

### Letter to the Editor

By John LaPlante

Winston Brooks is to be commended for his hard work on behalf of Wichita students and families as superintendent of USD 259.

But his enthusiastic letter ("Rebuttal," in the June/July issue of East Wichita News) in response to our essay on USD 259 misses some important points. He characterizes our op-ed in the May 2005 East Wichita News ("USD 259 Funding Up 64% Since 1993; Enrollment Up 1.4%") as "distorted" rhetoric.

Yet our essay consists almost entirely of spending numbers from the Kansas Legislative Research Department. It asks a simple question: "Spending is up substantially; are we getting our money's worth?" Per-pupil spending in the district was over \$9,200 for the 2003-2004 school year, a substantial sum by any measure. In his letter, Mr. Brooks mentions that budget items such as insurance and building operating costs have risen. True enough, some costs have increased.

But total funding for USD 259 is up 64 percent since 1993, a considerable new investment of public dollars. Thanks to a very modest increase in student enrollment, almost all of that money was available to use in the service of (roughly) the same number of students and their families. If Wichita schools spend less money on this or that budget item compared with large urban districts around the country, the administration might be commended. But the combination of cost and performance together must be kept in mind. This is especially true when Wichita's students will enter a world where their lives will be affected by the achievements of students not only in America's cities, but also by those of students in China, India, and many other emerging economies.

Even after a decade of increased district spending, school performance is less than optimal. According to the 2003-2004 district report card, available through the State Department of Education, nearly 1 in 2 students in the district (47 percent) was not "proficient" in math. More than 2 of every 5 students (42 percent) were not proficient in reading. According to the latest test results, some schools within the district showed improvement. But there is so much more to go. Wichita school employees are smart, hard-working people.

But in today's world, improvements in services, whether those services are delivered through the private or the public sector, come through increased competition. Our educational system will not achieve the level of excellence that our society, and our children deserve, until it, too, is subject to the competitive forces of the marketplace.

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