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Opinion

By John LaPlante

In "Merge: Consolidate districts" (Aug. 7 Opinion), The Eagle editorial board noted that "five years ago, Kansas had 304 school districts. Now it has 296."

As the Flint Hills Center for Public Policy suggested in a policy paper last year, the gains from district consolidation are illusory.

According to numbers collected by the Kansas State Department of Education, eliminating all districts with fewer than 200 students (10 percent of all districts) would eliminate only 2 percent of state aid spending.

Eliminating all districts with fewer than 430 students (40 percent of all districts) would reduce state aid by only 10 percent. Consolidation would save even less. The record in other states suggests that consolidation of larger districts might actually increase costs as bureaucracies grow.

Instead of tweaking district boundaries, lawmakers ought to consider the implications of "the 100 percent solution," a proposal from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. It gives students a backpack of funds that they can take to any public school, including charter schools. It's not perfect, but its student-focused, entrepreneurial approach would be better than the status quo.

It's time to stop funding school districts and start funding students.

JOHN R. LaPLANTE
Flint Hills Center for Public Policy
Wichita