The quarter-million dollar classroom

In his 2014 State of the State Address, Governor Sam Brownback noted the people of Kansas provide over $12,500 per K-12 student, or about $250,000 for a classroom of 20. What is that money being spent on? More important, what are Kansans receiving for that investment?

Start with the teachers. Thanks to efforts to keep classes small, the average class size in Kansas is less than 20 students. Including special education staff assisting children with special needs, there are 1.5 teachers for every 20 students. Adding special education paraprofessionals and other classroom aides to assist these teachers, there are almost two instructional positions for every 20 students. Kansas had the 18th lowest pupil to teacher ratio among the 50 states in 2010, the year of the most recent national data.

Salaries for teachers and classroom aides, along with textbooks and instructional supplies, make up just over half of that quarter-million dollars: about $125,000.

The next largest share of classroom costs is the classroom itself, along with the rest of the school building: the library, gym, auditorium and lunchroom, as well as equipment like computers to go with textbooks and chalkboards. On average, Kansas spends $50,000 for every 20 students for buildings and equipment, including payments on construction bonds. That brings the total to $175,000.

Once constructed, schools also must be maintained and operated. Kansas spends about $20,000 for every 20 students for heating, cooling, and cleaning school facilities, as well as keeping them safe and secure. That brings the running total of classroom costs to $195,000.

Next, students have to get to school. For every 20 students, Kansas spends $8,000 for transportation. State law requires transporting children who live more than 2.5 miles from school, and many more are bussed for safety reasons.

Schools also provide meals for students. Lunch and breakfast programs cost about $10,000 for every 20 students, including fees paid by students and staff. These fees are also part of the total cost per pupil. Adding transportation and meals, the classroom total is now $213,000.

In addition to teachers, schools also provide counselors, social workers, psychologists, speech pathologists, audiologists, nurses, attendance and resource officers and security staff. Counting their support staff, Kansas schools have one of these student support positions for every six classrooms of 20 students, at a cost of $10,000 for a class of 20.

Schools also need libraries, technology support and programs to continuously improve teaching and learning. Kansas spends about $8,000 per classroom on these services, bringing the total to $231,000.

In charge of each school is a principal and his or her staff. These individuals supervise and evaluate teachers and other school support staff, oversee student discipline, and relations with parents and the rest of the school staff. In small schools, the principal is also responsible for many of the duties listed above. Kansas spends about $12,000 for every 20 students on school leadership - or about one principal or assistant for every 160 students. That brings the total to $243,000.

All other expenditures - about 4 percent of the total - are the remaining administrative costs, including the superintendent, business office, human resources and legal costs. In small districts, the superintendent is often also a principal and handles these duties and more. Most districts participate in cooperative organizations to share many of these functions and reduce costs.

According to the most recent national data, Kansas provides about $1,000 less per student from all sources than the national average, or $20,000 for a classroom of 20 students. Kansas spends less per pupil than neighboring states like Nebraska, Iowa, North Dakota and Minnesota.

However, Kansas ranks eighth in the nation across multiple achievement measures, including national reading and math tests, graduation rates, preparation for college and adult educational attainment. Among neighboring states, only Minnesota and Colorado have higher adult completion of high school, four-year college degrees and advanced or professional degrees.

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Allocation of K-12 Education Spending

- Teachers, Aides, Classroom Materials: 50%
- School, Office: 4%
- Food Services: 4%
- Transportation: 3%
- Operations: 6%
- Construction, Repair, Equipment, Debt: 16%
- Other: 5%
- Teacher Support: 3%
- Student Services: 4%
There are 450,000 students in Kansas. As we all know from personal experience, no two children are alike or have the same needs. It takes a complex system to provide resources commensurate with every child’s needs. There are 2,833 schools in Kansas, each in a unique community with unique needs and unique resources. It takes a complex system to provide resources to educate the children in this many schools. There are 286 school districts in Kansas, each with unique needs and resources. It takes a complex system to provide suitable resources for every district in Kansas.

A complaint I often hear about the school finance formula in Kansas is that it is just too complicated. I heard a Kansas senator speak last week and he challenged the board members and administrators in the room to tell him how much weighting they got for each student. He was making a point that the formula is so complex that no one can even remember how much weighting they get.

It is probably human nature to seek simple solutions to complex problems, but noted cynic H.L. Mencken’s words are worth considering, “For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple, and wrong.”

Back in the 80s (for you youngsters that is the 1980s—a time when Alex P. Keaton was king and bangs were big) I decided that I would like to run a marathon. I was living in Lawrence at the time and they had a marathon that corresponded with the KU Relays. I trained hard and was ready to run as the big day approached. My family was very supportive, my brother, sister, mom, dad, and all the in-laws were there the day before. As we discussed the run the night before, my sister-in-law posed a question: “What if you have to go to the bathroom?” It was something I had not considered, but that I studied on that night.

Some of you may have run marathons recently. The question of going to the bathroom seems ridiculous and not particularly complex. But this was back in the day. There were no Johnny on the Jobs anywhere. The concept of hydration was just coming into vogue and most of us were raised on the idea that drinking before an athletic event would make you sick. These were the days before water bottles and three different levels of Gatorade. My simple solution to the question of bathroom use was easy – I just won’t drink anything.

Race morning came and it was a beautiful spring day in Lawrence, morning temperatures in the 60’s with a high predicted in the 80’s. A perfect day for a nice morning run, unless it’s a hilly 26.2 mile run and you don’t drink anything. No Gatorade, no water, no coffee, no 5 hour energy, nothing. It is really surprising that I made it to mile 25 before passing out. I struggled up the hill north of Allen Fieldhouse, and like a KU football team, blacked out before reaching Memorial Stadium.

I learned a valuable lesson that day. My clear and simple solution of not drinking was clearly and simply wrong. My worry is that if we seek a simple answer to the complex problem of funding schools, we will bonk long before mile 25. And the stakes are much higher than a finisher’s medal and t-shirt. The stakes are a suitable education for all of the children of Kansas.
Navigating the digital world: #kasbcon13 reflection

Well, I survived my first KASB conference! Even made it to the office on time Monday, and for those who know me personally, that’s amazing! I have to say I was impressed with the conference as well as the KASB staff. From a newbies perspective the whole conference was smooth as silk.

The general session with Kevin Honeycutt was awesome, and as always, inspiring. If you’ve never heard him speak you really are missing out! Kevin and his wife Michelle are dear friends of mine. Kevin also happens to be a school board member on the Inman USD 448 school board, a former art teacher and currently is a Technology Integrationist with ESSDACK. I met Kevin in 2008 at a conference in Wichita. I was a first year tech director and looking for other educators who experienced the power of technology in the classroom. Everything he said during that breakout session in 2008 was what I had experienced as classroom teacher integrating technology, meeting my students needs, differentiating instruction, and battling misperceptions.

You see, back in 2004 I had the opportunity to pilot palms in my fifth grade classroom. Each student had a palm handheld computer of their own. Since this was a relatively new venture in education there weren’t many resources available so I got to create my own curriculum incorporating these mobile devices (based off the approved standards of that time). I spent planning time, lunch time, evenings and weekends online looking for ways to incorporate the devices in meaningful educationally appropriate ways and teaching to the established standards. My students were amazing as they adapted to the new technology, helping each other out and discovering ways of their own to make the technology work for what they were doing. I found a blog by a teacher in Nebraska who was using Palms in his classroom (Tony Vincent) and dreamed of the day I could share what I was experiencing. The reason it was only a dream was because Blogs were blocked. The misperception of well meaning, but misinformed gate-keepers who were afraid that stalkers and child molesters would get ahold my students through the Internet or that I would do something illegal. That technology was going to allow for students to bully, look at porn, and all kinds of bad things. They were afraid of what they didn’t understand and what they didn’t know. The mainstream news was their source of information and it was full of people doing bad things via technology.

I had a completely different experience! In my classroom I saw the technology as a tool. An awesome tool with great potential for fostering creativity, problem solving, higher order thinking skills and collaboration. I would give my students an end result (standard based) and they would find a way to show me what they had learned using applications on their Palms. They would share with their classmates educational appropriate games, tips and tricks for making their Palms work as they discovered that they were in charge of their own learning. Discipline problems were non existent, absenteeism was minimal, and we had fun! We really did have fun learning! I had high expectations of my students and treated them with respect. We had established a culture for learning.

As a tech director I decided to try and recreate that atmosphere and culture with a couple of fifth grade teachers. We discussed the potential of having mobile devices in their classroom using the book Toys to Tools as a guide. Parents were asked how they felt about letting their child bring technology to school and every one of them was OK with it. We did have a few students who didn’t have access to a mobile device so I purchased some iTouches and iPads to supplement the technology. We worked together as team, mutually respectful, with opportunities to fail, so we could learn from those mistakes. I would spend a day or an hour each week in the classroom so I could help troubleshoot connection issues and other unexpected problems. But after a while I wasn’t needed. As sad as that sounds it was exactly what I wanted. Those teachers were empowered to make the technology work in their classroom. They had the rights to fix issues, the knowledge to know that an issue was beyond their control and the creativity to go on to plan b, c, d… Let’s go back to the statement “They were empowered”. That’s the key! Empowered, trusted, encouraged, and expected to make the technology work, to build the culture of collaboration, to engage their students in meaningful, relevant learning opportunities. That was the inspirational message Kevin conveyed.

That’s what I want to do here at KASB! The culture is already established in the staff! They welcomed me with open minds to the possibilities that technology can bring to their jobs and showed trust in me, even when I make mistakes, as I learn what they do and show them how technology can help. They really are an awesome staff to work with! Now it’s time to expand that culture. What can I do to help your administration and school board experience the positive power of integrating technology? My session at the KASB conference on Social Media was very well received and several people asked me about doing a workshop with their board or administrators. Call me and let me know what I can do to help you establish a culture for learning in your district!
New Year, new challenges, same foundation

As we move into the new year public education will be faced with a new set of challenges. So much to do...so little time.

As many of you know KASB has sister organizations around the nation. Many school districts across the country are dealing with the very same issues even if they are 200 hundred or 2000 miles away. The California School Boards Association recently shared a Top 10 list for new board members that we thought might be worth sharing with Kansas Leaders.

- Think kids!
- Work as a team, speak with one voice
- Keep confidential matter confidential
- Maintain the big picture view
- Listen, learn and ask questions
- Understand and stay with your role
- Respect the past and work toward the future
- Abide by policy
- Accept that change takes time and planning
- Advocate, advocate, advocate!

We have discussed some of these topics in earlier blogs but several of these topics really need to be repeated for all board members on a regular basis.

To find more about these top 10 and other important leadership advice and information, visit the KASB Leadership Services Blog at http://kasbleadershipservices.blogspot.com/