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Be smart when spending on education

BY JOHN R. LAPLANTE

When it comes to public issues that draw attention in Kansas, few can top K-12 education.

The Wichita Eagle, for example, asked candidates for state office, "Would you change how public schools are funded?" and "Would you support a tax increase for public schools?" Both questions are relevant in light of the school finance case that will soon be argued before the Kansas Supreme Court, which will decide whether the state formula for distributing \$2.7 billion in school aid is constitutional.

The ongoing interest in education is certainly appropriate. A well-educated citizenry promotes democratic values of self-governance, and education promotes skills essential for individual and community success in an ever-changing economy.

Before the Legislature and general public wrestle with the specifics of funding formulas or per-pupil spending amounts, it is useful and important to remember three principles:

Education has a price. It is not literally priceless. Money spent on education is money that cannot be spent on roads, health care or any number of other public or private wants or needs.

As important as education is, we would not dismantle fire departments, police departments or water treatment facilities to spend every last available dollar on education. So when one candidate for the Kansas Senate said, "I would stop at nothing to get more for schools," he can be forgiven for using a bit of hyperbole.

Increased spending on education does not guarantee better student achievement. This sounds odd, but that is what the evidence suggests.

Nationally, spending increased 70 percent between 1980 and 2000, even after inflation. Even so, test scores stayed flat. According to the Kansas Legislative Research Department, per-pupil spending in Kansas increased more than \$2,900 between the 1993-94 and 2002-03 school years. That's a 49 percent increase. Even after inflation, per-pupil spending has gone up 19 percent. Still, 42 percent of students demonstrated only "partial mastery" on national tests.

Comparisons with other states can be instructive. Florida and the District of Columbia have achieved similar percentage gains in reading scores since 1997. D.C. spending increased 46 percent between 1997 and 2002. Florida increased its spending by a mere 3.5 percent, and has stressed choice and accountability.

The goal of education funding is to make sure that children learn. Education funding is not primarily about building management, teacher compensation, class size, funding formulas for schools, or even schools themselves. Schools are a means toward education.

Smart thinking about education requires looking at results, not intentions. Money is useful, but only if we spend it wisely.

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