



Senate Education Committee
Testimony on SB 532, Blueprint for Literacy
Dr. Brent Yeager, Superintendent
March 7, 2024

Chair Baumgardner and members of the committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of SB 532, which would establish a blueprint for building more robust pre-service and in-service programs in Kansas. As a district, we applaud the collaborative effort undertaken to acknowledge the foundational role of literacy for students and, equally important, recognizing that quality of instruction is critical to student achievement outcomes.

About Olathe Public Schools

Olathe Public Schools is the second-largest school district in the state and the largest in the Kansas City metropolitan area, with a student population of approximately 29,000 students. Our vision is to prepare all students for their future from early childhood all the way to our 18-21 programs.

Our student population is diverse – in terms of ethnicity, socioeconomic status and learning needs. The district has 58 attendance centers, including 36 elementary schools, 10 middle schools, 5 high schools, and 7 specialty/early childhood centers. Ten (10) of our elementary schools are Title I schools, with poverty ranging from 56.9 to 81.25 percent.

We provide special education services to approximately 6,000 students pre-K through 21, with nearly ten percent of those students being identified as gifted.

Our district has students of many diverse languages and cultural backgrounds. We have over 90 languages spoken and over 2,700 students who receive English Learner Language (ELL) support. ELL students do not speak English as their first language and they require additional assistance learning English. After Spanish, our most common languages are Amharic, Vietnamese and Arabic.

So, what impact does that have on student learning and instructional practices?

In short, we know that our students come to us with varying levels of exposure to reading, literacy and a command of the English language. As a result, Olathe’s Board of Education has long prioritized literacy at all levels. We have made long-term investments in early learning, both in our schools and within the community, to help narrow the gap for those students entering kindergarten without basic literacy skills. Why? Because students who reach grade-level proficiency in reading by grade 3 are more likely to graduate and experience long-term success. This is reflected on our strategic plan.

In the K-12 setting, we have prioritized literacy across the curriculum. Our Board of Education has included it as part of our overall strategic plan. Reading is the foundation on which the success of students is built. The district focuses on structured literacy, which is an explicit and systematic

approach to teaching reading from kindergarten to fifth grade. With any instructional approach, early intervention is key to ensure all students are successful.

At the elementary level, we prioritize instruction and early intervention. Using our district's multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS), educators use universal screeners at all levels and assessments (e.g., FastBridge) to help identify students that need extra support. After that, the district takes it one step further by conducting a diagnostic screener that identifies an area of need and better informs educators in their decision-making process regarding which intervention is best for that specific child.

But teaching literacy is an ongoing process that extends beyond elementary school – especially in a district like Olathe that welcomes new students regularly. Our teachers must be trained to work with students at any age, with whatever literacy skills they have (or don't have), so that they can develop the skills they need to be successful.

Why we support this proposal:

- Olathe Public Schools believes that literacy is the foundation of all learning. Without a strong understanding of language, communication and writing skills, it is nearly impossible for children to succeed. We also believe that literacy education extends beyond a single classroom setting, but rather it is something that should be incorporated across all subject areas.
- We support greater collaboration between the Kansas State Department of Education and the Kansas Board of Regents in the area of teacher preparation.
- In our experience, not all teachers entering the classroom have the pre-service training necessary to be effective in teaching literacy. As a result, our district has invested significant resources for in-service and professional development – and in securing substitute teachers – to help our teachers be more successful in their work with our students.

Areas for consideration moving forward:

- Our hope is that the executive director hired to work with the literacy advisory committee will have a history of working with K-12 education and have some awareness of literacy programs and their importance to overall students success. But more important than being an expert in literacy, what we need is someone who can develop the relationships necessary – with KSDE, the Kansas Board of Regents, and the legislature – to advance the policy goals articulated in the bill.
- We urge thoughtful consideration when determining the locations and regional needs for the literacy centers. We believe they should be situated to provide *easy access for families accessing resources and for staff engaged in professional development* to help maximize utilization and collaboration.
- We also recommend there be some type of basic needs assessment to determine how many teachers need training to ensure that centers are not overwhelmed – because it isn't just about getting teachers trained, rather there is an urgency to getting it done quickly. The demands for professional in-service, especially while our partners in higher education contemplate changes to pre-service training mean that we will continue to onboard teachers that *may* need additional support.

- Finally, as a district that has invested resources in Science of Reading training, LETRS training within the district and hiring trainers to support LETRS, our hope is that the executive director and the committee will work with us to determine how this fits into any plan moving forward.
- We also believe any assessment that will be used should be designed within the expertise and knowledge of those directly working or providing direct oversight of PreK-12.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony on SB 532. As you consider this legislation and other policy issues this session, know that Olathe Public Schools remains committed to working with you to support Kansas students. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at byeagerec@olatheschools.org or (913) 780-8132.