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Helen Cochran: Focus on Achievement, Not Building Shiny New Facilities

By Helen Cochran

Recent debates with school bond proponents have been enlightening. Proponents offer no concrete evidence that the \$370 million bond proposal will raise test scores or lessen dropout rates. While low-achievement problems are not unique to Wichita, they are ours, locally, to deal with.

In the spring of this year:

- Two of every five of the district's 11th-graders could not read at grade level (Flint Hills Center for Public Policy).
- Five of the seven Wichita high schools failed to make "adequate yearly progress" (Kansas State Department of Education).
- Reading and math scores were 13.5 and 15 percentage points lower than state averages (Flint Hills).
- USD 259 was the lowest-ranked district out of 26 in Sedgwick, Harvey and Butler counties (state).

These are but a few of the disappointing statistics that warrant consideration despite recent information by the district that middle school AYP results have risen. As Denise Seguire, chief academic officer for USD 259, told The Eagle when the AYP improvements were released, "We have a long ways to go to 100 percent. The work we need to do is in instruction."

At a recent Pachyderm Club-sponsored public debate, bond proponent Sarah Olson argued that new athletic facilities and buildings will help her, as a real estate agent, sell more houses. Board president Lynn Rogers attempted to make the case that parents and students will take more pride in going to school if facilities are nicer.

The motivation of proponents is misplaced. Schools with strong academic credentials help sell houses and instill pride.

Despite the bulk of evidence that class size is not a determining factor in student achievement, Rogers has argued otherwise. When pressed for evidence, he suggested searching "class size reduction" on Google.

It is difficult to be persuaded by the reasoning of proponents.

Shiny and new is not what parents demand. Parents want two things: a strong academic environment and safety for their kids. They don't choose a school because it has a new football stadium or swimming pool. It is not bricks and mortar that will sustain these kids through life. They need the tools to read, write, function mathematically and reason.

It is unfortunate that despite some real needs in USD 259, voters are offered an all-or-nothing package. It would have been prudent to break the bond into several categories as opposed to one take-it-or-leave-it question.

There is a need for a new northeast high school, estimated to cost \$37 million, but currently the only way to get it is to approve spending another \$333 million.

It also would be prudent to wait until a new superintendent is hired so that he or she can assess what the crucial needs are and how best to address them with regard to USD 259's educational offerings.

Both presidential candidates acknowledged last week that despite spending more money per pupil than any other developed nation, America lags far behind. Both agreed reform is needed. According to the educational documentary "Flunked," sound reform costs little or nothing to implement and sustain.

Let's get started. It's a win-win situation for the children and the community.

Helen Cochran is spokeswoman for Citizens for Better Education.