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Say it isn't so! Examining Education Myths

By John LaPlante

Education is a significant part of the public budget, with one out of every two dollars in the general fund being spent on K-12 schools. Given the weight Kansans give to schools, it's important to make sure that we think clearly about education.

A new book by Dr. Jay P. Greene, called *Education Myths*, provides plenty of things to think about. Greene, who is the head of the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas, has been cited by the *New York Times* as a key figure in the debate over high school graduation rates.

Each of the 18 chapters in the book addresses a different myth. Two of the most powerful involve money. One says that schools need more of it, and the other says that one way we need to increase spending is to hire more teachers to make classes smaller.

It is easy to believe these and other myths that Greene discusses, and refutes in his book. Each one stems from sincere motives and personal knowledge, and each carries an air of plausibility. Yet a public policy that accepts each myth uncritically is headed for disappointment. Wasted money is bad enough, but acting on these myths also means that we lose opportunities for students and indeed for everyone in our society.

Not Enough Money?

Do schools need more money? That's the belief of the consulting firm Augenblick & Myers, the Kansas Supreme Court, Governor Sebelius, and a bipartisan majority of the Kansas legislature. The person who attempts to refute the argument that "schools perform poorly because they need more money" may be greeted with dumbfounded disbelief. Yet this is the subject of the first chapter in *Education Myths*.

Greene takes on the received wisdom of the *New York Times*, the National Education Association, and thousands of bumper stickers that proclaim "It will be a great day when our schools get all the money they need and the Air Force has to hold a bake sale to buy a bomber." But the belief that schools are inadequately funded is, in Greene's words, "simultaneously the most widely held idea about education in America and the one that is most directly at odds with the available evidence."

How can this be? Consider the historical record. In inflation-adjusted dollars, the U.S. spent just over \$1,214 per pupil in 1945. That amount nearly doubled to \$2,345 by the mid-50s. It nearly doubled again by 1972, to \$4,479, and then again to \$8,745 by 2002. Since the end of World War II, per-pupil spending, adjusted for inflation, has increased seven-fold.

If money is the key, we should have entered educational paradise by now. Instead,

improvements in national test scores have been trivial in comparison with increases in spending. Further, says Greene, most academic studies on the subject find no evidence that more spending brings better results.

But isn't educating children more difficult now than it used to be, you might think. You'll have to read the book to see how Greene answers the question, but consider this: if increased funding is the answer, why haven't we seen more improvements? At what point is more money ineffective?

Are smaller classes the answer?

Republican and Democratic politicians alike tout the benefits of smaller classes. The argument is plausible. After all, the fewer students in a classroom, the more attention that a teacher can give to each student. But is class size reduction an easy winner to improve student performance?

Once again, the received wisdom falls short of the evidence. The most famous research experiment used to justify class size reduction, the STAR project, had some important flaws that put its findings into question. For example, there was no baseline measurement of students who were involved in the study. Without a baseline, a rigorous analysis of just how much benefit (if any) was achieved is impossible. Further, the cost of replicating the STAR conditions would be significant, requiring a permanent increase of 28 percent. That's assuming that the findings were valid.

To be sure, some officials in teacher unions will dismiss Greene's book as filled with half-truths and distortions. That's their prerogative. After all, Greene does offer suggestions that won't sit well with a union-led model of schooling. But taking comfort in things we would like to believe won't cut it any more. The productivity revolution that we have seen throughout the economy must come to education. That won't come without enhanced competition and choice.

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