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More School Spending Isn't Improving Results

By John R. LaPlante

Can we buy better schools? That's the promise of many school board members, union officials and an array of consultants. Yet a new study of Kansas schools suggests otherwise.

Florence Neymotin, an assistant professor of economics at Kansas State University, wrote a report on the relationship between school funding and student achievement in Kansas public schools. It asks the question of whether increased spending on education, especially in poorly performing districts, has made a difference in student performance.

One measure of a district's performance is how many of its students graduate. Another is how many of its students do well on standardized tests. Neymotin looked at the relationship between each of these measures and increases in district spending across the state, using a tool known as regression analysis.

You can look at student performance either as a snapshot (analyzing results at a fixed time) or as a movie (looking at changes over time). The report does both. It took 18 different snapshots of student performance, using state tests in two subjects (mathematics and reading) in three different years (2004, 2005, and 2006), for three different grade levels (one each for elementary, middle, and high school).

Of the 18 different snapshots, increased spending led to increased performance only twice. In the 16 other times, increased spending had no detectable effect on student performance.

The report also took nine different snapshots of student performance on science and social studies tests, from 2003 and 2005. The results were even worse than they were for mathematics and science: There wasn't a single snapshot in which increased funding led to better performance.

So of 27 snapshots of increased school spending, only two showed evidence of improved performance on state tests.

The report also analyzed changes in scores over time on mathematics and reading. In none of the nine "movies" did the author find a significant improvement coming from spending increases.

As for graduation rates, Neymotin's report offered slightly better news, finding that graduation rates in 2005 were indeed improved as a result of more spending.

There are many different factors that can affect a district's performance, such as how many parents attended college. In her report, Neymotin was careful to, as she put it, "find school districts that look similar in all respects except for their amount of school funding and student outcomes."

Perhaps it's time, as the Flint Hills Center for Public Policy has been suggesting for a while, to try structural changes such as school vouchers or an invigorated charter school sector. What we've been trying isn't paying off.

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