

THE OLATHE NEWS

October 7, 2005

An open letter to the education commissioner

John R. LaPlante

Congratulations on being selected as the chief administrative officer of the Kansas State Department of Education. The rewards for you and all of Kansas will be great if you can move the state towards educational excellence and fiscal soundness. One way of doing that is to help us—the public and policy makers—understand the costs and performance of today's public schools.

How much money are we actually spending on this enterprise we call public education? How well are the schools performing? Knowing the answers to these questions will lead to better education policy.

HOW MUCH DO WE SPEND?

The amount of money we spend on education is too often obscured in details, or manipulated for political or institutional interests. Dollar amounts are obscured because the money comes through three levels of government, local, state, and federal, each with numerous funding programs. Statistical manipulation occurs when data on one source of funding is emphasized to the neglect of others.

Confusion and manipulation can also occur on the spending side. There are numerous spending categories, such as instructional services and support services of various kinds. Special interests may try to direct our attention to only one piece of the pie and exclude other data, such as the public's liability for teacher pensions, or the costs of constructing school buildings. Hiding the true fiscal responsibility of taxpayers does us no favor. Policy makers and the public need to know how much they are spending.

In the past few years, the public and policy makers have demanded transparent financial reporting from corporate America. The spending of taxpayer dollars should receive the same level of scrutiny, if not more.

HOW WELL ARE SCHOOLS DOING?

We also need better information about school performance. What percentage of students actually graduate? There are several ways of calculating that number; some are more accurate than others, and some simply make schools look better.

How many students are reading at grade level? Are the tests we use to determine student performance adequate? Do public officials describe test scores in a way that is both truthful and easy to understand? The largest number of Kansas students tested by the NAEP, a national comparison test, scored at the "basic" level. What does "basic" mean? Is that good enough? How well are schools performing? You are in a position to let us know.

Statewide information is good; local information is better. Many people think that education in general is in trouble, but that in their own district, everything is fine. Maybe it is; maybe it isn't. Are graduation rates satisfactory? Is a diploma evidence of an educated student? Are the standards high enough? Sound policy cannot be enacted without an honest evaluation of the situation. Take the performance information, put it into plain English, and made it widely available.

Review the official reports already published, and improve them.

COMPETITION CAN MOVE US BEYOND POLITICS

The true state of educational spending and performance is too often lost in political debates. That is no surprise, because education itself has become mired in politics. Politics usually takes over when government displaces markets and personal decisions.

In our approach to education, we have confused the goal of producing a knowledgeable population that knows how to acquire more knowledge with one particular way of schooling. Unfortunately, that way leaves out the benefits of competition.

Right now, citizens pay taxes so that the children at 123 Main Street, in Anytown, Kansas may receive an education. Who receives those taxpayer dollars in exchange for the responsibility to educate the children? One school district, and one school district alone, which faces almost no competition for the right to enroll those children. That's the law, and we are all worse off for it.

Competition in education can work. Competition in education does work. In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, public schools improved after they faced competition. Across the country, our colleges and universities lead the world. They compete with each other to attract students, who can use taxpayer-supplied money (financial aid) at any college. Perhaps there's a lesson in here for K-12 schools.

Kansans like to boast of their above-average schools. In today's world, above-average isn't good enough. Excellence in achievement as well as the wise use of taxpayer dollars requires a thorough understanding of what we are spending today on education, and how well the schools are performing. As the new commissioner, you can bring the necessary information to the debate.