



Opinion

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By John LaPlante

Are you getting more from your public schools?

With a new school year underway in Kansas, it's a perfect time to ask a question: has the public been getting its money's worth from public schools?

In late August, the Flint Hills Center for Public Policy released a report that offered some answers. "K-12 Spending and Performance in Kansas" brings together information from the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) on school spending and performance for the school years 1993-1994 to 2004-2005. The findings may surprise you.

Let's start with the number of students, since they are the reason we have schools in the first place. During the 2004-2005 school year, enrollment was at 441,867 students, just barely 1 percent more than the comparable number in 1993.

In the same span of time, many companies, including perhaps your employer or your business, have found ways to serve more customers while still shaving costs. Have schools done the same?

Public school spending went from \$2.6 billion in 1993 to \$4.3 billion in 2005, up 64 percent. Even after inflation is taken into account, schools spent 24 percent more per student at the end of the time.

The largest single funder of school budgets is the state government. Spending from state sources increased from \$1.5 billion to \$2.4 billion, up 61 percent.

Spending from local funds went from \$1 billion to \$1.5 billion, up 50 percent.

Federally financed spending on Kansas's schools increased from \$137.3 million to \$398.7 million, up 190 percent.

What happens to all that money? Do higher levels of spending translate into better school performance? The Flint Hills Center used the Comparative Performance & Fiscal System, a tool recently developed by the KSDE, to answer that question. It found no discernable relationship between a district's level of spending and its performance on state tests.

Another important measure of school performance is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), often called "The nation's report card." It tells us the percentage of students who score in each of four achievement levels, including proficient (grade level) and advanced.

How did Kansas do on this test? Not too well, if you look at math and reading scores for the fourth and eighth grades in 2005.

In math, only half of the fourth-grade students scored proficient or better. Only one in three students in the eighth grade scored proficient or better.

For reading, only one in three students managed to score proficient or better. This was true for both grade levels.

Unfortunately, we can't compare the NAEP scores of 2005 with those of 1993, because Kansas did not participate in the NAEP until the late 1990s.

We can say that since Kansas first took the national reading tests in 1998, school performance in reading has remained the same, with roughly one in three students at either grade level scoring proficient or better.

The situation is only slightly more favorable in math. Since 2000, the first year Kansas participated in the mathematics test, its scores have improved for fourth grade. They went from 29 percent proficient to 47 percent. But they have stayed the same for the eighth grade, at only 34 percent.

Given this performance, concerned citizens are justified in asking whether they should be satisfied with the results of their 64 percent increase in spending. Adjusting the state funding formula or increasing state aid may or may not satisfy either the rural versus urban dispute or equity concerns. For now, it has satisfied the Kansas Supreme Court. Still, fewer than half of all students are proficient on key measures.

Kansans have made a significant investment in education. It is reasonable to expect a return on that investment and, based on the current record, to look with skepticism on calls for increased spending as the answer to the challenges facing education in Kansas. Given the premium in today's world on a skilled and educated workforce, we must ask what reforms, possibly including those not being using today, will best serve the needs of students.

John R. LaPlante is an education policy fellow with the Kansas-based Flint Hills Center for Public Policy. To learn more about the Flint Hills Center and author, please visit www.flinthills.org. A bio on Mr. LaPlante can be found at <http://www.flinthills.org/content/view/24/39/>.

The Flint Hills Center for Public Policy is an independent voice for sound public policy in Kansas. As a non-profit, nonpartisan think tank, the Center provides critical information about policy options to legislators and citizens. For more information, please visit our web site at www.flinthills.org or contact us at inquiries@flinthills.org or (316) 634-0218.