

How about a little competition?

Kansas schools would do well to adopt the management that competitive business uses

Currently there are two major approaches to determine how much Kansas taxpayers ought to pay for public schooling. Perhaps it's time for a third.

One approach is to ask superintendents, "How much money do you need?" Who wouldn't answer "more?" It's part of the human condition to want more. A second approach is to decide what schools are already successful, then ask, "What does it cost you do to this?" Roughly speaking, these were the approaches used by Augenblick & Myers, the consulting firm whose report was relied on by the Kansas Legislature and the Kansas Supreme Court in making their decisions.

On the other hand, what if Kansas education needs something besides more money? What if our estimates of how much education costs are incorrect, not because of

faulty math or human error, but because we do not know what the public schools would do when faced with the competition that American businesses face every day?

Any given school can report its current costs of doing business. There is a fund for teacher compensation, another for supplies, still another for administrators and so forth. But are these the "right" costs? Is the money being distributed among the funds in the right proportion? Are school managers getting the best results for the money they have on hand? The best way to answer those questions is to use the same logic that we as a society use in deciding the "right" amount as a society to spend on food, clothing, housing and many other goods and services: competition.



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Under widespread competition, we have many buyers, many sellers, and the best framework for knowing the "right" price of a service. When companies face increased competition, they find ways to both reduce costs and increase quality. As Americans are exposed to increased competition from other countries, their training ground for work — education — must be subject to the same competitive forces.

Roughly 90 percent of Kansas students are enrolled in traditional public schools that operate in a noncompetitive market: the child's school is determined by the family address. We need to provide more competition, through tax credits, vouchers and charter schools. To prepare children for life in today's economy, and to determine the "right" amount of money to spend on schools, American education needs to embrace competition.

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