



EDUCATION DEBATE: MORE THAN SEX AND EVOLUTION

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Whenever I tell someone that I write about education, the hot-button topics usually come up. What do I think about evolution and intelligent design? Should sex education be opt-in or opt-out? Should it promote abstinence only, or discuss contraception as well?

I understand why people talk about these matters; they consider them to be vital to the future of Kansas.

It is far too easy to go from differences of opinion to caricatures that make dialogue difficult. One camp says that the teaching of evolution is a work of the godless. Another says that intelligent design is a fraud propagated by intolerant bigots.

One camp says that sex ed promotes immorality and violates parental rights. Another camp says that an abstinence-only approach is unrealistic and dangerous.

Is it any wonder that the language can get overheated?

But there is an extra, overlooked danger in the sex-and-evolution debate. It's that our discussions about education don't go very far beyond these issues. That's too bad, for there are still other questions facing Kansans. These questions have nothing to do with evolution or sex. They are, I suggest, even more important.

What are those questions? How do we reduce the rate of high-school dropouts, for one. One in four students does not graduate from high school on time. Most of those children never earn a diploma. With meager skills and incomplete knowledge, today's dropout is tomorrow's low-wage worker, or worse, prison inmate.

Another question is whether high school graduates have actually learned all that they should. As measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, two in three students cannot read at grade level in both middle school and high school. Student performance in math is weak as well.

The economic implications of an inadequate education are staggering. A country's most important resource is not its oil fields or wheat fields. The most important resource is its people. Citizens with knowledge and imagination can transform a raw material such as petroleum into a useful product that powers our economy. In a similar way, we can maximize agricultural output only with the application of human skill and knowledge.

Today, our students are falling behind children in other countries. American students who take the same math and science tests as those elsewhere routinely bring up the rear. Our current economic dominance and prosperity cannot be taken for granted. How can we maximize student achievement? That's one serious question the evolution and sex debate overshadows.

Another question is how to make sure that we spend education dollars wisely. Why has spending gone up so much more than student achievement? There are many demands on tax dollars, and we cannot afford ineffective spending anywhere in the budget, education included.

What about stagnant or even declining population across Kansas? Over half of the counties had fewer residents in 2000 than they did in 1900. School consolidation has been a common practice, but its usefulness is coming to an end. What's next?

How should we adjust to the growing number of students who do not speak English as their native language? Or who need special education services?

I could go on and on, but I hope you see the point. The world is changing, and the pace of change is increasing. How can we make sure that the next generation is equipped to deal with this reality? We're doing some things right, and many things not well enough.

One thing we should do is make more use of competition and choice. Others will disagree. Regardless, even talking about why and where choice in education works or does not work would be a step in the right direction. We need to start thinking beyond the headlines and instead begin to address the most vital questions facing the future of education in Kansas.

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