

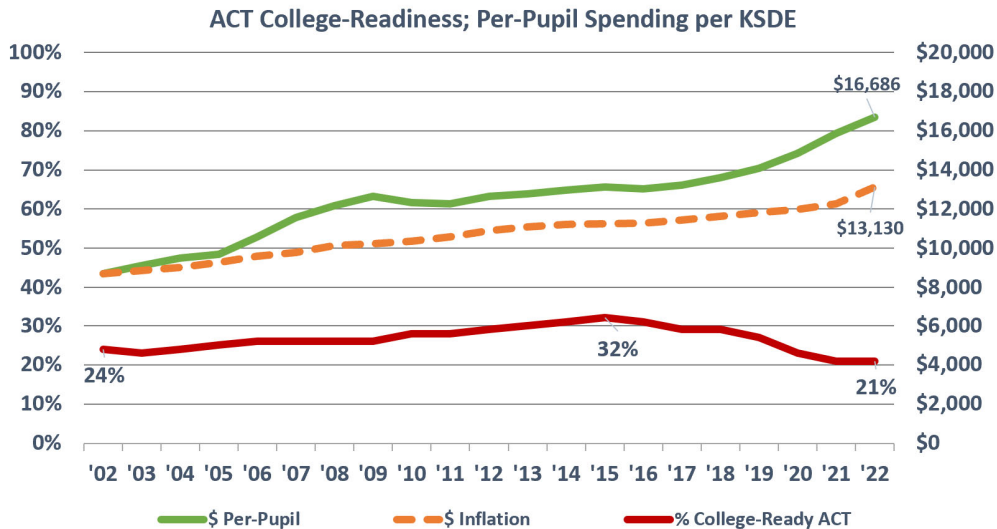
Chairman Tarwater and Members of the Committee,

We appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony on a major issue impacting workforce development.

Simply put, the public education system in Kansas is giving diplomas to many students who are below grade level in math and English Language Arts and not prepared to enter the workforce or for post-secondary training. This situation existed before the pandemic, and there is little hope that the public education system will attempt to resolve the crisis without legislative intervention.

**More students below grade level than are proficient**

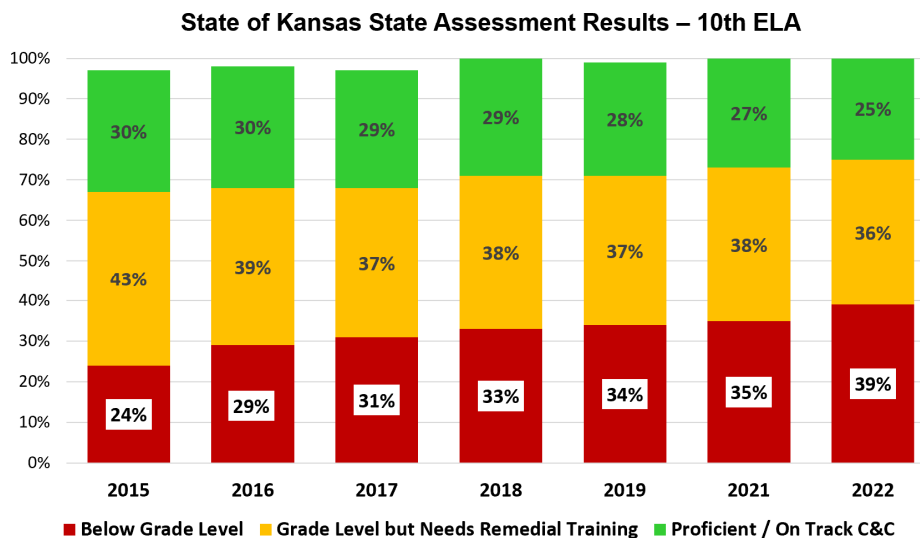
The 2022 ACT results show only 21% of Kansas graduates are college-ready in English, Reading, Math, and Science. That’s down from 32% in 2015, and the Department of Education says college readiness will continue to decline with no accompanying sense of emergency.<sup>1</sup> Think about that: college readiness could dip into the teens, and no alarm bells are going off at KSDE.



Source: ACT, Kansas Dept. of Education, Bureau of Labor Statistics  
 Consumer Price Index for Midwest Cities on fiscal basis.

The state school board association tries to justify low college readiness as somehow being appropriate. It goes like this: ‘well, only X% of jobs require a college degree, so having X% of students college ready shows the system is doing it’s job.’

Low college readiness on the ACT is not surprising, given state assessment results. Kansas has more high school students below grade level than are proficient in math and English language arts. Even Johnson County has more students below grade level in math than are proficient.



There have been more high school students below grade level than proficient in English language arts since 2017. Even pre-pandemic, the percentage of students below grade level went from 24% in 2015 (the first year of the current assessment) to 34% in 2019; now, 39% are below grade level and only 25% are proficient.

Math results are even worse. There have been more high school students below grade level than proficient since 2015, and now there are 46% below grade level and just 20% proficient.

### Dismal achievement will be the norm without legislative intervention

There are two big barriers to improving achievement in Kansas. The first one is a false sense of high achievement. No one is concerned about change if they think results are very good.

The other major barrier is an assumption that the public education system will aggressively take corrective action if achievement is low. But the system repeatedly demonstrates that it will not do so.

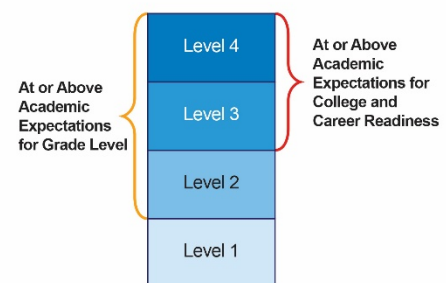
Our new book, *Giving Kids a Fighting Chance with School Choice*, tells one story after another of education officials deceiving legislators and parents...de-emphasizing academic improvement...and even ignoring laws designed to improve achievement.

As parents became more aware that achievement was lower than they'd been told, KSDE tried to change definitions to cover up low results. The adjacent graphic was presented to the Legislature in 2015 by KSDE. It clearly shows that results in Level 1 are below grade level. But KSDE and KASB now claim the state assessment doesn't measure grade level.

Fig. 1: KSDE State Assessment

### Performance Levels

Kansas Assessment Performance Levels



By the way, the U.S. Department of Education sets state assessment parameters, one of which says the assessments “must measure and report assessment results against grade-level academic standards.”<sup>2</sup>

The KSDE 2021 Success Tour is another example of their efforts to deceive people and de-emphasize academic improvement. KSDE officials conducted what amounted to pep rallies in 50 cities to celebrate high graduation rates. They gave out 91 Gold and Silver awards for graduation rates, but only 1 Silver award for academic preparation.

With more high school students below grade level than proficient, school officials know they are giving diplomas to a lot of students who are below grade level. In fact, the superintendents of Olathe and Shawnee Mission didn’t deny the practice during a 2019 discussion at the Overland Park Chamber of Commerce.

### *School districts ignore state laws*

School districts also blithely ignore state laws designed to improve achievement.

A 2019 Legislative Post Audit concluded that “most at-risk spending was used for teachers and programs for all students and did not appear to specifically address at-risk students as required by state law.”<sup>3</sup> Rather than take corrective action, Kansas Board of Education President Kathy Busch published a response that basically said, ‘shut up, go away, we know what we’re doing.’<sup>4</sup>

And nothing changed.

Upon learning that many school districts were ignoring the law requiring annual needs assessments be conducted in every school, the Legislature in 2022 enhanced accountability requirements. Yet our examination of 27 school districts found none of them did what was required.

## **A proven method of improving student achievement**

Fortunately, there is policy the Legislature can adopt that compels education officials to put students’ needs ahead of their institutional interests. States with robust school choice programs like Florida and Arizona have performance records that exceed the national average.

- Florida went from being one of the worst states in the nation in 1998 to one of the best in 2019 and 2022.
- Arizona and Florida have higher proficiency levels on each of the eight primary measurements of the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) compared to 2003, but Kansas is lower in every case. The national average improved in all eight measurements.
- Florida improved its proficiency levels more than the national average in all eight measures; Arizona grew more than the national average in five measurements, but Kansas is lower in every case.

School officials don’t want to lose the funding that comes with students, so they have to reallocate resources to provide a better education experience. That’s why all students benefit from money-follow-the-child programs.

## Conclusion

Workforce development is seriously hindered by the state’s consistent pattern of graduating large numbers of students who are below grade level. We encourage legislators, employers, and parents to speak up about the student achievement crisis in Kansas, and we encourage the Legislature to pass money-follow-the-child legislation for all students.

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<sup>1</sup> Neuenswander, Brad, Kansas Department of Education, testimony before the Special Committee on Education, November 30, 2021, [youtube.com/watch?v=O1Dk8hJPs-Q&t=6145s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O1Dk8hJPs-Q&t=6145s)

<sup>2</sup> Every Student Succeeds Act, U.S. Department of Education, <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/essaassessmentfactsheet1207.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Kansas Legislative Division of Post Audit, “K-12 Education: Evaluating At-Risk Student Counts, Weights, and Expenditures,” December 2019, [kslpa.org/audit-report-library/k-12-education-evaluating-at-risk-student-counts-weights-and-expenditures/](https://kslpa.org/audit-report-library/k-12-education-evaluating-at-risk-student-counts-weights-and-expenditures/)

<sup>4</sup> Kansas City Star editorial board, “Why are Kansas schools diverting urgently needed funds from at-risk students?,” December 18, 2019, <https://www.kansascity.com/opinion/readers-opinion/guest-commentary/article238722248.html>

Percent of High School Students Proficient in Math							
Description	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2021	2022
Wichita	14%	13%	12%	12%	15%	9%	9%
Topeka	14%	12%	16%	15%	15%	11%	11%
Kansas City	7%	5%	8%	9%	10%	7%	5%
Lawrence	29%	30%	33%	31%	35%	26%	25%
Blue Valley	52%	52%	49%	47%	49%	43%	45%
Shawnee Mission	33%	36%	36%	34%	33%	29%	29%
Olathe	38%	40%	39%	38%	37%	25%	26%
Gardner-Edgerton	24%	20%	24%	25%	21%	18%	17%
De Soto	42%	37%	36%	41%	38%	44%	38%
Geary County	15%	13%	14%	18%	19%	17%	18%
Andover	43%	40%	38%	36%	44%	36%	34%
Derby	16%	23%	21%	23%	22%	17%	14%
Maize	34%	38%	44%	45%	39%	33%	29%
Emporia	23%	18%	23%	15%	15%	18%	16%
Hutchinson	15%	12%	14%	19%	13%	11%	13%
Salina	13%	16%	14%	17%	16%	9%	16%
Garden City	5%	4%	4%	10%	9%	8%	6%
Dodge City	9%	11%	7%	11%	13%	14%	11%
Hays	34%	37%	40%	34%	37%	32%	27%
Pittsburg	19%	18%	10%	16%	20%	29%	26%
State Avg.	24%	23%	23%	24%	25%	20%	20%
Percent of High School Students Proficient in English Language Arts							
Description	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2021	2022
Wichita	18%	20%	18%	20%	18%	14%	13%
Topeka	19%	15%	23%	20%	23%	17%	18%
Kansas City	8%	7%	8%	11%	13%	12%	11%
Lawrence	40%	43%	44%	43%	40%	37%	32%
Blue Valley	53%	52%	50%	46%	45%	44%	47%
Shawnee Mission	43%	44%	43%	41%	38%	37%	38%
Olathe	43%	43%	39%	41%	38%	38%	31%
Gardner-Edgerton	38%	31%	39%	35%	32%	27%	22%
De Soto	53%	51%	49%	48%	46%	40%	40%
Geary County	27%	22%	24%	28%	25%	29%	23%
Andover	46%	44%	41%	39%	41%	42%	38%
Derby	28%	32%	26%	30%	28%	20%	18%
Maize	43%	37%	30%	38%	37%	33%	29%
Emporia	25%	27%	28%	17%	21%	29%	18%
Hutchinson	21%	21%	18%	20%	18%	19%	15%
Salina	26%	26%	24%	29%	28%	25%	27%
Garden City	20%	14%	15%	17%	18%	12%	10%
Dodge City	16%	14%	12%	11%	11%	19%	12%
Hays	41%	45%	39%	25%	33%	37%	35%
Pittsburg	19%	27%	26%	19%	26%	30%	26%
State Avg.	30%	30%	28%	29%	28%	27%	25%

Source: Kansas Dept. of Education