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Tutoring options: A good feature of No Child Left Behind

By John R. LaPlante

Vested interests threaten to undermine the educational assistance that Kansas children are entitled to under law. This is because a relatively unnoticed provision of the No Child Left Behind act is now under attack by many people, from Hillary Clinton to school leaders in Kansas.

What assistance is under attack? Something as old as education itself: tutoring.

Under No Child Left Behind, poor students from failing schools can receive extra tutoring at no cost to their parents. Each state must identify tutoring services, using academic and fiscal standards. These services can include public schools, for-profit or non-profit organizations, colleges, or private schools. In turn, the affected school districts are supposed to provide parents with a list of approved services.

Tutoring can take place in a variety of locations, including schools, libraries, and private homes. Scheduling is flexible; tutoring sessions can be held before school, after school, on weekends, and during the summer. Some tutoring sessions even offer one-on-one guidance. Talk about a low student-teacher ratio!

The students who are eligible for tutoring help under No Child Left Behind receive an evaluation of what they need, tutoring free of charge, additional time to learn, a customized plan, and plenty of attention. What's not to like?

The answer to that question may depend on who you are. Are you the parent of a child who needs tutoring? Or are you someone who is rigidly tied to the same old way of doing business?

The parents of the children receiving the tutoring have the most at stake. One mother told a Kansas newspaper that as a result of tutoring, "(my son) comes home and he's more eager to do homework. He's not struggling with comprehension of math."

Senator Clinton, by contrast, told members of a New Hampshire teachers union that the tutoring program "is Halliburton all over again," filled with cronyism, incompetence, and patronage.

According to a recent article in *Education Week*, many schools are resisting the law's requirements. Companies that try to participate in the tutoring program, the newspaper tells us, have "encountered such obstacles as district reluctance to permit companies to provide tutoring on school grounds, lack of communication between districts and parents about the tutoring

programs, and what the companies see as bureaucratic red tape.”

What’s going on? Why are schools standing in the way of students getting extra help? One maxim of political reporters is “follow the money.” In this case, it’s sound advice, for it suggests one explanation for the resistance. When an eligible child signs up for tutoring, a portion of the money that the federal government sets aside for poor students goes to the tutoring service.

But there’s more than money at stake. There’s also the matter of control. The tutoring requirement represents a dramatic shift of power from school administrators to parents. Prior to No Child Left Behind, the father who was unhappy with his son’s school had little recourse. He could beg school officials for extra help. Sometimes he got what he was asking for. Sometimes he did not, and his child would be stuck with the district.

The inflexible situation is dramatically different with the tutoring services offered under No Child Left Behind. That same father can take a list of tutoring services, talk with everyone on the list, ask hard questions, and chose the organization that will supplement his son’s school day. He can take comfort in knowing that if for some reason there’s a mismatch, he can hire a different tutoring service.

Tutoring, which has always been available to middle class and wealthy families, is now available to the poorest of families.

For fair-minded Kansans, should that be a problem?

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