

Posted on Fri, Sep. 01, 2006

Is school investment paying off?

BY JOHN R. LAPLANTE

A new school year is upon us, so it's time to ask a question: Is the public getting its money's worth from public schools?

"K-12 Spending and Performance in Kansas," a policy paper released by the Flint Hills Center for Public Policy, brings together information from the Kansas State Department of Education on student enrollment and school spending. The findings may surprise you.

Let's start with student enrollment, which should be key to any school budget. The total expenditure report, a department document, currently includes the school years from 1993-94 to 2004-05. During that time, full-time equivalency enrollment increased just more than 1 percent, to 441,867 students.

During that same time, many companies, including perhaps your employer or your business, have had to expand their customer base while having fewer resources. On the other hand, what has happened to school funding?

Federally financed spending on Kansas schools nearly tripled, increasing from \$137.3 million in 1993-94 to \$398.7 million for 2004-05.

Spending out of local funds increased by 50 percent, going from \$1 billion to \$1.5 billion.

Spending from state sources, which has been the center of many political debates in Kansas over the past few years, increased 61 percent.

Even after inflation, spending on schools from all sources increased by 25 percent. That's a healthy amount.

What happens to that money? Do higher levels of spending translate into better school performance?

Another report from the State Department of Education, the Comparative Performance and Fiscal System, ought to make us wonder. The Flint Hills Center used the report to analyze the relationship between district spending and district performance on achievement tests. It found no discernible relationship.

Concerned citizens should ask whether they are satisfied with the results of their 61 percent increase in spending.

Adjusting the state funding formula by adding or altering dedicated funding streams or spending categories may or may not satisfy 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, and roughly 1 in 4 who reach high school age do not finish in four years.

Kansans have made a significant investment in education. Given the premium in today's world on a skilled and educated work force, we must ask what reforms, possibly including those not being used today, will best serve the needs of students.

John R. LaPlante is an education policy fellow with the Flint Hills Center for Public Policy in Wichita.