

TRI-COUNTY SPECIAL EDUCATION INTERLOCAL No. 607

220 East Chestnut P.O. Box 668
Independence, Kansas 67301
(620) 331-6303 Fax (620) 331-7016

Testimony in Support of HB 2066
Julie Bruington, Director
Tri-County Interlocal #607

Chairman Hawkins and members of the Committee:

I appreciate the opportunity to offer my support for House Bill 2066. Tri-County Interlocal #607 is a special education agency, working cooperatively with our member districts to provide special education and related services to students with exceptionalities. Our agency receives federal funds through IDEA dollars, state funds through categorical aid and each participating district is assessed an annual contribution to cover the budgetary gap. Specifically, as it applies to HB 2066, I am testifying today regarding the need for more accessible and efficient options to provide related services, such as speech and language therapy, to students with disabilities.

Tri-County Interlocal #607 is a special education agency in southeast Kansas. Our member districts include Caney Valley, Cherryvale, Coffeyville, Fredonia, Independence, Neodesha and Parsons. Those school districts cover approximately 1200 square miles. We serve approximately 1300 students, of which about 1175 of those are students with disabilities. Of those 1175 students, about 725 of those receive some type of medical service as a part of their school program. Currently we have 705 students who receive speech and language therapy services.

As I'm sure you are aware, southeast Kansas has its own economic challenges. However, the two most important challenges I want to draw your attention to today are the number of students we have living in poverty and the difficulty we have in recruiting qualified educational professionals to the area. The seven superintendents that are a part of our interlocal annually report the number of students they have enrolled who are eligible for the free and reduced lunch program. Those percentages range from 52% in Caney Valley to 83% in Coffeyville. Many of those students are also eligible for support through the Kansas Medicaid program.

Our goal at Tri-County Interlocal #607 is to hire and retain qualified individuals to provide these legally required and educationally necessary services to our students. While the recruitment of all special education providers has become a challenge, our most critical area of need has been in the area of speech and language pathologists. Our agency currently employs 12 speech and language pathologists to serve those 705 students. Three of those are part time individuals. Right now, we employ two tele-therapists to work with students in our school districts. This is the fourth year that we have had to look to the tele-therapy model to provide necessary services to our students. The full time caseloads for our speech and language pathologists range from 60 to 96 students that must be seen weekly and most of them are seen at least twice a week. Our agency has had at least one speech and language pathology vacancy for the last five years. Right now, we have three vacancies, one of which I am unable to fill even with a tele-therapist. I have been unable to recruit qualified individuals to fill these vacancies. When a medical emergency or



anticipated medical leave arises, I have no viable options to consider except tele-therapy. I anticipate additional vacancies over the next several years as we have five speech and language pathologists who are at or nearing retirement age. This results in exceptionally high caseloads for our existing therapists and a need to look for alternative methods of delivering services to our neediest populations.

Our agency has long been known for trying to think outside of the box when it comes to solving problems that directly impact student programming. We frequently partner with the other special education agencies in southeast Kansas to deliver both high quality and financially efficient services to students with disabilities. We have been known to pool our resources to support joint program ventures, to purchase time from another agency to meet a unique demand and to share staff positions when neighboring districts cross interlocal lines. We have initiated a “grow our own” speech therapist program in which we can offer financial support to a student who is currently enrolled in an approved program in return for a commitment of service upon graduation. Without alternative service options, our ability to provide access to services is seriously compromised. The answer cannot be assigning higher caseloads over larger areas. This is not only exhausting, but it is not an efficient use of the resources we do have.

Efficiency can be defined as the amount of useful work performed by an individual compared to the cost of sustaining that individual. Time spent driving across those 1200 square miles is not an efficient use of a therapist’s time. Time spent working with students on their educational program is an efficient use of a therapist’s time. Tele-therapy allows us to have a professional staff member in one community while working with students in another community. The students continue to receive these educationally necessary medical services under the tele-therapy model. The difference is that these tele-therapy services currently are not eligible for any type of Medicaid reimbursement. On site therapists are able to bill Medicaid for student services. A conservative estimate would indicate that we are losing close to \$100,000 per year because these services are not eligible for claiming through Medicaid. This bill would not authorize new and additional services for students with disabilities. It would allow agencies such as Tri-County Interlocal #607 to obtain reimbursement for services that are already being delivered.

I foresee this model to be a very real option and possibly an only option, for rural Kansas students to receive required services. Any option that doesn’t include adequate funding options forces our agency to turn to our local school districts, and therefore our local taxpayers for financial support.

Your support of HB 2066 would provide us with a much needed revenue stream that would allow us to maximize service time to students with disabilities in a way that is both efficient and sustainable.

If I can answer any additional questions, please feel free to contact me at (620) 331-6303 or at julieb@tricounty607.com.