



Office of the Superintendent

Dodge City Public Schools • Unified School District 443

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Monday, November 14, 2011

Governor Sam Brownback
State of Kansas Capitol
300 SW 10th Ave., Ste. 241S
Topeka, KS 66612-1590

Governor Brownback,

The students of Kansas consistently score among the top ten states in the nation on a wide range of professionally respected measures of student achievement. I believe that this fact alone provides strong evidence for the quality of the state's public schools, students, and educators.

After over 38 years as a Kansas educator, including years as a classroom teacher, building principal, and district administrator, it is my perspective that the current school finance formula contributes to that success, and is the most equitable of any during my tenure in education. In addition to the formula's consideration of a student's academic proficiency and/or learning exceptionalities, it takes into account the economic and linguistic/cultural factors impacting a child's potential for success in school.

Dodge City USD 443 is a diverse and growing school district¹. We are also in somewhat of a unique position in regards to the current school funding issue. As a growing school district, many of the effects of the recent budget cuts seen in a majority of Kansas school districts have been 'mitigated' in our school district as the result of over 500 new students during the past three years. This year, however, our school district's budget may actually decline by approximately \$660,000, even with an additional enrollment increase of about 80 students.

Our enrollment increase has been a 'two-edged sword', however. While the additional funds from enrollment have helped compensate for the lost budget authority due to the reduction in the Base State Aid per Pupil (BSAPP), the net effects have included increased pupil teacher ratios, reductions of programs, and a larger tax burden on our local community. Our class sizes, as an example, are approaching pre-Montoy levels, with as many as 26 Kindergartners in a classroom. Teaching staff have not been added in proportion to the enrollment increases because of the reduction in budget authority and the lack of available classroom space in the school district.

Other programs and services, including extended learning opportunities, have been reduced or eliminated. With a student population that is over 75% Hispanic, 55% English language learners, and nearly 80% economically disadvantaged, these services and programs (including before/after school interventions, summer school and staff training) are critical to the continued success of the students we serve in Dodge City.

The school district has also been unsuccessful in passing two bond issues for additional facilities since 2009. In both instances, surveys indicated that voters were aware of the need for the facilities, but were unwilling to levy additional taxes to fund them, especially in light of the perceived potential loss of State equalization for capital projects. As a result, funds that should have been available for instruction and direct services to students have been diverted to

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maintain current facilities, as well as to renovate existing and/or temporary facilities to address the growing student population.

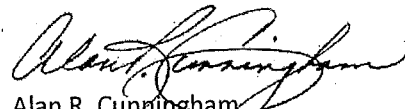
Recently, Dodge City USD 443 did not make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Specifically, the student subgroups that did not achieve AYP included the most at-risk students – special education students, with English language learners only attaining AYP by the slimmest of margins. Prior to the reductions in budget authority, these groups had attained AYP each year. I attribute our school district's current AYP status directly to increasing class sizes (pupil/teacher ratios), as well as the inability of the school district to continue to fund many of the opportunities for extended learning time for these students.

Governor Brownback, these kids are smart. They can learn at exceptionally high levels when they are afforded opportunities to overcome the deficits with which they arrive at our schools. They only need a highly qualified and well-trained teacher, access to adequate resources, and additional time to be successful. Unfortunately, these things cost money.

I respectfully request that your administration's school finance plan be deferred, and that in its place a three-to-five year plan be developed to fund the current school finance formula, which has been accepted by Kansas courts as addressing our State's constitutional mandate to suitably fund Kansas public schools.

I respectfully include one caveat along with this recommendation, as well. Since early childhood education and early identification of learning needs produce the greatest cost-benefit ratio in education, the school finance formula should include a plan to phase in full-time equivalent funding for those school districts whose students participate in all-day Kindergarten programs. Currently the costs for these services come from funds which could be used for many of the supplemental programs and services affected by recent reductions in BSAPP.

We are One Kansas. As Kansans, all our children deserve their chance to reach "...To the Stars...". On behalf of the students and staff in Dodge City USD 443, thank you for your consideration of my request.


Alan R. Cunningham
Superintendent of Schools

(¹ In addition to serving a population that is over 75% Hispanic, 80% from economically disadvantaged families, and 55% English language learners, because of the nature of employment in the community, Dodge City USD 443 has one of the state's largest migrant populations. This often results in students with significant interruptions in the continuity of their schooling.)

cc. Sen. Garrett Love
Sen. Steve Morris

Rep. Brian Weber
Rep. Ron Ryckman