

Online service gives data on education

Should taxpayers be devoting more money to schools? Some people say yes, others say not yet. But here's something that should find wide agreement: let's look at what we are spending right now.

The latest tool for understanding the size and scope of school funding comes from the Kansas Department of Education. It has put together an interactive service that gives citizens and lawmakers alike powerful tools for examining school spending and performance.

With education a hot topic these days, this tool could not have come at a better time. Most citizens do not know how much their local district spends, or how well the schools actually perform.

The new service, with the unfortunately cumbersome name of "Kansas Education Performance & Fiscal System" can be found at the department's web site. (The web address is <http://online.ksde.org/cpfs/>).

Let's take a tour of the online system.

The first step is to select one, several, or all of the unified school districts in Kansas. You can also select only the districts in a given county. You can further limit your search by other factors, such as size of enrollment or the number of students who take part in free lunch pro-



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grams. So you might, for example, look for mid-sized districts with few free-lunch students.

Once you decide which districts you want to look at, you can retrieve 18 different pieces of data for those districts. The data fall into three types. One set of information includes various measures of attendance, and student demographics. A second set describes the effort put into schools, such as teacher salaries and money coming from the state. Finally, a third set of data measures the outcomes of schools. You can retrieve student proficiency scores for math, reading, and other subjects.

For example, I asked for all districts with an enrollment of 3,001 to 5,000 students. (It turns out that there are 15). I then asked to see the percentage of students who scored "proficient" or better on each of the standard tests. I also asked for the percentage of students who receive free or reduced-price lunches, a common definition of "at-risk" students, for those districts.

It's at this point that things get interesting. It is commonly assumed that poor students do worse than other students. (In fact, that's part of the ongoing debate over school finance.) In the school districts I selected, the free lunch population ranged from a low of 11 percent in Andover to a high of 61 percent in Liberal. And as it turns out, the proficiency results are better in Andover than in Liberal. This is consistent with the poverty-driven model.

But as the statisticians say, correlation does not prove causation. In other words, A and B may occur at the same time, but that doesn't tell us whether A causes B, B causes C, or whether both are caused by C. One popular "theory" of politics, for example, uses the results of the World Series to predict presidential elections!

Let's compare Liberal with Leavenworth, another district in the same size range. Both have high levels of poverty; 48 percent of students in Leavenworth get a free or discounted lunch.

The reading proficiency scores for the two districts are similar for grades 5, 8 and 11. But they don't have the same math scores. Leavenworth's proficiency rates are 81, 63, and 43 percent for grades 4, 7, and 10. In Liberal, the comparable numbers are only 65, 48, and 21 percent. Across the board,

students in Liberal do not do as well as those in Leavenworth. At the extreme case of the fourth grade math, they do only half as well. Perhaps Leavenworth has found a better way of teaching math. Or perhaps other factors are at work. The data prompts questions.

Did you notice, by the way, that the proficiency rates went down as we looked at higher grades? It's as if students stop learning as they get older. (Don't blame Liberal and Leavenworth alone; this holds true across the state). Why is that? Yet another question.

So there you have an all-too-short introduction to the Kansas Education Performance & Fiscal System. Parents, lawmakers, and interested citizens as a whole will find plenty to think about when they run the numbers.

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