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Add choice, not just money, to education

BY JOHN R. LAPLANTE

The Kansas Supreme Court ruled last week that the Legislature has not fulfilled its constitutional requirement to finance what it had previously defined as a "suitable" education.

"It is clear increased funding will be required," said the court, but it did not specify how much.

One approach to the dilemma is to change the definition of a "suitable" education so that the state commits itself to purchasing a less expensive mix of services. Advocates of increased funding argue that this would "dumb down" schools. Gov. Kathleen Sebelius, in her State of the State address, opposed this approach and called it an "end run."

The ongoing controversy points out the trouble of relying on a government-driven system of defining education and delivering it through the political process.

Generally, Americans like to choose from a variety of providers when they buy important goods and services. But aside from paying full tuition at a private or parochial school, when one is available, there is only one provider in any given school district -- the tax-supported public school.

Our current system for delivering education depends on this one provider and a great deal of centralization. That was the approach used by planners in the old Soviet Union for all goods and services. They tried to decide the "right" mix of services, products and prices. It did not work very well -- producing shortages here, surpluses there and shoddy goods almost everywhere.

The American approach to funding education suffers its own flaws from centralization. The greatest flaw is that most of the benefits of competition are lost. The benefits of competition are captured best when the norm is voluntary interaction among buyers and sellers, not court rulings or legislative compromises.

The decision to determine the budget by using the current costs of a noncompetitive system relies on an imperfect set of calculations. Without competition in place, we are unlikely to get the cost-effective services that we all want.

If the Legislature decides to increase funding in response to the court, it has two choices. One is to simply add more money to the current, top-down system that tries to satisfy everyone through the political process.

More promising approaches direct money to students, not schools; increase competition; and let families personalize the education their children receive.

A voucher or refundable tax credit given to low-income families, for example, could be spent on tutoring, supplemental materials or even tuition at a private school. Not only would this approach direct spending to the desired students, it would also introduce a greater role for competition.

What is suitable for one child or family is not necessarily suitable for all.

Some students will benefit from direct instruction, while others will flourish in a more open-ended approach. Some will succeed with a business and career-oriented education, while others would do well to pursue the liberal arts. The needs of people in a rural community may differ from the needs of those in an urban one. A top-down system will not accommodate these differences very well.

The purpose of raising taxes for education is to make sure that children learn. It is not primarily to create one kind of school system.

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