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A Recent Court Decision Speaks Sense on Education

More Please

The bumper-sticker version of school finance theory holds that "It will be a great day when our schools get all the money they need and the Air Force has to hold a bake sale to buy a bomber." The National Education Association projects a more sophisticated version of that argument, when its web site laments "a lack of resources in schools and classrooms across the country." Politicians of both parties seem to agree when they boast about how much extra money they have allocated to schools.

In other words, "more money is important to education" is the accepted wisdom of our day. This fact makes a recent ruling of the Texas Supreme Court rather remarkable. The court struck down a statewide property tax, and along the way, offered some comments not often heard from judicial or legislative quarters.

Schools do need some money, and nobody would argue that a public school could operate today with a budget of \$100 per student. Teachers need to be paid, supplies must be purchased, and so forth. Beyond some minimum threshold, however, the question is whether more money can buy better results. The court's answer is "we can't say for sure."

There is no guarantee

The court said "While the end-product of public education is related to the resources available for its use, the relationship is neither simple nor direct; public education can and often does improve with greater resources, just as it struggles when resources are withheld, but more money does not guarantee better schools or more educated students."

Stop and consider that statement. It seems obvious, but as The Wall Street Journal noted in an editorial on the ruling, "to our knowledge, this is the first time anywhere in the country that the judiciary has flatly rejected" the argument "that more dollars equal better classroom performance."

With that out of the way, it's time to think not of how much more we can spend, but how to effectively spend what we have today. The Texas court suggested that simply adding money to the current way of doing business may not be a long-term method of getting better results. And they're right. Having a lot of money is useful. But if you're spending money in a less-than-optimal way, adding more money is an inefficient method of producing educated students.

Education has seen its fads and controversies over methods of teaching, school size, class size, and the distribution of money. But it may be time for a different kind of change.

The Texas high court said "There is substantial evidence, which again the district court credited, that the public education system has reached the point where continued improvement will not be possible absent significant change." While the court suggested that "increased funding, improved efficiencies, or better methods of education" may be what is required, it also hinted at a role for competition.

States already use competition in higher education, where students can take public funds to a number of colleges. But it has largely been left out of the mix of reforms for K-12 education in Texas, or Kansas.

They've tried changing the formulas for collecting taxes and distributing money. Over the years, they've encouraged the consolidation of thousands of districts into a few hundred.

They have also added money to K-12 education. As we at the Flint Hills Center for Public Policy noted back in March, per-pupil, inflation-adjusted spending in Kansas increased 22 percent from 1993 through 2004.

As Kansans respond to the ongoing controversy over school finance, they ought to consider the lessons of the Texas court. More money won't suffice. Perhaps it's time to expand competition from higher education to the K-12 level.