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The Education Commissioner and the Admiral

By John R. LaPlante

The recent resignation of Bob Corkins as education commissioner is an opportunity for us to think again about K-12 education. Corkins, who headed the Kansas State Department of Education for just over a year, was under intense scrutiny from the start. Press accounts of him invariably reminded us that he had never been a school teacher or administrator. It was as if his surname became “Corkins, who has no experience in education.” And of course, his past support for vouchers and calls for charter school enlargement were seized upon by many as proof of his being “anti-education.”

Was it wrong for the state board of education to hire someone without credentials as a school administrator? Not necessarily. Consider that just six weeks ago, the Los Angeles Unified School District hired David L. Brewer III to become its superintendent. He replaced Ray Romer, who had been governor of Colorado. What are Brewer’s qualifications? He is a retired Navy admiral.

Neither Brewer nor Romer fit the criteria of a traditional superintendent. Nor are they alone. Districts in Chicago, Philadelphia, San Diego, New Orleans, New York, and Washington, D.C., have also hired non-traditional leaders. These superintendents have been attorneys, bankers, military officers, and other professionals.

How have the new leaders worked out? As with traditional superintendents, some have done fine, and others have floundered. The executive directors of both the American Association of School Administrators and the National School Boards Association have said that non-traditional leaders who are willing to learn can do a good job as superintendent.

The editor of American School & University, a Kansas-based publication, agreed, saying “The qualities and skills that make a great leader in the private sector, such as management expertise, vision and strategic thinking, are no different than those that make an outstanding school superintendent or college president.”

Non-traditional leaders may actually have an advantage: They are more likely to spot inefficiencies that are obvious only to outsiders.

Anti-education?

While Corkins was attacked for having a non-traditional career path, his support for increasing competition among schools as a means to improve education was seized upon by some who

tagged him as “anti-education.”

What was the proof of his anti-education stance? He said that charter schools are a good idea, and that perhaps someone other than local school districts should be able to approve and oversee them. That is what a number of other states do, including Minnesota. Minnesota, which scores as well as Kansas on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, would be surprised to learn that it is “anti-education” for letting the state department of education, public universities, and non-profit organizations authorize a charter school.

What about vouchers? A few weeks ago, the father of the voucher idea, Milton Friedman, died at age 94. Friedman was not a school administrator, though he did have a long and distinguished career as a professor and economist, winning the Nobel Prize for economics.

Friedman said in 1956, and for many years after, that a stable democracy depends on an educated public. He also said that many forms of education carry “neighborhood effects,” meaning that when a child is educated, society as a whole benefits, not just the child. Citing these and other considerations, he concluded that government could require schooling and collect taxes to pay for it.

But while compulsory education and public financing could be justified, Friedman said that “it is more difficult to justify the actual administration of educational institutions by the government.” Writing not long after World War II, he proposed the GI Bill as an example of how K-12 education could work. Under the GI Bill, veterans could redeem a sum of money for education at a number of educational institutions, public and private. It led to a great expansion of college education. Today, this idea has been applied to K-12 education on a small scale in several states.

In many cases across the country, the hiring of non-traditional leaders and use of charter schools, vouchers and tax credits have been motivated by desperation. Most Kansans don’t share that sentiment about their local school district. But that doesn’t mean that the old ways can’t accommodate some changes. Knee-jerk reactions against non-traditional leaders and of more use of competition do little to improve the educational quality Kansans seek to provide for students. Here’s hoping that Kansans will see in Corkins’ departure an opportunity to reflect on the direction of K-12 education in this state, and a chance to explore those options that are yielding positive benefits for students across the country..

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