



Testimony to Legislative Educational Planning Committee

Student Centric Reforms Across the Nation

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Chairman Huebert and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to present to your committee today.

At first glance, Kansas appears to have a good educational system but as you will hear from other speakers today first impressions can be misleading. Certainly, many Kansas students receive a quality education and we all know people who move to this state in order to send their kids to our schools. In fact, my parents moved from Kansas City, MO to the Blue Valley School District to send my brothers and me to better schools when we entered kindergarten.

However, what national rankings and these anecdotal stories leave out are the children left behind. Left behind, despite the best efforts of teachers and the public servants working in our schools. But, still left behind. What about the child who doesn't get the help they deserve? Or the parent who stays up at night knowing their child struggles every day at school? What about the family who doesn't have the financial means to move from a district such as Kansas City, MO to the suburbs of Blue Valley?

Many Kansas kids receive a quality education, but many are left behind.

Every state in the country deals with the same issues regularly discussed in our educational system. Low-income students, special needs children, ELL students, societal problems, under-engaged parents, ever-increasing demands from Washington. The challenges facing today's educators are no different here than in any community in the country.

Some states face those obstacles as challenges to be overcome. Others use these challenges as a crutch and the status quo persists.

States and communities around the country recognize that the answer to solve these problems can't simply be more money. It matters more how existing money is spent and creating a system with the *individual student* as the focus – not the system as the focus.

Many states are achieving these goals and putting the resources of the state to bear on one, individual child. It is also important to note that Kansas does some of the items listed below. In some cases, quite well. However, that should not be an excuse to stop trying make the good better or try new things that are delivering an effective education to students around the country.

Special Needs Scholarships

Rep. Jason Nelson of Oklahoma has already discussed the Lindsey Nicole Henry Scholarship program in our neighboring Oklahoma. To summarize what these scholarships are in practice, parents of a student with a special need child (in Kansas a student with an IEP) are able to take a prescribed portion of their students educational dollars to attend a private school that better meets the needs of their child.

I visited an autistic student in Tulsa who described going to her zip code-directed public school as "going to war." She ate lunch in the bathroom and cut herself because of bullying. Phylcia now uses the scholarship to attend a private school focused on special needs children. She is doing well in school, is on the cheerleading squad, and as her mother said has had her first boyfriend.

Under-performing Scholarships

Similar to a special needs scholarship in structure, children in an at-risk demographic or in a chronically underperforming school can take a portion of their tax dollars to utilize a different educational option.

Tax-credit Scholarships

Tax-credit scholarships allow taxpayers to receive full or partial tax credits when they donate to non-profit organizations that give out private-school scholarships. For those that donate, some programs make individuals eligible to receive tax credits, others permit businesses, and a few allow both. In Georgia, 1900 students utilized this program to attend roughly 400 different schools during the 2009-2010 academic year.

Personal Tax Credits and Deductions

With personal tax credits and deductions, parents are partially reimbursed by the state for approved educational expenses. This typically includes reimbursement for private school tuition as well as books, supplies, computers, tutors, and transportation. Even when tuition is not eligible for a tax credit or deduction, these programs still make school choice easier for parents who choose private schools.

Education Savings Accounts

This mechanism allows parents to withdraw their children from a school and receive a portion of their public funding deposited into an education savings account. Parents can use their account funds to pay for private school tuition, online learning programs, private tutoring, or future college expenses.

Public charter schools

As you probably know, charter schools are public schools that are freed from many government rules and regulations in exchange for increased financial and academic accountability. schools are open to all children, who are enrolled randomly, and are accountable for student achievement. Currently, 42 states and Washington, D.C., allow for more than 4,000 public charter schools to operate.

While Kansas has a public charter school law, it has been ranked as #39 out of 42 by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. It is primarily used by rural districts that want some freedom from too much government regulation. However, little is changed in the way of accountability and increased parental choice.

8-2

In a 9 December article from the *Topeka Capital-Journal* (Kansas missing out on Race to the Top money), Celia Llopas-Jepsen cites USD 501 Superintendent Julie Ford in noting why Kansas hasn't received any federal Race To The Top funding,

"Ford, who worked on Kansas' application as an employee of KSDE, said one of the single biggest factors may have been the fact that charter schools fell under local district control in Kansas."

I am certainly not one to advocate chasing federal handouts, but if the federal government recognizes the need for expanded public charter school authorization then maybe it is time for this body to consider it as well.

What is more, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan in noted in the same article as saying the point of Race To The Top is to encourage states to compete. Once again, if President Obama's education secretary is advocating for competition in K-12 education then surely this issue warrants action across the political spectrum.

Regents Institutions, community colleges, mayors, city councils, or county commissions are all possible authorizers of public charter schools. Given that Emporia State University is one of our nation's leading teacher colleges it seems ideally suited to operate a K-12 school.

Home Schooling

Parents who choose home schooling educate their children outside of public or private schools, typically within their own homes. Prevalent in Kansas, but something we should build on.

Online Learning

Online learning allows students to receive a teacher-driven education through Internet-based curriculum. Such methods provide flexibility and allow for highly individualized, personalized instruction.

Examples of great programs in Lawrence and Maize offer a model on which to expand. In other cases, a rural student may take a single course not offered in their building. A good example of building on the success we are already seeing in Kansas.

A-F Grading of Schools

When your child brings home the report card you instantly know what each of those grades mean. The same clear and transparent definitions should be used to define the success of a building or school district.

Where implemented most effectively, this system is based on upon raw scores but also on the learning gains of individual students.

Alternative Teacher Certification

Why can Bill Snyder teach a class on leadership at Kansas State University, but not at Manhattan High School? The answer is that he, presumably, doesn't have a teaching certificate. Kansas needs to expand the people eligible to teach K-12 classes beyond those who have a certain college degree.

Of course, not everyone should be allowed to teach but putting hiring responsibilities with an individual district or, better yet, a building principle allows responsible entities to make those decisions.

Amidst teacher shortages in rural Kansas, I'm sure a retired bank president might like to teach an accounting or math course. Under current law they have to go back to college. Under this type of program, a principle or superintendent could make those decisions.

Social Promotion Ban

I'll discuss more about the Florida experience shortly. But, beginning in 2003, Florida put in place a social promotion ban for students not learning basic literacy skills by the end of the third grade. Since inception, the percentage of children scoring low enough to be retained has dropped by 40%.

As any high school teacher will tell you, the children who have the most trouble in high school, either academically or with discipline, probably have a hard time reading. This is because they didn't learn the skills early enough. With each passing year they get further and further behind. They struggle or drop out of school.

It is a travesty. It is avoidable. Is it more cruel to keep someone in 3rd grade for another year so they can learn to read? Or, is it more cruel to send a child forward and watch them struggle as long as they stay in school and, maybe, enter the workforce?

Florida doesn't wait for someone to get to the 3rd grade. Instead, they identify struggling students as early as kindergarten and start interventions immediately. Also, waivers can be granted on a case by case basis to those scoring low enough to be held back.

Incentives for Success

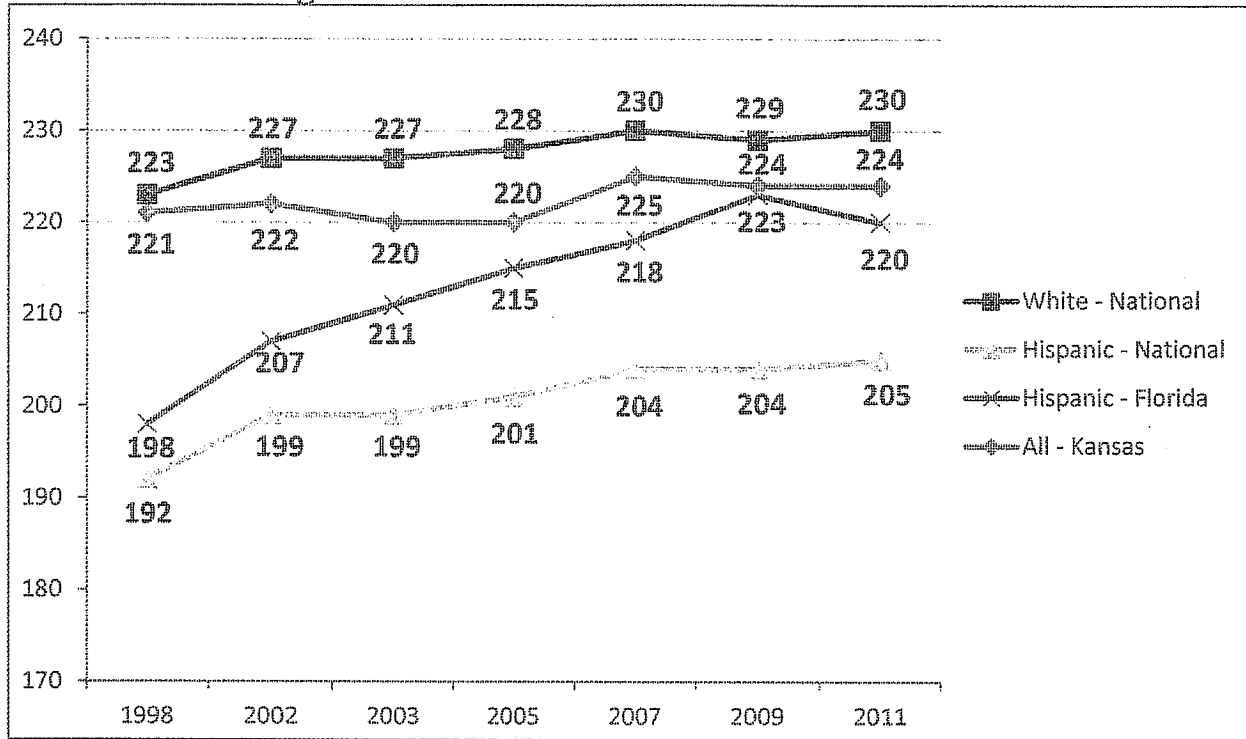
This idea uses existing money to align funding with goals. An individual school gets additional money for moving up in performance measures (e.g. A-F Grading). Teachers receive bonuses for a student successfully passing an AP course. In Kansas we can build on the model of career and technical education incentives.

Once again, it is about allocating existing resources in support of the goals outlined by the state. I should also note, in many cases the funding bypasses the district. It is given directly to a teacher or a building principle. This further empowers those closest to our children.

Florida is a leading example of student-centric reforms and their track record demonstrates their effectiveness. Since the last 1990s, they have closed or narrowed achievement gaps between minority and white students. In fact, Florida outscores Kansas on the National Assessment of Educational Progress' 4th grade reading exam. Keep in mind that Florida is a majority minority state.

Maybe more important than a raw score is to look at trends. Since Florida has implemented many of the reforms mentioned earlier, their students are improving on this exam while Kansas students are achieving at roughly the same levels they were in 1998. The chart before you makes these trends clear.

4th Grade Reading – NAEP Scale Scores



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Nation's Report Card

If Kansas students are to be presented with a challenging education then Kansas must stop excusing the status quo. Placing the student at the center of our educational system is the way to achieve this goal. It can be done without spending more money, but spending the money already allocated more effectively.

More important than any dollar amount, the power to choose should be placed with those who know a child best - his or her parents. Parents and students should have a variety of options to choose from. Of course, high-performing public schools. But also public charter schools, scholarships for special needs students or student in chronically underperforming buildings, digital learning, or home schools. Driven by transparency, accountability, and bringing more high-quality teachers into the classroom, an effective education for every Kansas student is within our grasp.

Thank you for the opportunity to present today and I'll stand for any questions you may have.

8-5