

Date: December 1, 2021

Testimony for Special Interim Committee on Education

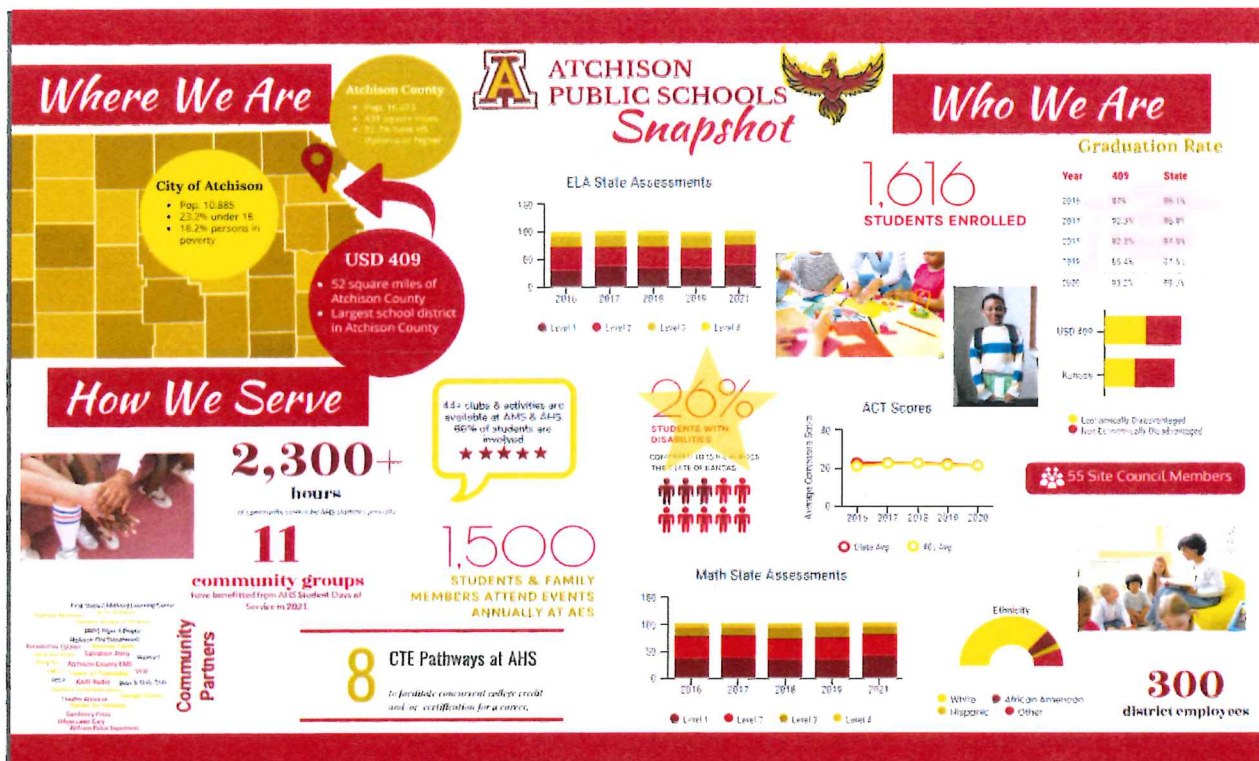
Rep. Kristey Williams, Chairperson

Dr. Renee Nugent, USD 409, Superintendent

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony regarding Improving Student Achievement and Outcomes.

As the current superintendent of USD 409, Atchison Public Schools, I bring a unique and authentic perspective to this conversation. Atchison, a 4A school district shares a positive working relationship with a 2A private high school, and two private elementary schools. When I accepted the position as superintendent of this rural yet diverse district three years ago, I made a commitment to visit classrooms weekly so that I could truly make decisions based on the needs of students and staff unique to each building. In fact, already this year I am approaching 400 classroom visits. I share this with you because as we discuss improving achievement and outcomes, it is critical to understand the entire picture related to education, specifically those of us in rural areas where access to many services for students is limited.

Today I will highlight three areas that greatly impact student achievement and outcomes: access to quality interventions, materials and training for all staff, especially in light of the interruptions caused by the pandemic, how special education needs and costs are negatively impacting student achievement and outcomes, and the need to recruit and retain quality educators in order to achieve high levels of success.



Academic Achievement and Quality Intervention

I am 100% in favor of the idea of improving student achievement and outcomes. I especially want to see individual student growth throughout the year using a variety of measures. Academically, USD 409 focuses primarily on data from iReady screeners and assessments in math and reading, state interim assessments, ACT scores, NAEP scores when chosen, Kansas assessment scores, graduation rates, and post-secondary success data. This year we added a school capabilities assessment to the mix in which we measure how classrooms utilize high effect strategies to increase learning at a faster rate.

USD 409 applied for and was selected to receive the LiNK (Literacy Network of Kansas) Grant funding in a partnership with Leavenworth Public Schools in 2018. As 80% of our FTE funding goes to salaries and benefits for staff, the LiNK grant provided the district with opportunities for resources and professional development, including a robust screening and assessment protocol, iReady, to equip our teachers with the most research-based approaches to teaching reading and literacy. Our iReady data after full funding and prior to the pandemic showed that we were making steady growth. Our annual fall data indicated that year-to-year we were seeing steady improvement and retention. Our staff was confident these results, because of the interventions reflecting true student needs, would result in growth on the state assessment as well. The reality of COVID punched us all in the gut. COVID is not an excuse, and we are ready to pick up and move forward; but the data is clear that we have to make progress, and this regression will not be an overnight fix for any district.

We have committed a high percentage of our ESSER funding to train all staff using John Hattie's research through *Visible Learning* to ensure we are utilizing the best teaching and instructional practices to move students forward at a faster rate. Each building went through an assessment process to gauge current teaching practices and develop a plan for what works best in teaching all students. This is a three year commitment for our district, and I have never been more excited to have an opportunity to train all staff across all content areas in order to move the needle in a positive direction. But growth and change takes time. I believe we will get there, and it will take every ounce of funding to make change happen.

Academic Achievement and Special Education

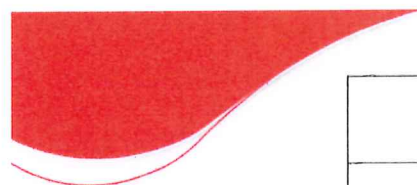
Another important factor to consider when discussing achievement and accountability is special education. The special education population of USD 409 is nearly 27%, almost double the state average. If all of the student population in the city of Atchison attended public schools, this percentage would align more closely to the state average. Conversely, Atchison Public Schools carries the enrollment for all but a very small percentage of special education students, and USD 409 provides special education services to all students, whether they attend a public or private school. Although special education does have its own funding source, the needs of the students we serve exceed that allotment. In 2019-20, USD 409 supplemented the special education fund \$1,321,917 and in 2020-21, the special education fund was supplemented \$1,019, 559.00.

To put the costs of educating special education students in perspective, USD 409 has already spent \$21,568.54 dollars on a 4th grade student who has autism as we contract out ABA therapy services to meet the student's needs along with OT, PT, and speech services. This does not include the certified

teacher's salary or paraprofessional support. A student at the high school level, needing similar services but is more medically fragile, has already used \$24,961 this year for educational services, and the student will attend our district until age 21. Again, yes we do receive special education funding, but the limited access to local services drives up the cost to provide a free, appropriate education.

A little over 1% of our special education students take the DLM (Dynamic Learning Maps) Assessment, which is for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities for whom general state assessments are not appropriate. This leaves over 25% of our special education students to take the state assessment and learn on-grade level content. By definition of special education--a set of services provided to students who experience exceptional learning needs--finding the right tool to improve academic achievement and outcomes is important. Of 176 special education students at USD 409 who took the Kansas Reading Assessment last spring (grades 3 - 11), 122 scored a level 1 and the remaining a Level II. If we were to utilize a growth model approach to measuring learning outcomes, such as a combination of measures, it would be clear that our students are making progress. Unfortunately, one test in one moment of time often tells .

As mentioned above, not only are we supporting our staff in quality professional development with our ESSER funding, we are also increasing access to after school programs and summer programs dedicated to meet the needs of all students, including at-risk and special education students beyond ESY. We completed our second year of summer school and saw great gains.

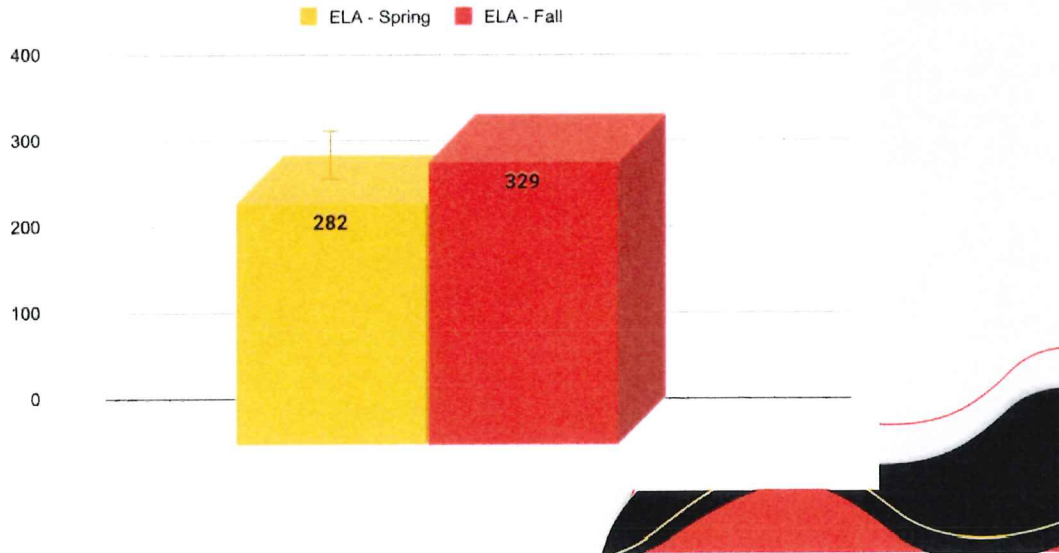


Enrollment		
	Session 1	Session 2
Prek-K	40	37
1st & 2nd	64	52
3rd & 4th	54	32
5th - 7th	38	21
Total	196	142



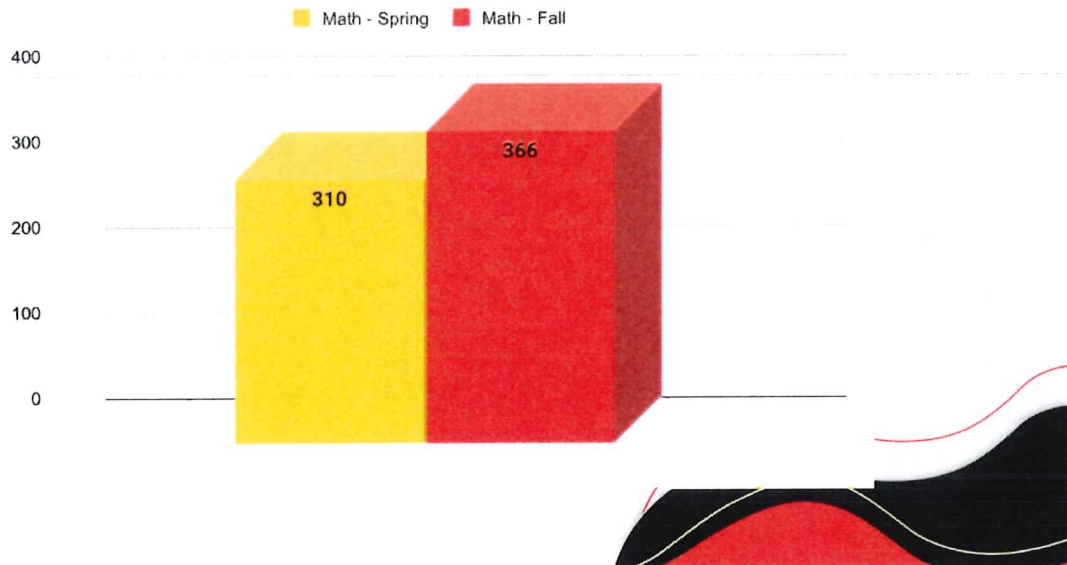
16.67% increase between grades levels

Reading iReady Data - Grades 1-7



18.06% increase between grades levels

Mathematics iReady Data - Grades 1-7



We have committed to two more years of these programs through ESSER funds--which includes transportation--but after that, it will be difficult to allocate money based on the rising costs of services that extend beyond the FTE amount allotted.

Recruiting and Retaining Quality Teachers

When we received full funding after the Gannon ruling, we knew we were facing an unprecedented national teacher shortage. In 2020, USD 409 was able to finally use our full funding to get our base pay to \$40,000 for new teachers. With our geographical location, however, we are competing with districts less than a 60 mile radius who have base pay at \$44,000 or higher for a starting salary. We were unable to fill 3 special education positions this year, which as stated above is a huge percentage of our student population. We have used ESSER money to secure three contracted long-term subs who are working towards teacher licensure in other high needs areas, such as early childhood special education. In addition to finding quality teachers, it has been a struggle to fill paraprofessional positions, bus drivers, food service personnel and substitute teachers to name a few. All of these positions impact student performance and accountability measures, both directly and indirectly.

John Hattie's research is clear in that a teacher with high efficacy (believes in his/her own teaching ability and that students can learn and achieve at high levels) has an effect size of 1.29 (an average effect size of one year's growth is .40). In order to really see an impact in improved student achievement and outcomes, we have to, as a state, invest in the teaching profession as a whole.

In closing, I do know that students can learn and achieve at high levels. And I appreciate the funding that has been provided over the last three years and that is to come in the next few years. From the class of 2018, prior to COVID, we have 28 students currently attending college and are in their 4th year (7 of whom were identified as ELL, special education, and/or foster care). Their average state assessment score for ELA was 2.25. Over half were in the lower 2-score range. For math, the average score was 2.39. Yet, they are achieving and succeeding in college. If only a single measure, such as a state assessment, was utilized to predict post secondary success, this would have been discouraging. Using a growth model approach to measuring student outcomes would be a better picture of success for individual students.

As we discuss improved student achievement and outcomes, there is a bigger picture that I hope I have begun to paint for this important committee. And my examples didn't even include the numbers of foster students we serve, the number of students with mental and physical aggression, and the number of homeless population that continues to increase.

These examples are not excuses. They are human reasons to push harder for the success of every student. I hope to work with you in determining how that success can be measured, and understanding that there are multiple options to measure outcomes.

Again, Thank you for allowing me to share.

Dr. Renee Nugent
USD 409 Superintendent of Schools