legally obligated through Individual Education Plans to temporarily fill these vacancies with staff members hired in other needed assignments. With additional funding, we could hire mental health professionals, needed to support students in their increasing social-emotional challenges. These positions directly affect students' educational outcomes. Without increased funding, compensation for these difficult-to-fill and difficult-to-do jobs will continue to fall further behind private employers.
- **Other Detrimental Changes:** While the recent formula modifications and funding increases have been helpful, the change in delayed funding for enrollment is detrimental to rapidly growing districts like ours. This year alone, we are educating nearly 250 more students than last year but will not receive the state or local funds to support that fluctuation. This means we either hire the needed staff members and work in the red by nearly \$1.3 million or we simply accept larger class sizes. Neither of these options are good business operations, and our students and school community deserve better.

Three studies have been conducted in the last ten years in an attempt to quantify the cost of adequately funding Kansas public schools. Adequately. Not exceptionally or at a world-class level, but just the bare minimum. The funding requested in Senate Bill 44 is only asking for the smallest amount legislators are legally expected to provide. And, at this point, we will take it.

We remain hopeful that equitable and reliable funding once again will become a constant and allow local schools and boards of education to make decisions that best serves the interest of our students and communities. Please make public education a priority again in Kansas. Thank you for the opportunity to share my perspective as you seek feedback from Kansas educators.

Sincerely,



Dr. Chad Higgins
Superintendent, Maize USD 266