February 18, 2021

Re: SB 173, support
Senate Education Committee

Chairwoman Baumgardner and Members of the Senate Education Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to SB 173, which would extend the sunset on high density at risk. The 27,705 students of Shawnee County, Kansas, are served by five public school districts. Leadership from all five Shawnee County public school districts worked collaboratively to create our 2020-21 Shawnee County Legislative Positions. These legislative positions were mutually created with the belief that Shawnee County students are our top priority. Significant societal benefits are gained by supporting exemplary public education, and all Kansas students deserve an adequate and equitable public education.

We support full funding for the high-density at-risk weighting. Failure to remove the sunset would result in a $3.9 million loss to Topeka Public Schools.

We draw your attention to the positions on school funding which were mutually created with the beliefs that Shawnee County students are our top priority, there are significant societal benefits gained by supporting exemplary public education, and all Kansas students deserve an adequate and equitable public education. For school funding, a formula must account for changing student needs, higher expectations and increasing costs. Given the significant statistical relationship between socio-economic status and students to be found to be at-risk of academic failure, a reliable measure of poverty, such as free-lunch status, must be an indicator for allocating funds intended to address the needs of at-risk students. For that reason, the high density at risk weighting should not be allowed to sunset.

Topeka Public Schools uses the allocated at-risk dollars primarily on staff, directly benefiting students. At-risk funds are distributed to school based salaries based on a Special Needs Index that identifies schools by need (e.g., EL, SPED, F/R rate, and mobility). This ensures that the funds are providing supports in an equitable manner. Elementary schools benefit from the at-risk funds by allowing us to set classroom ratios that support more direct instruction. Schools with more at risk students have a smaller teacher to student ratio.

Two of our schools that are primarily funded through at-risk dollars are Hope Street Academy and Avondale Academy. Hope Street provides an alternative option for high school students who struggle in a traditional high school by providing smaller class sizes, childcare for students with children, and flexible school hours for students who have to work while in high school. Avondale Academy houses several programs that provide services to students, including a Day School for students who have been suspended from their home school. This allows students to not miss out on instruction.

The most unique services provided at Avondale are for students who have behavioral and/or social emotional struggles and attend on a temporary basis. The Topeka Public Schools Virtual School for grades 4-adult is also located there. Students can get support from Family Service and Guidance Center, Shawnee Regional Prevention and Recovery Services, and other community service providers who have space at the school. This eliminates many of the barriers at-risk students have in getting community services (e.g., transportation, missing school, parents missing work). Once the student interventions are in place and working, students' transition back to their home school. Both of these alternative schools provide a safe place for students to find academic success.

The high density at risk weighting supports students who are at-risk, and through its impact, supports students who are not at-risk. Please vote yes on SB 173.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide our support for this bill.

Dr. Tiffany Anderson, Superintendent, Topeka Public Schools #501
Scott Mickelsen, School Board President, Topeka Public Schools #501