

Analysis: Lack of collaboration on state policies leaves children in the fray

Career education initiative an example of policy with broad support

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Many of the concerns shared by those who work at, support and advocate for rural schools and the students they educate boil down to factors wholly or partly outside their control: geography, resources and state policy.

Geography shapes the challenges these schools face — from the difficulty many experience in recruiting teachers, to low-density population bases and obstacles to economic development. Yet resources and policy have potential in the eyes of many patrons and educators to contribute to solutions.

Efforts to give high-schoolers better access to post-secondary career training are one illustration.

Three years ago, Kansas introduced tuition-free access for high-schoolers to these courses. The effects have been clear — sharp growth in the numbers of students taking them.

Armed with the Legislature's financial backing, post-secondary schools like Fort Scott Community College and districts like Pittsburg USD 250 and its small-town and rural neighbors in Crawford and Cherokee counties are teaming up to find new ways of delivering career education.

In this matter, state and community leaders and educators appear to be on the same page. Their professed goal is expanding opportunities for teenagers, so that they may walk across the stage at their high school graduations and leave not only with a diploma in hand, but with other skills that will serve them well in the next phase of their lives.

"What's the right thing to do by your citizens?" Pittsburg city manager Daron Hall said, when asked why his city had contributed financially toward career education there. "Communities are made of families. Families have kids."

As The Topeka Capital-Journal visited towns in western, central and southeast Kansas, a number of rural educators and parents described this spirit of aspiration and collaboration, of dreaming up and realizing new and better opportunities for children, as absent from state discussions of K-12 education.

Instead, some said they saw Kansas as being locked in a long-running tug-of-war over school finance. The question is whether this battle and partisanship in the Statehouse preclude conversations on the more immediate priorities of these schools and their patrons — such as how to improve services for English language learners, enrich children's lives with field trips and fine arts, and stock the shelves of school libraries.

Glenda LaBarbera, a principal in Garden City — which struggles annually to find enough educators for its classrooms — said rural and urban Kansans alike should care whether schools are able to find and keep "phenomenal teachers."

Yet such priorities are complicated for many rural schools by the lack of targeted statewide

efforts — the kind that have widespread backing from local school boards, state policymakers and lawmakers alike — to address them.

Dave Heinemann, a former state lawmaker who represented Garden City for nearly three decades, now lobbies for an alliance of about 100 small-town and rural school districts. In an interview, he could think of few examples of recent legislative efforts to help address either the immediate concerns or the long-term ambitions of these schools.

“What legislation have we seen that small schools would want to support?” Heinemann asked. “It used to be, years ago, that there were several pieces of different types of legislation that you could work for.”

He named just two bills from the past few years: the governor’s 2012 technical education measure and his 2014 proposal to fund all-day kindergarten, the latter of which lawmakers rejected. This year he is hopeful a bill will pass to let schools continue to hire retired teachers, which he said is especially important to remote schools that struggle to fill positions.

Overall, however, he said legislative priorities have shifted for rural schools from proactively seeking to better the education they offer, to “playing defense — trying to keep what we have and not make it any worse.”

The prime example this spring is the school finance bill signed Wednesday by Gov. Sam Brownback. The bill reduces key operating or maintenance funds for most school districts and scraps the state’s formula for providing extra dollars to small schools, aid meant to address the higher per-pupil costs that accompany schooling in sparsely populated areas.

For rural schools, this latter piece was one of the most important weightings in the state’s school finance system, meaning one of their top priorities now will be to have it restored. This may make other long-standing goals for these schools — such as seeking the state’s help with broadband access, higher funding for special education and more job applicants for rural teaching positions — seem all the more unattainable.

Meanwhile, rural educators described many of the bills occupying the time of lawmakers this year as unrelated to their needs — efforts to transform school board races into partisan elections, scuttle the state’s standards for teaching math and English, curb the influence of teachers unions, and allow for criminal prosecution of educators for teaching material harmful to minors all are examples.

The gulf between the priorities of state leaders and educators appears to be driving the wedge between these parties further, making efforts to collaborate on any statewide initiatives that might be as widely popular as the technical education push unlikely.

This schism was clear after Brownback signed the school finance bill, unraveling the state’s 23-year-old K-12 funding formula.

As the governor’s office and legislative leaders describe it, the bill is a step toward stability for schools, a move away from an obtuse funding system, and a way to get more dollars into classrooms.

Superintendents looking at their budgets see the opposite — another wave of cuts that will eat into their districts’ contingency funds and undercut their efforts to plan long-term.

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