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Trickle down - USD 382 receives little of the extra funding for education ordered by the Supreme Court

By Carol Bronson

In January 2005 the Kansas Supreme Court ruled in Ryan Montoy vs. the State of Kansas that the Kansas Legislature had failed to meet its constitutional duty to provide for continuous improvement in education and told legislators to base spending on the actual costs of providing a suitable education.

A three-year plan was established to provide additional funds to public school districts.

In a year-end press release, Governor Kathleen Sebelius wrote, "Currently we are in the second year of a school finance plan and we have made a historic commitment to K-12 education. By the end of the third year, we will have invested over \$1 billion of new funds in education."

To the question, "has USD 382 received a significant portion of those extra dollars?" Superintendent Glen Davis has a short answer.

"No."

State aid is based on enrollment, which is declining in the Pratt school district (a loss of 238 students over a 10-year period), and inflation has taken a toll. Fuel and food costs have risen significantly, Davis said. In addition, the Legislature "tinkered with" the low enrollment weighting formula, giving fewer of those dollars to USD 382 and districts smaller than it. Some of the new funds were earmarked for districts that have a high concentration of low income families, and Pratt didn't qualify, he said.

Increases in the base state aid have been minimal - \$50 here, \$75 there, Davis said.

Pratt's total expenditures have increased from \$7.7 million in 1996-97 to \$12.1 million in 2006-07, according to figures at the Kansas State Department of Education website. The per pupil expenditure rose from \$5470 to \$10,254.

The Flint Hills Center for Public Policy points to a 93 percent increase in per-pupil funding statewide since 1993 (\$5987 to \$11,558), but notes that translates to a 33 percent increase after adjusting for inflation. The non-profit think tank contends that student learning has not progressed satisfactorily, based on National Assessment of Educational Progress tests, which indicate that roughly 50 percent of fourth grade students are not proficient in mathematics and

that reading scores have stagnated.

NAEP scores were chosen as a measure because Kansas has participated in the program since 1998, according to John R. LaPlante, education policy fellow with the Flint Hills Center.

NAEP is not a used as a general test in Kansas, however some pilot studies have been done, Davis said.

On the Kansas State Assessments, which are normed to national standards, students do show progress. The Kansas State Department of Education reports strong performance in reading, mathematics and writing for all students and decreasing gaps for disadvantaged students and students with disabilities.

A class-by-class analysis shows that 79 to 99.9 percent of Pratt students scored proficient or better on state reading assessment tests in 2007 and 72.3 to 89.4 percent on math tests. In the majority of cases, percentages were higher than for previous years.

Total expenditures at USD 438 Skyline increased from \$2.5 million in 1996-97 to \$4.5 million in 2006-07, while the full time enrollment equivalent rose from 338 to 370. Skyline spends \$12,254 per pupil, up from \$7525 ten years ago. Skyline students consistently perform well on state assessments, according to Superintendent Mike Sanders.

The biggest focus of Kansas Association of School Boards and administrators' groups in 2008 will be to ask the Legislature for an increase on the base state aid to support pay increases for teachers, Davis said. Kansas ranks 39th among the states for salaries and the goal is to reach the middle.

"I could support targeted funding for teacher salaries," Davis said. "I think that's an area where we have to make improvement or we're going to have a major crisis as far as getting young people to enter the teaching field."

Teaching as a career "is not on the radar screen for young people," he noted, because of its reputation for low salaries and discipline issues.

"There is a feeling in Topeka that they (legislators) have taken care of schools with the three-year plan," Davis continued. "Really, all that was was a way to get the lawsuit resolved. The challenge will be to get them to look at a long range plan for the good of education."

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