

Reporter

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SCHOOLS FOR QUALITY EDUCATION, INC.

Public Relations Message

Post Audit Findings the Press Skipped

Headlines screamed that local school districts were over identifying the number of free lunch students when the Department of Legislative Post Audit presented their report on at-risk students in Kansas. Much of the data gathered by Post Audit highlights the difference between information obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau and the Kansas Department of Education. Sadly there is the urge to sensationalize a small bit of information while virtually ignoring the many explanations of weaknesses in both forms of data collection. Since some policymakers have called into question the accuracy of department information on free lunch counts based on Census Bureau data, it would seem that the differences between how each is able to obtain their statistics should be important.

The most glaring flaw Post Audit noted was the obvious time lag associated with the U S Census Bureau's gathering and reporting of their information. Today's estimates are for 2003. When used to determine the wealth of the population, it is important to recognize economic trends can create tremendous shifts in the number of families receiving state and federal assistance on a year-to-year basis. Such shifts may not be considered in a timely enough manner by the Census Bureau to address the needs of the present.

Post Audit's report also pointed out the weaknesses in the Bureau count of children in poverty in Kansas, including the fact that rural counts may not be gathered well enough to give a true estimate of this group of citizenry. The poor are often a very transient population. It is difficult to track the homeless, migrants and undocumented workers that our schools must serve wherever they end up and for

however long they are there. With families breaking up and then blending in unconventional ways it can be very hard for the bureau to gather such data accurately. Apparently the census form only allows room for six children in a family. Additional children are left out of the count. Similarly when a child is living with foster parents he is not counted in the census because the census only counted "related" children.

All of these weaknesses factor into differences in the recent report of student populations in three rural school districts presented in the performance audit report. In the comparison of what school districts reported to the Department of Education vs. the Census Bureau count, there were amazing discrepancies. In information focusing on students between the ages of five to seventeen, the Census Bureau identified USD 438 Skyline as having 213 students while the district reported 461 children to the Dept of Ed. USD 424 Mullinville had 78 children by the census accounts but the Dept. of Ed. Report showed 159. Finally USD 219 Elkhart had 485 students according to the census information when they actually were serving 696 children. All of these examples were listed in the Post Audit report but not presented in most press coverage or given much attention in recent presentations.

What was noticed was the supposed number of children being over reported. While the Census Bureau has the distinct advantage of having access to financial information that the Department of Education and local school districts cannot obtain, they have a time constraint that poses a huge hindrance to educators trying to meet real needs of at-risk children. The Census Bureau can check tax returns of

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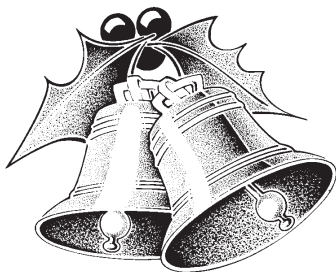
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individuals, while education entities have to take parents' word on their income level.

Most media coverage focused on the possibility that 17% of the 500 free-lunch students in the statewide random sample were actually ineligible because their parents underreported their incomes. Extrapolating that out to estimate how that would relate to the total student population, suggests that as many as 23,000 students may have been inaccurately identified for free lunch, but Post Audit also suggests that approximately 3,500 students who were eligible came from families who did not apply. They found all this information by going through tax return data from the Department of Revenue and quarterly wage reports from the Department of Labor. While Post Audit and the Census Bureau have access to this information, our school districts do not. All the while districts have students who need help, and it is their job to provide it in a timely manner.

The Legislative Post Audit's Performance Audit Report on K-12 Education was charged with reviewing free-lunch student counts used as a basis for at-risk funding. Consideration was not given to the number of children in our Kansas public schools who have not reached adequate yearly progress targets. Although that would seem to be pertinent to a discussion of at-risk students, it was not in the question posed by the 2010 Commission to Legislative Post Audit. The report did provide very telling weaknesses in how data is gathered while making it clear that Census Bureau information has its share of inaccuracies. At the federal level Title I dollars continue to be determined by free and reduced lunch counts. Schools are not able to access the knowledge that would confirm or refute income levels of families to ensure that the information they report to the state is correct. The challenge remains finding the "silver bullet" that readily and accurately gets funding to our neediest students.

Val DeFever
Public Relations Representative



Dollars and Sense II: Cost Effective Strategies for Good, Small Schools

Good small schools are affordable and sustainable, and they make sense. Thirty years of education research, summarized by the first *Dollars and Sense*, showed that small schools graduate a higher percentage of students, have lower rates of violence and disciplinary problems, and send more students on to postsecondary education than larger schools. *Dollars & Sense II* deepens the evidence that good small schools are more affordable and successful even when compared to larger schools in the same district.

This report continues the argument for small schools by: 1) analyzing more than 3,000 construction projects showing that smaller schools are no more expensive to build than much larger schools; 2) analyzing the budgets of 25 good small schools demonstrating that they spend less per student on educational programs, maintenance, and operations than the per-pupil expenditure in their districts, yet they achieve results that are equal to or better than schools in the same area; and 3) providing examples of innovative and effective educational programs, facilities, and strategies for cost effectiveness in small schools. Order your free copy online at www.goodsmallschools.org, under "Downloads."

By Barbara Kent Lawrence et al
Knowledgeworks, Summer 2005



SQE Annual Meeting

Schools for Quality Education held their Annual Meeting and Issues Caucus Breakfast on Saturday, December 2, 2006 in Wichita. Elections were held for positions on the Board of Directors. Steve Watts from USD #292-Wheatland is the new president and Dennis Dowell from USD #482-Dighton was elected President-Elect. A complete listing of the Board of Directors can be found on page 4 of this newsletter.



President's Message



My appreciation for the support that SQE gives to small and rural schools in Kansas has grown over this past year, as I have been involved closely with its outreach in your behalf.

A summary of the year's activities is appropriate for me to give you, especially as I consider this past year to be a challenging and pivotal year for education in Kansas. The executive board met more frequently than usual this year and found it necessary to meet via conference call a couple of times in order to make timely decisions and keep communication flowing. Our membership of 132 districts is significant and the board is committed to representing the needs of its membership effectively throughout the year.

In January members of the SQE board visited with KASB staff at their request about a round table discussion with Schools for Fair Funding representatives and the goal of the school finance lawsuit. A meeting did take place later in the spring between KASB board and staff, SQE board members, Schools for Fair Funding lawyers, and superintendents of urban districts. The meeting was a time of discussion of the diversity of needs for all schools in Kansas and a good opportunity to communicate the small schools' perspective firsthand. I believe that communication between districts of different sizes can be beneficial in understanding the common challenges, and it certainly showcases the academic successes of small schools.

In February an issues breakfast in Topeka was held for SQE members to invite and join their legislators for breakfast. I find this a valuable opportunity to visit not only with my legislators, but to spend time with other key policy makers. This is an annual event held at the same time as the KASB Legislative meeting in Topeka and is a tradition that draws a good number of legislators and leads to a convenient informal discussion time.

Throughout the spring SQE was involved in the legislative process. Val DeFever, the Public Relations staff, kept members informed of the committee discussions pertaining to education issues via email and testified often regarding the small and rural school interests. Perhaps some of you helped in this effort by supplying data for her testimony or by testifying yourself. Thank you for your contribution in the legislative process, whether it is a letter or email to your legislator, a comment at a legislative coffee in your district, or a trip to Topeka!

One of the popular activities of SQE that reaches the classroom directly has been the essay contest sponsored each year for middle and high school students. This past summer the board voted to suspend the contest for this year for logistical reasons, but the intention is to announce a topic again next summer for students to write about in the fall. Also at the summer meeting the board voted to generate fact sheets regarding the challenges and successes of small schools in Kansas, which could be used in discussions with the public and policy makers. These would be patterned after materials received by the office at KSU from a Missouri advocate for small schools. As SQE works to represent a composite of the needs of small schools and to identify those needs and costs of meeting them, the board also voted to contact the Rural School and Community Trust for their input.

Also on the national level, SQE helped host the National Rural Education Association's annual meeting in Kansas City this past fall. SQE is the state affiliate to this organization and it was a privilege to learn from the presenters and speakers from other states. A diversity of challenges but a common commitment to education was apparent.

Your membership in SQE is valuable to your district because of the collaborative effort it makes on a statewide level. SQE brings together the concerns of 132 districts in different geographical parts of the state with different educational challenges and works for a common voice that can be heard. When we speak with a united voice and a shared goal, we are more effective in developing a solution to our problems.

Over the past year I had the privilege of working in the midst of a coalition of Kansas schools, which represent the best in education for their students. They tirelessly endeavor to not leave any children behind. They work alongside business partners to make education a priority for their communities. And they succeed in shaping the leaders for tomorrow's world. These are the Schools for Quality Education and you can be proud of the job you do!



*Glennys Doane, President
Schools for Quality Education
USD #272—Wacanda*

Mark Your Calendar

SQE Public Relations Breakfast

February 15, 2007
Jayhawk Club, Topeka
700 SW Jackson
6:30-8:00 a.m.
Reservations Required
Call 785-532-5886



Contact: 785-532-5886 or go to our website at <http://coe.ksu.edu/sqe>.

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