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## What is Public Education?

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What do Kansans want from public education? Fundamentally, they want students to learn. It's that simple.

Unfortunately, discussions about education quickly become contentious. Too often, we confuse the goal of student learning with the local school district, which is merely one of several means toward that end. As a result of this confusion, suggestions to change public schools—or even to simply challenge requests for additional funding—can be interpreted as an attack on education itself.

### **PUBLIC EDUCATION MEANS AN EDUCATED PUBLIC**

What is public education, exactly? Public education is activity that produces students who learn, resulting in an educated public. That's it. Notice that this statement says nothing about school finance, teacher pay, or any other contentious issue.

Education, especially K-12 education, is public because it has widespread benefits. Students who receive a good education become creative, innovative workers who are competitive in the world market. They tend to attract companies that pay well. Students who are educated become voting citizens who can engage the important issues of the day. Because education benefits not only the student but the public at large, we levy taxes to pay for it. We do this for both K-12 and college education.

At the college level, we expect state or local governments to run some institutions, and private organizations to run others. Students who attend either type of college are eligible for taxpayer support; we do not depend solely on the “public” college to deliver the public goal of educated students. Both forms of college benefit the public.

So why is the suggestion that we apply this same model to K-12 students considered “anti-education” by some?

### **GOVERNMENT GROCERY STORES?**

Outside of K-12 education, the public has no problem using privately run organizations to achieve a public goal. Funds flow from the public to the individual in need, who then selects from a number of providers.

Take housing for example. The public benefits when people are able to purchase houses and rent apartments. We might call this goal “public shelter.”

Do we then rely primarily on government-run housing units? No. Instead, we offer tax breaks for landlords to provide apartments and to individuals to purchase homes. Public housing, or more specifically, government-run housing, has not had a noteworthy history. As a result, we give people housing vouchers, which can be used to pay rent at any number of privately owned apartments. We have learned that the best way of achieving a public goal is often to let people use public funds at both government and private organizations.

We take this logic one step further with what might be called “public food.” We all benefit when other people have food to eat. In the political system, we have decided to make sure that this happens by giving some people taxpayer support for food purchases. But unlike the case of colleges or low-income housing, we don’t have government-run food stores. Instead, we give food stamps to those in need. The *public* goal is met through *private* parties.

### **CHANGING THE STATUS QUO CAN BE PRO-EDUCATION**

When a student receives a good education in one of Kansas’ 300 unified school districts, the public benefits. The public also benefits when that same student receives a good education at a Catholic diocese school, an independent Christian school, or a home school.

The public benefits because education occurs in each of these cases. We attach the word “public” only to those government-run schools because only they (with a few exceptions) receive taxpayer support.

Because of this habit, people who advocate increased scrutiny of public schools, sometimes using the threat of diminished increases in funding as a prod to reform, are often labeled “anti-education.” The same epithet is sometimes given to those who favor non-traditional forms of education finance, such as vouchers or tax credits for tuition.

Are these advocates anti-education establishment? Perhaps. Anti-public school? Not usually. As the example of college shows us, government-run and privately-run schools can both serve the public good. Anti-education? Only if we can say that the person who supports public scholarships for students at private colleges is “anti-education.”

Given the above examples, it is important to ask who may gain and who may lose if education finance becomes more consistent with other areas of public policy. Does the level of outrage surrounding the issue truly reflect concern over student outcomes and the public good?

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