

Liberty Opinion: 05 May 2009

**Nothing ruins education faster than loose money and teachers' unions. In fact, Kansas could quadruple its spending per student - and all the state would have to show for it, says John LaPlante, is a vastly more expensive failure, like the one in the nation's capital.**

---



---

## What the D.C. schools can teach Kansans

“Equal treatment under the law” is a fundamental feature of our political culture. But on the subject of educational opportunity, some children have more equality than others — and unfair laws bear much of the responsibility.

That fact is being played out in our nation’s capital in a story that provides a good lesson for Kansas.

In 2004, Congress enacted the D.C. Scholarship Opportunity Program, which gives families in the District of Columbia \$7,500 to use for tuition and fees at participating private schools. That’s a boon for poor families seeking a better life for their children.

D.C. public schools are abysmal, with fewer than 15 percent of students testing at grade level and only 58 percent graduating from high school.

Participating parents have been predictably happy with the scholarship program, and researchers have recently concluded that it boosts children’s reading scores.

This sounds like a successful program, but Congress and the DC political establishment are conspiring to kill it. Why?

Leaders of national teacher unions are calling in their chits, demanding results from the politicians they helped put in office. As a result, students will be forced to return to unsafe and poorly performing schools.

The Washington Post noted the irony: 38 percent of members of Congress, who will take away the best hope that 1,700 students have for a good education, send their own children to private schools.

U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan rode into town with a reputation as a reformer. D.C. schools aren't good enough for his children, either, even though, in his words, they have "more money than God." (The Cato Institute's Andrew J. Coulson calculates that the schools spend \$26,555 per student each year.)

Sidwell Friends is a private school in Washington, D.C. Among its students are a brother and sister, James and Sarah Parker. Normally, they would attend a school where less than half the students are proficient in reading and math, and metal detectors and security guards attempt to keep the peace. Thanks to the scholarship program, they don't have to.

But they may be forced to return because Congress has pulled the plug on their scholarships.

Two sisters, Sasha and Malia, also attend Sidwell. Unlike James and Sarah, they don't have to fear going back to a dangerous, poorly performing school. Why? Their father is the president of the United States, a man who can afford the private tuition and could also probably save the D.C. program — and along with it, the educational future of James and Sarah Parker.

Unfair? That's politics for you.

Some children are trapped in poorly performing public schools. It's time to help those families who can't afford a private school, or to move elsewhere.

Though Kansans can't do much about the tragedy facing the Parker children, they can promote fairness at home. Some public schools are doing a good job, but some children are trapped in poorly performing schools.

It's time to help those families who can't afford a private school, or to move elsewhere.

State government pays 57 percent of the school districts' total expenses. That is more than \$7,000 per student, a sum that would pay for tuition at most of the private schools I've surveyed.

Of course, government doesn't have any money of its own; it only redistributes what it takes from taxpayers. Now it takes money and gives it to districts. It should give that money to students, as scholarships. Doing so would ensure that all children, not just those from financially well-off families, could choose whatever school is most suitable for them.

---

John R. LaPlante is an Education Policy fellow with the Kansas-based Flint Hills Center for Public Policy. For more, go to [www.flinthills.org](http://www.flinthills.org).

The Week in Review

cg n to add currency