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## **It's Time to Start Asking Hard Questions**

*By John R. LaPlante*

If you're a parent, you know that children sometimes require tough love. Maybe it's time we apply some of that tough love to the institutions to which we entrust our children every school day.

Even if you believe there are problems with education generally, it's easy to think that the school your own child attends is an outstanding one. Any other reality is simply too depressing to consider.

Civic pride can lull us into complacency, too. The schools are not merely another service run by government. They are often networks of parents who know each other as fellow parishioners, scout leaders, or local merchants. In addition, school sports bring people together behind one purpose.

The news media, meanwhile, want to be part of the community as well. So they face incentives to not dig too deeply into possible shortcomings of schools.

It's no wonder, then, that advocating more school funding is a badge of honor. Favoring accountability, whether it's in the form of increased scrutiny or making it easy for taxpayer funding to follow a child to another school, is not so noble. Questioning the wisdom of increased funding to an unreformed system carries the risk of being labeled "anti-education."

### **UNPLEASANT SURPRISES**

When the results of state assessments were released earlier this year, news headline read "Changes start to pay off," "Schools Making the Grade," "Making Progress," and "Student Achievement Increases."

Read the details, however, and you may find an unpleasant surprise.

According to the official state report card, two out of every five high school students in Kansas cannot perform at grade level in math. One out of five cannot read at grade level. If this defines "making the grade," what does failure look like?

The problems aren't just in high school. In reading, one in five students in grade 3 is not up to speed. The same is true for students in grades 6 and 11. Is this "making the grade?"

In math, the situation is worse. Two in ten students can't work as expected in grade 3. By high school, it's four out of ten.

Students from poor families have even more urgent reasons to learn. But in high school, half of

them cannot do math at grade level, and over three in ten cannot read at grade level.

Even if you live in a district that has an outstanding reputation, go to the web site of the Kansas State Department of Education. Look at the record of your district. Don't forget those other districts, either. After all, you're subsidizing schools elsewhere, through your state taxes. Remember, too, that the plight of a poorly educated population in the next county or town will, like a rock thrown into a pond, have ripple effects.

If one out of every five products sold by a company was harmful or defective, you would know about it. Newspapers would not be writing headlines about "making progress." They would call for change. Significant change. Now.

Contrast this with what happens with schools. A record of inadequate performance brings out two responses. One is a call for more money.

Another response is to make excuses. "Making progress," remember? The president of one PTA said "Everybody's doing the best that they can." Perhaps, though with schools loaded with work rules that protect incompetence and fail to reward excellence, it's hard to know for sure.

We can see in the economy, and know from personal experience, that competition among organizations is a more powerful force for improvement than giving out more money and counting on good intentions. That's why the Flint Hills Center for Public Policy, among others, has called for vouchers, tax credits, charter schools, and other measures that will make schools compete for students.

Too often, the motives of the people who ask the tough questions about schools are themselves questioned. Aren't they merely "opponents of public education?"

On the other hand, lobbyists for increased school funding include school officials and others who are paid by the taxpayers. They far outnumber lobbyists critical of education costs and current performance.

It's time to reject the complacency, and the diversions, and ask some hard questions about schools.

The alternatives are as unsatisfactory as the results of childrearing without discipline.

Some tough love, as it turns out, would benefit us all.

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