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School's in Session, and the Laboratories of Democracy are Open

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One of the advantages that the U.S. has over many countries is that it is a federal republic, which gives states significant opportunities to innovate. It's no wonder that they have been called "the laboratories of democracy."

As students enter a new school year, Kansans can look to innovations recently enacted in the other 49 laboratories for ideas on how to further the education of the public.

Of all the states, Arizona may be the one most willing to try new approaches. Prior to this year, the state already had a tax credit program by which individuals can claim a tax credit for donations to school tuition organizations, or STOs. In turn, the STOs give scholarships to students seeking alternatives to their standard school district.

Thanks to a new law in Arizona, corporations as well as individuals can now receive tax credits for donations to scholarship funds. After resisting the idea, Gov. Janet Napolitano, a Democrat, allowed the credit to become law without her signature. She also allowed the establishment of a voucher program for children in foster care, and another one for students with disabilities.

In Pennsylvania, the state raised the limits on a law that allows businesses to receive tax credits for contributions to scholarship programs. Gov. Ed Rendell, a Democrat, gave his assent to the plan. His participation is yet another sign that support for alternative means of financing public education is no longer limited to Republicans.

In June, Rhode Island created a similar program, with the support of a Democratic-controlled Legislature and a Republican governor.

In 2005, Utah created the Carson Smith Special Needs Scholarship program, which allows students with autism to attend a private school. Thanks to changes in the rules made in back in March, state officials expect the number of participating students and schools to increase for the 2006-07 school year.

Ohio is known for its Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program. Because the program lets students take funds to religious schools, it faced many legal challenges. In 2002, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled it constitutional.

Under EdChoice, a program created in 2005 and expanded this year, schools are ranked by performance. Students who attend schools in the two lowest-performing categories can take

public funds to privately run schools. Unlike the Cleveland program, EdChoice is available statewide.

In Iowa, the Educational Opportunities Act was passed by a vote of 49-1 in the House and a 75-19 vote in the Senate. In June, Gov. Tom Vilsack, a Democrat, signed on to the measure, which establishes an individual tax credit for contributions to STOs. Both House and Senate are almost evenly split between the two major parties.

In Wisconsin, Milwaukee's voucher program has been so successful that the number of participating students was near its legal limit. Gov. Jim Doyle, a Democrat, signed legislation that increased the limit by 50 percent. Over 20,000 students will now be able to enjoy a different school of their choice.

Thanks in part to tax credits, voucher programs, charter schools, and interdistrict choice, students in many states are now more likely than ever to find schools that match them.

These initiatives have been embraced by politicians and families of a variety of political views, religious beliefs, and neighborhoods. Some appeal to low-income people, others, to a broader spectrum. Some are focused on specific cities; others are open to residents throughout a state.

But they have this in common: despite drawing opposition from the ranks of union officials, school boards, and others, they are expanding in scope and number. Parents in other states who are looking for a better match for their children's education are making headway. There's a lot that parents and lawmakers in Kansas can learn by watching their example.