



Editorial: Education debate should be about more than money

December 25, 2017

With the 2018 legislative session a few weeks away, Kansans still have no idea how their lawmakers will address the state's interminable school finance crisis. After the state Supreme Court ruled that the Legislature's most recent K-12 funding proposal remains unconstitutional, there has been an intense debate among lawmakers about how to proceed. Democrats like House Minority Leader Jim Ward have called for an increase in funding, which would require higher taxes or spending cuts. Meanwhile, some Republicans have suggested amending the Constitution to limit the Supreme Court's influence over school finance.

The Senate GOP leadership made its position clear in October: "Raising taxes to fund this unrealistic demand is not going to happen." But as we noted in an editorial last week, we don't see any realistic alternatives to a tax increase or spending cuts. Fifteen amendments on school finance have been proposed since 2005, and none of them has passed.

As the session approaches, this debate is only going to become more vehement. However, while it's essential to discuss how much money taxpayers should spend on schools, we're afraid there hasn't been enough emphasis on how that money is actually being spent.

For example, the Kansas State Department of Education is in the process of implementing its Kansans CAN School Redesign Project. Education commissioner Randy Watson says this effort will involve a drastic reorientation of our schools' priorities: "We're going to deconstruct the traditional school system and build what Kansans believe best meets the needs of today's students." Doesn't it seem possible that a plan to "deconstruct the traditional school system" could have an even greater effect on academic outcomes than more money?

According to a 2014 study released by the Cato Institute, average state spending on education increased by 120 percent between 1970 and 2010, while adjusted state SAT scores fell by around 3 percent over the same period. The report states: "There has been essentially no correlation between what states have spent on education and their measured academic outcomes." However, other studies report a link between increased education funding and improved outcomes.

A 2016 study published in *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* analyzed the "school finance reforms that began in the early 1970s" and reports that increased spending had a substantial impact across a range of measures: "A 10 percent increase in per pupil spending each year for all 12 years of public school leads to 0.31 more completed years of education, about 7 percent higher wages, and a 3.2 percentage point reduction in the annual incidence of adult poverty."

The dispute over the relationship between education spending and outcomes will persist, but here's what isn't up for debate: How districts spend their education dollars is crucial. Kansans CAN is shifting the state's emphasis toward measuring postsecondary achievement, building individual plans of study around career interest, preparing children for kindergarten and giving students opportunities to develop vocational skills while they're still in high school.

We're strong supporters of some of these efforts, but we have questions about others. Are standardized tests being deemphasized? Couldn't that have an effect on postsecondary admissions? How will increased education funding fit into the Kansans CAN model? Will the state reconsider this model if certain benchmarks aren't met? What's the time frame? How will the state expand early childhood education if it's "doing all of this with existing resources," as Watson puts it?

As the argument over school finance gets louder, we hope it doesn't muffle the conversation about how our education system actually functions.

Members of The Capital-Journal's editorial advisory board are Zach Ahrens, Matt Johnson, Ray Beers Jr., Laura Burton, Garry Cushinberry, Mike Hall, Jessica Lucas, Veronica Padilla and John Stauffer.