

The Patriots News from the citizen advocates..

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Does Educational Choice Threaten Community Stability

By John R. LaPlante

Which is more important – community building or educational choice? A controversy in one city in south-central Kansas raises this important question about the definition of a community, and its relationship to education.

Bel Aire, in the northeast corner of the Wichita area, has a population of over 6,600. With an eye towards economic development and population growth, it purchased and annexed 2,400 acres of largely undeveloped land.

The annexed parcel was within the boundary of USD 375 Circle, based in a neighboring county. As a result of the annexation, half of Bel Aire's land was now in USD 259 and half within USD 375.

On September 17, the City Council, by a 4-1 vote, expressed its support for shifting the boundary between the two school districts, removing the 2,400 acres from Circle and giving it to Wichita.

As you might expect, USD 259 Wichita thinks this is a good idea for Bel Aire, while USD 375 Circle vows to fight it. Meanwhile, some Bel Aire residents talk of circulating a petition to block the move.

In local discussions on the topic, several themes stood out, but the predominant question was whether Bel Aire needed one school system or two, and whether the answer to that question trumped everything else.

One position, which prevailed in the city council, was that having the whole city within a single district would unify the city and be good for community spirit. *"We do need one school district here in Bel Aire,"* said one resident. One newspaper account said that proponents of the single-district idea imagine local families *"gathering at their local high school to cheer for the same team, instead of sending their kids to more than a dozen public and private high schools."*

Another position said that having options among schools and school districts is itself a valuable part of the community, and contributes to the education of children. Each district has different offerings. "Why not have the best of both worlds?," asked one mother who led the failing cause. Winston Brooks, superintendent of USD 259, gave a nod towards the value of choice when he touted his district's ability to offer Bel Aire residents more intra-district choice than USD 375 Circle could.

So who's right?

The belief that a single educational option is required for community life is a curious one. That's because public schools are often sources not of unity but of controversy and division.

For example, does a school district offer too much sex education? Too little? The wrong kind of sex education? These and other questions are likely to arise as long as there is an expectation that everyone should be served by the same system. Indeed, the history of public schools is filled with controversy and even violence over disagreements on subjects ranging from textbooks to busing to how to teach math. In a recent analysis, for instance, the Cato Institute's Neal McCluskey documented over 150 instances of "political combat" in public schools during the 2005-06 school year.

The claim that community harmony requires having only one school district is mistaken for another reason: it neglects the other ways we build community and social harmony. Arts groups, business and professional organizations, churches, and social service organizations such as soup kitchens, not to mention chance encounters among citizens while walking the dog, all build a sense of place, belonging, and community.

In short, the belief in Bel Aire, and elsewhere, that the good life requires a single provider of education in a community is simply misplaced. Equating a single school district with a strong community and setting that option against educational choice presents a complicated matter in far too simple terms. Sacrificing greater choice for the sake of having a single football team to rally around is an unfortunate outcome for Kansas education. In a society that values choice and having options, we should place more, not less importance on having options in schooling.

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