

Wichita Independent Business Association Newsletter

January 2005

New Reports Enhance School Accountability

by John R. LaPlante

Even though K-12 education accounts for more than half of the Kansas state budget, it can be difficult for ordinary citizens to understand whether public money is being spent well. Thanks to some new online tools, that's going to change.

School Evaluation Services (SES), operated by the Standard and Poor's, will conduct a develop performance benchmarks and identify best practices of Kansas schools. Four to six school districts may also be examined, with the final report being delivered sometime in the first half of 2005. The Kansas City-based Kauffman Foundation is granting approximately \$300,000 for the initial evaluation.

This is good news. Solid, easy-to-follow ways of evaluating schools and school districts are essential to sound governance, and educational success.

For too long, it's been hard for citizens to evaluate the claims and counterclaims surrounding school finance. This is in stark contrast with less important goods and services that they buy every day. Accountants and auditors provide investors and creditors with a view of a company's strengths and weaknesses. Consumer-oriented magazines and web sites report on tests on everything from automobile tires to water purifiers.

But data about school performance has been lost in a pile of statistics about inputs, such as teacher salaries, student-teacher ratios, and overall funding levels. If the past performance of the Standard and Poor's service is any indication, Kansans will learn a lot from the report.

The move to bring in outside evaluators is a timely one. The Kansas Supreme Court may give its ruling on a controversial school funding case any day now, and many observers expect the court to call for a large increase in state funding for schools.

Earlier this year, Governor Sebelius proposed increasing spending on K-12 schooling by \$300 million, only to be rebuffed by the legislature. So expect school funding to loom large as a topic in next year's legislative session.

LOOK TO THE DATA

SES, which has already performed comprehensive reviews of every public school and district in Michigan and Pennsylvania, looks at student results, spending, and return on investment. It also considers the financial and demographic environment of schools, enabling an apples-to-apples comparison of effectiveness. By placing their findings on line in an easy-to-follow format, SES opens up the world of school evaluation to anyone with a computer and a modem