

CENTRAL KANSAS COOPERATIVE IN EDUCATION

PROVIDING SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES FOR CENTRAL KANSAS

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To: Chairman Hawkins
Members of the House Health and Human Services Committee

From: Michael C. Lowers
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Re: Written Testimony: HB2206

Dear Chairman Hawkins and Members of the House Health and Human Services Committee:

I have the honor of serving as the Executive Director of Special Education at the Central Kansas Cooperative in Education in Salina, Kansas. Our goal is to level the playing field for students with exceptional needs ages 3-21. It is a delight to work with our children as they grow and develop into wonderful young women and men. We serve 2980 students in exceptional IEP programs across 4000 square miles in 12 school districts. Our services include: Special Education certified teachers, school psychology, occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech (SLP), audiology/hearing impairment, vision impairment, preschool (ages 3-5), gifted and talented students, transition to workforce programming (ages 18-21) and we provide paraeducators. We have a very dedicated staff who works very hard to meet the needs of all students!

As you are aware, the shortage of staff members with certified licenses continues to grow each year. Specifically, we have struggled greatly in the last few years to hire new Speech Language Pathologists as staff have retired or as SLPs have been hired by other cooperatives and/or medical institutions due to better pay and benefits. As a result, we are currently short 8.5 FTE (Full-time equivalency) speech language pathologists. We, of course, try very hard to hire and retain highly skilled SLPs but it has become very difficult to say the least. We also have tried to use contract labor companies to bring in SLPs from outside our area to move to our community and provide speech therapy in person. These organizations have been unable to find any SLPs to move to Salina. So, next we set up online speech therapy through a company, Presence Learning. P.L. currently provides staffing for 8.5 SLPs serving 430 of our students in speech. Without this service, I, frankly, would be unable to provide services to these students and we would be out of compliance with IDEA.

In looking at neighboring states, Colorado, Oklahoma and Missouri, teletherapy is being used in these locations as well---with one difference. When we use teletherapy in Kansas, cooperatives and school districts cannot claim Medicaid funding for students receiving online therapy. In the neighboring states mentioned, the organizations can claim Medicaid....I write this testimony to ask that Kansans be offered the same opportunity to claim Medicaid for online therapy as well. Our organization is losing approximately \$240,000 per year because of this difference.

Some points to consider:

- On-line speech therapists are licensed in Kansas just like all SLPs delivering service in person.
- The quality of SLPs provided by Presence Learning has been outstanding.
- On-line speech therapists can live anywhere but the bulk of ours live in the metro Kansas City area. As with many situations in Kansas, the population and thus the availability of SLPs is in the more urban areas. Online therapy allows rural areas to access staff who live in the urban areas of Kansas.
- Our SLP department fully supports our ability to collect Medicaid for therapy provided online. They have seen firsthand the high quality of speech therapy service provided online and they state that they are very impressed with how online therapy and the use of innovative technology provides speech services for the students.
- Technology and the use of innovative techniques, including teletherapy, is the wave of the future. Kids really like to use technology and it is amazing how much using online therapy can change the view of some of our students.....it is novel and different.....the use of technology lights up their faces!
- For our cooperative, we have a speech para in the room at all times....hence the child can develop an "in person" relationship with the paraeducator. Having an adult in the room also means that the speech therapy room is safe, organized and always supervised. In addition to this one-on-one relationship, the online speech therapist is present via video and we have found that, since our students have been born into and they function comfortably in a technology rich society, they feel very comfortable as well receiving therapy via technology. As a result, they get great therapy and they also develop strong relationships with the online therapists. I believe that this is innate in our children. As adults, we tend to be more cautious about the use of technology. The fact of the matter is that the kids thrive on teletherapy.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, for the reasons listed above, I respectfully advocate that all speech therapists and the therapy they provide be allowed to apply for Medicaid reimbursement, whether in person or when online therapy is provided to students. Either delivery mode works very well and the therapists in both settings are fully licensed to provide speech therapy by the state of Kansas. Again, we are losing \$240,000 per year due to this situation. Your voice now can change that as you discuss this situation.

If I can answer any additional questions, please let me know. I can be reached at (785) 309-5100 or at mike.lowers@usd305.com.

Sincerely,

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