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Education is rife with politics-inevitably

By John LaPlante

With the legislative session now over, it's a good time to revisit the long-standing complaint that politics gets in the way of education. Last year, one assistant superintendent said that he hoped that legislators "don't let politics as usual come into play and that they do what is right for kids."

But can we be surprised when decisions about education, especially decisions about school finances, are shaped by political compromises?

Whenever governments spend money for any purpose, political questions arise. How much do we spend? Do we allocate the money by population, income level, or something else? Should government employees run a program, or should we give grants to non-profit organizations? Do we send checks to individual citizens?

The answers that people give to these questions are shaped in numerous ways. These include economic interests, views of what is morally desirable, experiences, and ideas about what works. Given varied and often competing perspectives, it is not surprising that political debates can be long and heated.

When it comes to education, there are two major types of political debates. The ones involving curriculum-evolution, sexuality, and so forth-draw the most attention.

But another key area of debate concerns money. A lawsuit against the state of Kansas, filed by school districts unhappy with the amount and distribution of state funding, has roiled Kansas politics and courts for years.

The state gives each public school district a base amount of money for each full-time student. By law, the state gives an extra amount (a "weighting") for students who meet certain criteria.

State aid to a district is based on many factors, such as the number of poor students and non-English speaking students, the land area of the district, and so forth. How important should each factor be? Should low-income students bring more money to a district than handicapped students? How should sparsely populated but sprawling districts be treated? Consulting firms, judges, and other experts can give their advice, but when taxpayer money is spent, answering these questions is by nature a political exercise.

Who makes the decisions about school funding? The governor and the Legislature play important roles. Both are elected to office. So are local school board members, who, like legislators and governors, oversee a unit of government.

So then, people who stand for election make the decisions about how much money to collect from citizens, how to spend it, and how to run government-owned assets. Politics is inevitable, even if the goal is to educate children.

I have left out three other important parties. The first is the state board of education. It also is composed of people who stand for election and who make their views known; that is, they are politicians. A second

is the KNEA, the teachers union. It certainly recognizes the importance of politics. With professional lobbyists, grassroots activists, and members whose livelihoods depend on the outcome of political decisions, the KNEA is a political actor in its own right.

The third party is the court system, especially the Kansas Supreme Court. Several opinions from the courts suggest that the messy business of politics can and should be eliminated from education. These officials, who are appointed to office by politicians, retain office through public elections. Some have shown a strong interest in making decisions about how spending on education should be allocated.

In short, the fingerprints of politics are all over education. Can politics be removed from the picture? Not if we collect and distribute taxpayer dollars to fund education. But we can lessen its role by adopting a consumer-driven approach that uses vouchers, tax credits, and other measures. In that environment, decisions about education will be shaped not only by politicians, but by families, one at a time.

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