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School Choices Promote Accountability

By John R. LaPlante

In an era of earmarks, citizens demand accountability when tax dollars are spent. So what's one of the most unused methods of promoting accountability? School choice.

Nationally, school choice exists in several forms, including tuition tax credits and vouchers. But Kansas has neither. It's no secret the Flint Hills Center for Public Policy thinks we need some form of school choice to unleash the power of competition among schools for student enrollment.

Recently, the group Kansas Families for Education charged that the Flint Hills Center has "omitted many facts as they campaign for vouchers, and in the process, they obscure the truth." Executive director Kathy Cook unleashed a laundry list of complaints about vouchers. Space does not allow a full response, so let's cut to the most important issue, which is accountability. Cook charges schools of choice "aren't accountable to you, the taxpayer."

* Abuse and mismanagement persist in public schools.

Certainly, accountability is important any time public funds are spent for a public purpose. Our governments spend a lot of time and money towards that end, starting with simple law enforcement and the legal system. In addition, inspectors general within state departments look for fraud, waste and abuse. Legislatures have hearings. The press, which now includes citizen-bloggers, can bring misdeeds to the light of day.

Despite accountability measures in public schools, financial abuses occur. During the 1990s, California taxpayers had to pay nearly \$220 million to bail out schools due to fraud and financial mismanagement. In Fort Worth, Texas, a contractor stole \$10 million from the district. Other examples abound.

Another concern is student performance. Yet for all the accountability measures in public schools, American students perform worse than their international peers the longer they stay in school.

The point is laws and regulations alone are not enough. To ensure the highest degree of accountability, we must enlist something else.

* Consumer control promotes accountability.

So what's missing? A strong voice for parents. Parents can be good consumers, but most are ill-equipped to debate pedagogy or financial management techniques with school officials. Further, legislators, members of Congress, and executive branch employees have ideological and professional interests that might not line up with the wants and needs of parents.

With all these people involved, who do you hold accountable if your child isn't getting a good education at the public school district? Your taxes will go there anyway. And unless you can afford the cost of moving or private school tuition, your child likely will go there, too.

If we enact some measure of school choice such as vouchers, we enlist the power of the people who have the greatest stake in education. With school choice, parents who understand that their assigned district isn't providing what their children need can hold it accountable by enrolling their children elsewhere. Have you ever expressed your dissatisfaction with a company by withholding your patronage and taking your business elsewhere? School districts will respond to similar pressures by making reforms -- if we fund children rather than school systems.

Is school choice a radical and untested idea? Hardly. In 13 states, some 112,000 students -- the combined enrollment of the four largest districts in Kansas -- now can attend private schools thanks to voucher or tax credit programs. The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled both are legal; and parents whose children can attend other schools thanks to school choice approve.

Letting parents use vouchers or tax credits to select a school for their children does not mean the end of public schools. Milwaukee has a voucher program. It also has private and government-run schools. Arizona has a tax credit program. In these and other locations, school choice and public schools coexist, serving children in response to the wants and needs of families.

Something similar happens in higher education. In Wichita, for example, students can use government grants (vouchers) to attend either Wichita State University (government-run) or Friends University (privately run).

School choice is consistent with the American values of consumer sovereignty, individual freedom, and dispersal of power. Laws and media scrutiny are two means of school accountability, but the missing component is school choice.

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