



One Goal - Different Views

Dear *Wichita Eagle* Readers,

Student achievement awareness ads that we recently ran in this and other newspapers across Kansas have unfortunately been associated with a great deal of controversy. An *Eagle* editorial said we were 'playing fast and loose with the truth.' Local superintendents wrote that we were using 'misleading information' to 'discredit' student achievement. **Those and other allegations are completely false.**

Those who have falsely accused Kansas Policy Institute of misleading people know full well that every piece of information we've shared with parents is the truth, as the Kansas and U.S. Departments of Education have provided every single fact. These facts may present a different story, but they are facts nonetheless.

There's no question that many students get a good public education and we have no doubt that educators are doing their best within the confines of the current system. But despite all their efforts, the fact remains that many students are still being left behind.

State assessments show that only about half of Kansas juniors have full comprehension of grade-appropriate material. Parents are given much higher numbers based on those who Meet Standards and are considered Proficient. If you're wondering how both statements can be true, it's because **being Proficient in Kansas does not require full comprehension of grade-appropriate material.**

According to KSDE documents, state standards were dramatically altered in 2006. In fact, the changes were of such magnitude that KSDE written guidelines say "...no comparison to past student, building, district or state performance should be made."¹ Despite that official policy, KSDE officials persist in doing so.

The 2006 changes were quite dramatic and appear to have significantly reduced standards. The performance categories were changed from Advanced, Proficient, Satisfactory, Basic and Unsatisfactory to Exemplary, Exceeds Standard, Meets Standard, Approaches Standard and Academic Warning.² The definition of Meets Standard makes it quite clear that Proficient and Satisfactory were combined into a single category. Here are the current definitions for Reading:³

Meets Standard – when reading grade-appropriate narrative, expository, technical and persuasive text, a *proficient* student has *satisfactory* comprehension.

Exceeds Standard – when reading grade-appropriate narrative, expository, technical and persuasive text, an *advanced* student has *full* comprehension.

KPI extended multiple invitations for public events to the State Board of Education and KSDE. Each invitation has been refused...except one. Destry Brown, Superintendent of USD 250 in Pittsburg, arranged a public discussion with parents on April 5. We didn't agree on everything but the nearly 250 people in attendance were able to reach their own informed opinions based on more facts than they possessed previously.

The *Pittsburg Morning Sun* had this to say about the event. "...both men were brave enough to meet, in a public setting, to make their voices heard. We won't declare a winner, because just by having the debate, both organizations won. Both sides care about education and how it is funded, taught and assessed. This debate wasn't about celebrity and it wasn't about perfection. But it was a simple, direct conversation about one particular issue – education. It was a "red meat" debate in a world where similar debates rarely happen. It was a throwback to the Lincoln-Douglas debates of more than 150 years ago. Perhaps the secret lied in the fact that neither man was particularly running for elected office, although that is unlikely. This sort of naked, but respectful, discourse is rare in the modern arena, although it shouldn't be."

A number of parents came forward afterward and thanked me for giving them more information and answering their questions. Some agreed with our viewpoint, some didn't. And that's just fine.

This isn't about convincing people that we're right and someone else is wrong. There is an absolute 'right' answer to some things, like how much we spend and actual test results, but how the money should be spent or what should be done to improve achievement are not 'right' or 'wrong' answers. We see those and many other educational issues as subjective, personal decisions that each Kansan should make for themselves. But fully-informed decisions require access to all of the information.

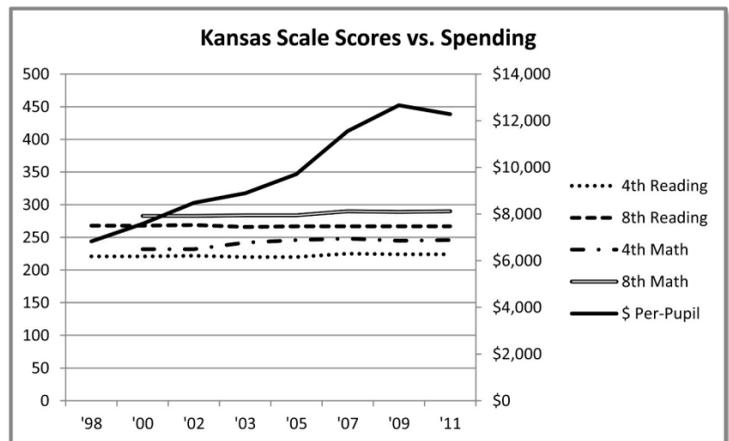
It's a shame that more administrators and state officials aren't like Destry Brown. And frankly, the *Wichita Eagle* could do this community a great service by hosting an open, public forum instead of maligning Kansas Policy Institute from the editorial pages.

I won't speculate on the reasons for their actions, but ponder this question: If these people so firmly believe that the facts are on their side, why do they refuse to participate in respectful, public discussions?

Student-Focused Solutions

Spending more money in the hopes of increasing student achievement hasn't worked. While scores on unchanged, national assessments remained essentially flat, spending increased quite substantially. Total taxpayer support of public schools in Kansas increased from \$3.1 billion in 1998 to \$5.6 billion in 2011; total spending per-pupil increased from \$6,828 to \$12,283.⁴ **And while you may have been told that total funding for schools was reduced this year, the truth is that KSDE estimates that 2012 spending will reach a record \$5.7 billion.⁵**

Some people would have you believe that the growth in total spending is deceptive because not all spending goes into the classroom, but the truth is that Instructional spending has increased at an even faster rate than total spending! Instructional spending increased 87% between 1999 and 2011; that is more than double the combined rates of increase in inflation and enrollment.⁶



Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), all students' scale scores; Kansas Dept. of Education, per-pupil spending.

It's pretty clear that suing taxpayers for more money won't improve student achievement, but there are viable solutions being implemented in Oklahoma, Florida, Indiana and many other states.

- **Expand the Pool of Effective Teachers** – Teachers are the single most important piece of the education puzzle. Why can a retired Boeing engineer teach at Wichita State, but not at Wichita East High School?
- **Reward Success** – Send dollars directly to the teachers and buildings that succeed. Give merit pay to effective teachers, as measured by students' progress over the year.
- **A-F Grading of Schools** – Intuitive, transparent measurement that is easily understood.
- **Educational Freedom** – Allow Regents universities to authorize and operate public charter schools. Make scholarships available to special needs students and low income families. Expand online learning opportunities that utilize cutting-edge technology.

The *Pittsburg Morning Sun* is right – KPI cares about education, and we will not be deterred by those who are more intent on preserving the status quo than implementing substantive reforms that will help more students get the kind of effective education that will prepare them to succeed.

Sincerely,

Dave Trabert
President

¹Kansas Department of Education, *Kansas Assessments in Reading and Mathematics 2006 Technical Manual*, page 2.

²Ibid, page 43.

³Kansas Department of Education, <http://www.ksde.org/Default.aspx?tabid=159>, Reading Performance Level Descriptors.

⁴KSDE, data for 1998 through 2001 contained in reports provided by Deputy Commissioner Dale Dennis; data for 2002 through 2012 available at: http://www.ksde.org/Portals/0/School%20Finance/data_warehouse/total_expenditures/d0Stateexp.pdf

⁵Email received from KSDE Deputy Commissioner Dale Dennis dated November 9, 2011.

⁶Instructional spending and FTE enrollment downloaded from KSDE Comparative Performance and Fiscal System at <http://cpfs.ksde.org/cpfs/>; data not available for prior years. FTE enrollment increased 1.4%. Inflation per Bureau of Labor Statistics, Midwest Urban Cities not seasonally adjusted; CPI increased from 162.7 to 214.7, or 32.0%.