

**BEFORE THE STATE CORPORATION COMMISSION
OF THE STATE OF KANSAS**

In the Matter of the Joint Application)
Of Evergy Kansas Central, Inc., Evergy)
Kansas South, Inc., and Evergy Metro, Inc.) Docket No. 23-EKCE-775-RTS
for the Approval to Make Certain Changes)
in their Charges for Electric Service.)

**PREFILED TESTIMONY
OF
SUSAN WILLIS
ON BEHALF OF UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT #259**

1 **Q: PLEASE STATE YOUR NAME AND BUSINESS ADDRESS.**

2 **A:** My Name is Susan Willis. My business address is Wichita Public Schools, 903 S.
3 Edgemoor, Wichita, KS 67218.

4 **Q: PLEASE STATE YOUR OCCUPATION.**

5 **A:** I am Chief Financial Officer of the Wichita Public Schools (USD 259).

6 **Q: PLEASE DESCRIBE YOUR EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND AND PROFESSIONAL**
7 **EXPERIENCE.**

8 **A:** This information is included in Exhibit A to my testimony.

9 **Q: ON WHOSE BEHALF ARE YOU APPEARING IN THIS PROCEEDING?**

10 **A:** I am appearing on behalf of Unified School District #259 ("USD 259").

11 **Q: WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF YOUR DIRECT TESTIMONY IN THIS**
12 **PROCEEDING?**

13 **A:** USD 259 is concerned about escalating and noncompetitive utility rates, because it
14 faces accelerating operating costs and increased education expectations while also
15 preparing for the end of historic federal funding provided to recover from pandemic-related
16 learning loss.

17 **Q: HOW IS THE DUTY TO EDUCATE THE STUDENTS OF USD 259 IMPACTED BY**
18 **THESE FACTORS?**

19 **A:** USD 259 students are still testing at 5-8% below pre-pandemic levels; continued
20 focus of resources on learning recovery will be critical to this generation of students. Further,
21 like most urban school districts across the nation, USD 259 is slowly declining in enrollment,
22 meaning any increase in base state funding per pupil is eroded by flat or declining enrollment.
23 In this environment, any significant electric rate increase will make it even more difficult for
24 USD 259 to fulfill its responsibilities.

1 **Q: HOW ARE SCHOOL DISTRICT EDUCATION GOALS DETERMINED?**

2 **A:** Notwithstanding each District's unique characteristics, each Kansas school district
3 has a local school board charged with a constitutional duty to "maintain, develop and operate"
4 local public schools. These local school boards must meet state academic standards and
5 achieve certain outcomes, regardless of their different student populations.

6 Article Six of the Kansas Constitution requires public schools and other educational entities
7 to promote "intellectual, educational, scientific and vocational improvement." In recent
8 decades, that responsibility has become much more sharply defined. In the early 1990's, the
9 State Board of Education – an elected constitutional body under Article Six – implemented a
10 significant transformation of school accreditation to focus on student educational outcomes.

11 At the same time, the State Legislature directed that accreditation be based on improvement
12 in student outcomes and required state academic standards and statewide testing in core
13 subjects. Since the early 2000's, the federal No Child Left Behind Act ("NCLB") required that
14 school districts meet annually increasing targets for student proficiency rates in reading and
15 math. In December 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law
16 replacing NCLB. ESSA required, for the first time, that all students be taught to high
17 academic standards that will prepare them to succeed in college and careers. ESSA also
18 included a new accountability system based on multiple measures including factors other
19 than test scores. Under ESSA, Kansas schools, were required to submit goals that
20 addressed proficiency on tests, English-language proficiency, and graduation rates. Those
21 goals had to set an expectation that groups that are furthest behind close the gap in
22 achievement and graduation rates.

23 In the spring of 2014, the Kansas Supreme Court articulated a new set of standards called
24 the "Rose" capacities which describe the skills students need to have to be successful adults.

1 These include not only basic skills like communications, but “citizenship” skills in democratic
2 participation, economics, physical and mental health and cultural appreciation, as well as
3 preparation for postsecondary academic or vocational program. The Legislature adopted
4 these capacities as education goals for the state and have become the “Kansans Can” vision
5 for educational outcomes.

6 In the spring of 2022, the Kansas Legislature passed a law requiring school boards to make
7 resource allocation decisions within the annual budget adoption process sufficient to remove
8 the barriers preventing all students from achieving a Level 3 or Level 4 on state academic
9 assessments (on a scale of Levels 1 to 4, with 1 being the lowest). Further, school boards
10 must estimate the amount of time it will take for all students to achieve proficiency above a
11 Level 2 for grade level academic expectations on state assessments based on that resource
12 reallocation. This requires more resources for teachers. Higher electric rates will erode our
13 ability to address these standards.

14 **Q: HAS SCHOOL FUNDING KEPT PACE WITH INCREASING OPERATIONAL**
15 **COSTS?**

16 **A:** No, operational funding has not kept up with inflation and the increased operating
17 costs we currently face with more special needs children, more students with significant
18 behavior challenges, and higher academic expectations. During the 2017 Kansas legislative
19 session, a new school finance formula was signed into law which finally ended the extended
20 period of state aid funding reductions, putting additional funds into the base aid per pupil and
21 restoring weighted funds for student subgroups which are more expensive to educate,
22 including At-Risk students. However, the Kansas Supreme Court, in October 2017, found
23 the formula to be inadequate under the Kansas Constitution and gave the Kansas legislature
24 until June 30, 2018 to submit a formula that would be constitutionally adequate. The 2018

1 Kansas legislature put another \$522 million into the formula. On June 25, 2018, the Kansas
2 Supreme Court determined that the state needed to address inflation. The 2019 Kansas
3 legislature put another \$90 million into the formula for inflation. On June 14, 2019, the Kansas
4 Supreme Court found the revised formula substantially complied with the Court's mandate to
5 address inflation, and retained jurisdiction of the case to ensure continued implementation of
6 the scheduled funding. Since this final court decision in 2019, the Kansas legislature has
7 complied with the Supreme Court mandate and continued to authorize funding increases set
8 by the school finance formula and the change to a three-year average Consumer Price Index
9 (CPI) increase in both the 2022-23 school year and for the upcoming 2023-24 school year.
10 However, according to the Kansas Association of School Board's ("KASB") Kansas
11 Education Facts, January 2023, (attached as Exhibit B), current Kansas school spending
12 (which includes \$400 million in temporary federal COVID-19 funding), when adjusted for
13 inflation, is only slightly higher than in 2009. KASB also cites that despite increasing state
14 aid under the state's current school finance plan, Kansas per pupil funding is more than 10
15 percent below the U.S. average. Our Kansas Supreme Court and Legislature have agreed
16 to increases in the school financing formula tied to a three year CPI average. Everygy's
17 requests for a rate increases in this Docket far exceeds a three year CPI average.

18 **Q: IF KANSAS IS INCREASING FUNDING, WHY IS FUNDING AN ISSUE FOR**
19 **SCHOOL DISTRICTS, PARTICULARLY USD 259?**

20 **A:** The Kansas school finance formula allocates funding to school districts based on a
21 per pupil model. School districts receive a base amount per student full-time equivalent (FTE)
22 and then receive additional weightings for FTE defined students with certain higher needs,
23 which include At Risk students, students requiring transportation, students who are English
24 language learners, students who qualify for pre-Kindergarten services and students requiring

1 Special Education services. Since 2015, USD 259 has been declining in enrollment, with the
2 sharpest decline occurring in 2020 following pandemic-related school closures. Overall, the
3 district has contracted by about 8% from 2015 to 2023.

4 **Q: HOW HAS THIS DECLINE IMPACTED USD 259'S FUNDING?**

5 **A:** Fewer students means less funding, even if the base per pupil is increasing. In a year
6 that the state increases funding by 3%, USD 259 may only see an increase of 2% because
7 of enrollment decline. USD 259 has responded and reduced staff accordingly, but many of
8 the fixed costs of maintaining buildings and support services remain and have steadily
9 increased.

10 **Q: ARE THERE OTHER NEEDS REGARDING THE MAKEUP OF THE STUDENTS**
11 **THAT REQUIRE MORE FUNDING?**

12 **A:** USD 259's student makeup has continued to change, and costs related to these
13 higher needs populations have increased at a greater rate than funding in the formula. For
14 example, KASB reports that since 2010, special education students have increased by 25%,
15 total special education expenditures by 44% and inflation by 34%, while state special
16 education aid has increased by just 25%.

17 **Q: HOW HAS USD 259 BEEN HANDLING THESE INCREASING COSTS AND**
18 **LOWER ENROLLMENTS?**

19 **A:** USD 259 must transfer funds from its General fund and Supplemental General fund
20 just to cover the increasing costs of mandatory special education services. This action leaves
21 fewer dollars to support ongoing and increasing operational costs, let alone support
22 innovation, increasing technology needs and teacher development so critical to achieving
23 improved student outcomes.

1 It is also taking more funds to attract employees to education. USD 259 currently has
2 almost 200 paraprofessional openings, 55 Special Education teacher vacancies, and 125
3 other teacher and support staff vacancies. Urban school districts like USD 259 have students
4 with more needs, and thus have to offer better wages and benefits than suburban
5 counterparts to attract the shrinking pool of new teachers entering the field to work for USD
6 259. These challenges all combine to put a tremendous amount of pressure on the allocation
7 of funds USD 259 receives each year.

8 **Q: IN LIGHT OF THE REDUCED STATE FUNDING AND INCREASED**
9 **OPERATIONAL COSTS YOU HAVE DISCUSSED, HOW WILL EVERGY'S PROPOSED**
10 **25.29% RATE INCREASE AFFECT USD 259?**

11 **A:** As I have testified, school operational costs continue to rise and new state funding,
12 after being cut from 2009-2015 and then frozen for 2016-17, will not be sufficient to address
13 the tremendous need for resources which exist in all programs and services for USD 259
14 students, particularly as overall student enrollment declines and high needs populations
15 increase. New funds coming to USD 259 are specifically being targeted to educational
16 recovery programs, staff needs, and improving outcomes for high need students. A
17 significant increase in utility costs inhibits this recovery and restoration effort. The largest
18 area of operating expenditures is personnel, so a likely consequence would be the inability
19 to add and retain teachers and other school staff. This would lead to increasingly larger class
20 sizes and continued reduction of student services. The second largest budget area is building
21 operations. USD 259 already has over \$1 billion in deferred maintenance needs, so
22 increased utility costs could exacerbate these challenges, ultimately resulting in the
23 mothballing of school buildings which cannot be maintained.

1 **Q: WHAT ARE THE SOURCES OF SCHOOL DISTRICT FUNDING GOING**
2 **FORWARD?**

3 **A:** School districts rely on three sources of revenue: state, local and federal. Each of
4 these sources has faced and continues to face uncertainty in the future.

5 About 73% of school revenue comes from state appropriations, 15% from Local and
6 12% from Federal

7 **Q: ARE THERE OTHER COSTS YOU ANTICIPATE THAT WOULD ERODE YOUR**
8 **ABILITY TO FULFILL THE SCHOOL DISTRICT'S OBLIGATION TO EDUCATE**
9 **STUDENTS?**

10 **A:** (a) Other concerning uncertainties in state funding are the significant unfunded
11 liability of the Kansas Public Employees Retirement System and growing state health care
12 costs. These factors are expected to constrain the state's "foundational" commitment to
13 public education.

14 (b) Local revenues (about 15% of total school revenues) are problematic because
15 school districts have extraordinarily diverse local tax bases. Some higher wealth districts
16 could likely raise additional revenues relatively easily, if allowed by the state. But many
17 districts require much higher local mill levies to raise any additional funds. These disparities
18 can be mitigated by increased state equalization aid, but the limitations on state funding have
19 already been noted. USD 259 is already maxed out the amount it can levy locally for Capital
20 Outlay funds. USD 259 is also already exercising its full Supplemental General fund authority
21 (33% of the General fund) so it cannot raise more local taxes in excess of that 33% authority.
22 That leaves no other unrestricted local tax availability for USD 259.

23 (c) Federal revenues (normally 12% of total school revenues) are restricted to
24 specific programs such as student meal support, special education aid and programs for

1 disadvantaged students; they cannot be used for basic operating costs such as electricity.
2 While federal funding in these areas can reduce the need to supplement support from state
3 and local funds, the most likely projection is that efforts to reduce the federal deficit will reduce
4 or, at best, limit federal aid to K-12 education.

5 (d) Federal pandemic relief funding for school districts will end in September
6 2024. Therefore, our recovery initiatives will either have to be cut or we will have to find other
7 sources of funding to maintain services. As students have not fully recovered academically
8 as well as socially/emotionally, USD 259 will have to make other spending reductions to
9 continue pandemic-related learning and behavior recovery beyond September 2024.

10 In short, most if not all Kansas school districts face a highly constrained financial
11 environment for the foreseeable future. Any increase in fixed costs, such as electrical rates,
12 will therefore reduce resources available for improving student educational outcomes.

13 **Q: DO INCREASED EDUCATIONAL STANDARDS BENEFIT KANSAS AND LOCAL**
14 **ECONOMIES?**

15 **A:** An educated workforce is an integral component needed to attract and retain
16 industries that require skilled educated workers. However, higher utility rates will divert
17 operating dollars from teachers, support services, enhanced learning technology and
18 programs to improve teacher effectiveness.

19 **Q: DOES KANSAS COMPETE WITH OTHER STATES FOR THESE SKILLED**
20 **EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES?**

21 **A:** Yes. Other states are also improving educational outcomes, and the United States
22 faces rising international competition for high skill jobs. It is imperative that Kansas meet and
23 exceed this competition.

1 Kansas public schools, which educate over 90% of the school-aged population, must be able
2 to focus limited resources on educating students. Increasing "overhead", costs like utility
3 payments, especially at the levels Evergy is proposing for schools in this docket will
4 detrimentally affect Kansas students. .

5 **Q: PLEASE SUMMARIZE YOUR TESTIMONY.**

6 **A:** USD 259 provides an education which supports the state and local economic base,
7 and sets the direction for the prosperity of the state for decades to come. However, to achieve
8 the high level of education targets which each school district must meet, they must reduce
9 operating expenses at every opportunity to support competitive salaries for staff, buildings
10 and extra-curricular activities as necessary to achieve our educational objectives.

11 As I have stated, the Commission should not increase the electric rates charged to schools
12 and certainly not at the levels requested by Evergy at 25.29%. If the Commission finds cause
13 for an increase, the Commission should look at the facts and circumstances facing public
14 schools and align any increase to a normalized CPI factor of 1-3%, not the punishing rate
15 increase being proposed which forces schools to choose between meeting student needs
16 and keeping the lights on.

17 **Q: DOES THIS CONCLUDE YOUR DIRECT TESTIMONY?**

18 **A:** Yes, it does.


VERIFICATION

STATE OF KANSAS)

) ss:

COUNTY OF SEDGWICK)

Susan Willis, of lawful age, being first duly sworn upon my oath, state that I am the Chief Financial Officer of Wichita Public Schools; that I have read the above Prefiled Testimony; that I know the contents thereof and declares that the statements made therein are true and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief.

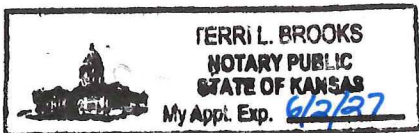


SUSAN WILLIS

SUBSCRIBED AND SWORN to before me this 15th day of August.



Notary Public



My Appointment Expires:

6-2-2027

CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I, the undersigned, hereby certify that a true and correct copy of the above and foregoing document was served by electronic service on this 29th day of August, 2023, to the following:

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Timothy E. McKee, #07135

Exhibit A: QUALIFICATIONS OF SUSAN WILLIS

Q: PLEASE STATE YOUR NAME AND BUSINESS ADDRESS.

A: Susan Willis. My business address is Wichita Public Schools, 903 S. Edgemoor, Wichita, KS 67218.

Q: PLEASE STATE YOUR OCCUPATION.

A: I am Chief Financial Officer of the Wichita Public Schools.

Q: PLEASE SUMMARIZE YOUR EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND AND WORK EXPERIENCE.

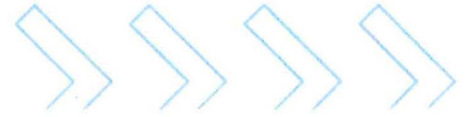
A: I began my tenure as the Chief Financial Officer of the Wichita Public Schools in August 2016. Prior to that date, I served as Payroll Director for the Wichita Public Schools from May 2008 through July 2016. I received a Bachelor of Science in Business, Accounting, from Emporia State University in 1989. I am also a Certified Public Accountant in the State of Kansas.

In my current position as Chief Financial Officer, I am responsible for overall budget and financial reporting of the District in compliance with governmental accounting standards and federal and state statutory requirements. I also prepare monthly budget reports for the Board of Education (BOE), and present to the BOE during the budget preparation process. I monitor revenues, expenditures and cash balances of the Wichita Public Schools, and oversee the preparation of the State Budget Forms and the Annual Comprehensive Financial Report. I am also responsible for analyzing a variety of financial information and making recommendations to maximize use of funds by the Wichita Public Schools.



Kansas Education Facts

January 2023



Students

Exhibit B

Kansas public schools enroll approximately 90% of the school-aged population of the state. About 5% of other children attend accredited private schools. The rest attend non-accredited private and home schools, which do not have to report enrollment.

Kansas public school districts enrolled over 484,000 students this year by headcount. In 2020, enrollment hit a record high of 492,000, but dropped due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the past two years, Kansas regained half of the enrollment numbers lost.

Over the past 25 years, the number of racial and ethnic minority students in Kansas has increased from less than 15% to nearly 40% in public schools and from less than 12 to 30% in private schools.

Since 2000, public school students eligible for free and reduced-price meals increased from less than one-third to nearly one-half; in private schools, from one-tenth to one-fifth.

Since 1994, public school students with disabilities doubled, from less than 7% to over 16%; in private schools, from 2% to 5%. Public schools provide special education services to private school students as well.

Teachers & Staff

Kansas public schools employ over 72,000 full-time equivalent (FTE) positions. This total does not include part-time positions. This number accounts for about 5% of total employment in Kansas, excluding farming-related careers.

The total 72,000 FTE positions in Kansas break down as follows.

Approximately 80%:

- 35,000 teachers
- 10,000 special education paraprofessionals and classroom aides
- 8,000 guidance, counseling, health, libraries, technology and other student and teaching support staff
- 4,000 school principals and building office staff

Approximately 20%:

- 5,400 operations and maintenance staff
- 2,100 transportations staff
- 3,000 food service workers
- 2,000 district administration, business support and all other jobs

Only 11 states have a lower student-to-teacher ratio than Kansas (13.6 to 1), which is below both the national average (15.9 to 1) and the regional average (14.7 to 1) of neighboring states.

Kansas has more teachers, paraprofessionals, teacher aides and other support staff per student than the U.S. average but falls slightly lower than average for all other staff positions.



Education Outcomes

In 2021, Kansas reached its highest educational attainment for persons aged 24 or older: almost 92% completed high school and nearly 35% achieved a four-year degree or more. In 1940, less than one-third had finished high school and less than 5% had completed a four-year degree.

In 2021, more 18 to 24-year-olds had completed a four-year college degree than ever (12.4%), but the percentage with any college, including one and two-year degrees or no credentials met, fell from 59.2 to 56.3%.

Kansas public schools' four-year high school graduation rate reached an all-time high of 88.2% in 2020, falling slightly to 88.1 in 2021 following the COVID-19 pandemic. Special education, low-income and English Language Learnings groups also reached new highs in 2020 before the impact of COVID.

The five-year average postsecondary effective rate for Kansas students is defined as the percentage of each senior class that graduated high school and either completed or remained enrolled in a college or technical program after two years. This number reached a high of 52% for 2020 but is predicted to fall due to the impacts of COVID-19.

Postsecondary degrees, including technical certificates, awarded by Kansas colleges to students under 24 rose from 20,000 to 28,000 in 2019, dropping back to 27,000 in 2021 after the pandemic. For students 19 and under, credentials earned rose from under 2,500 to over 6,000 before dropping to 5,700 in 2021.

Each step up in educational attainment, from completing high school to an advanced degree, increases average income and employment opportunities and reduces poverty rates.

School Funding

Kansas schools expect to spend over \$8 billion this year. When adjusted for inflation, that would be slightly higher than in 2009 but includes over \$400 million in temporary federal COVID-19 funding that expires in two years.

Regular operating budgets for Kansas school districts are estimated to be about \$5.1 billion this year – far below 2009 when adjusted for inflation.

Kansas schools spend 54% of funding on direct instruction; 21% on student and teacher support, food service and transportation; 21% on school construction, bond payments, and operations and maintenance; and less than 4% on general administration.

Kansas public schools spend approximately 10% below the U.S. average per student and about the same as the regional average of neighboring and Plains states.

Less than half of increased school funding since 2010 has gone to general operating budgets for regular teachers and programs. More has come from higher federal aid such as temporary COVID-19 aid and expanded student meal aid, higher KPERS payment dues to past underfunding (which schools cannot spend), and payments on school construction bonds approved by local voters.

Since 2010, special education students have increased by 25%, total special education expenditures by 44%, and the inflation rate by 34%, while state special education aid has increased by just 25%.