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## Letter: Data misleading, biased – results more important

By Ronald Banks April 17, 2013

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To the editor:

I looked at the data noted in the March 29 Letter to the Editor concerning the state of Kansas education and the importance of our concern in this important duty of our state and city, education of our children.

But we should be aware of the data, its authors and organizational intent. The study, "Spending v. Achievement" originates from the Kansas Policy Institute, formerly the Flint Hills Center for Public Policy. This institute advocates ideology of free-market American think tank, CATO Institute; biased toward conservative limited government and pro-business ideology.

Although the purpose is to inform the public, I feel a subtle attack at the public sector and unionized teachers. If the system can be disparaged, changes can be encouraged, e.g. privatization, defunding or other avenue that can channel funds to the private sector. I have reviewed the study. It states initially that present administrators are unwilling to change because they want to concentrate on Kansans and not other state data for comparisons.

This point is upheld as the study admits "stark differences in demographics and unnecessary but none the less real achievement gaps among certain ethnic groups and other student cohorts invalidate any comparison of overall achievement among the states." A cohort is a similar grouping from where similar data can come.

When it comes to "Cut Score Analysis," grouping into rating performances, the Kansas State Department of Education defends its cut scores. The study proclaims a set percentage grading should be used i.e. A-100-90, B-89-80 etc. The study implies no rationale other than it is traditionally used in the school room. However, KSDE states: "Cut scores cannot be arbitrarily determined. They must be defensible (legally and psychometrically) given that pronouncements are made about individual students, teachers, districts, etc. Therefore, cut scores must be empirically justified."

The study accepts this premise: "It's true that cut scores cannot be arbitrarily determined and that they must be legally and psychometrically defensible, but they could still be higher." With no reasoning, continues to declare arbitrary scale. Also, the study admits "It would not be fair to compare student achievement between an affluent, suburban district such as USD 229 Blue Valley and relatively poor, inner city district such as USD 500 Kansas City because there are large achievement gaps between certain demographic cohorts."

Fort Leavenworth would likewise interject considerable affluence into our system i.e. officer ranked-college educated parents and diverse backgrounds of data. With this I would like to suggest "averages" are not the best way to compare data. Averages can be weighted, skewed i.e.  $20+50=70$ , average of 35, like affluent to poor districts. If the study disavows its own premises, it is not serious. A standard deviation or other statistical procedure that shows a p-value, probability value, that the data are not occurring by random, is an accepted way in scientific data.

The study denigrates the curve grading system i.e. using top performer as basis for grading performance. For example, MA has highest performance with 47 percent; in a curve this would be the top score that others would be ranked. All things equal, why not compare with the best? Obviously, this does not meet the arbitrary scale (A-100-90 etc.) which the study wants to use.

Because the diversity of most bright is greater in college, the curve is needed because the tests are made so difficult to challenge the brightest, then go from there. Other than nit-picking technicalities, other things should be considered: have you substitute taught? I have and teaching "ain't easy." The job is not only bean-counting but brain-counting. Nurturing intelligence in the light of class limitations.

If you want to get a real idea of our school system go back through the Leavenworth Times: teacher, Ginger Riddle- LHS math, MS in math and education (LVT, Feb. 27); (LVT, March 8) LHS, Leavenworth advances in quiz show; (LVT, March 16-17) Students qualify for international contest; (LVT, Feb. 19) Students serve as mentors, at Richard W. Warren Middle School and have Cooking Club sponsored by Sci Teacher, Rebecca Calhoun; former LHS grad 2005, Victoria Henson now at Iowa St U, volleyball record maker and now professional volleyball player; (LVT, Feb. 14) 1990 LHS grad, Dr. Jennifer Klemp, Asst. Prof of Med Div of Oncology UKMC; 10 or so, chosen students for Armed Services Academies; (LVT, March 20) JROTC ready to compete nationally.

Total per-pupil spending argument is more cloudy. How can spending be decisive when the correlation demands many parameters to include-teacher skill, student innate ability, etc. Money does not translate intelligence. I am glad I did this research and learned something new, KPI and the study. Yes, let's look at the whole picture, not just one side; like this study. Things may be better as the flaws are picked out of the study. But, no matter what, The Leavenworth School Board is important.