

# Reporter

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**SCHOOLS FOR QUALITY EDUCATION, INC.**

## Public Relations Message

### **Virtual Schools in Kansas are Audited by the Legislature**

In an effort to better understand virtual schools in our state, the 2010 Commission asked the Department of Legislative Post Audit (LPA) to study the twenty-eight schools that presently exist. The department visited with the districts who are presently running these schools and the department of education who oversees their activities. The results were startling, but not necessarily all together surprising.

Virtual schools began in the late 1990's as an effort to meet the needs of a population of would-be students made up of high school drop-outs, home school and private school students who needed more curriculum available to them and students seeking advanced course work. This population has grown from 60 students in 1998 to over 2,000 in the current school year. Many of these students have not been a part of the public school population in the past. A break down of the course work pursued shows a strong interest in math, science, social studies and language arts offerings.

Data gathered showed that although the majority of the virtual school students lived in close proximity to the district offering their course work, 878 of these students lived over thirty miles from the district. The virtual school offerings were most often made available by the district itself, while six regional service centers also provide instruction for area school districts. In all cases, districts receive current base state aid per pupil, however, all but one district indicated that providing this form of education is less costly than a brick and mortar education. Students of average school-age are tested in much the same manner as regular students in the home district, but those in credit recovery type programs who are over the age of 18 may not be tested in the

same way. With all this in mind, it is interesting to note that virtual school students do not perform as well as traditional school students.

At the advent of virtual schools, the Kansas Department of Education was directed to develop policies and procedures to ensure uniformity and adequate oversight of these schools. There is very little actually in statute to determine requirements of virtual education, but it is recognized that it would "cover all K-12 courses offered through distance learning technologies (primarily the Internet) that are available to students at any time and in any place." Guidelines established by the Department of Education include:

- To be eligible to receive State funding the virtual school must be registered with the Department of Education.
- Course work must be aligned with the state standards and taught by a certified teacher
- Students are required to take the state assessments.
- Virtual schools must have a policy in place to meet the needs of special education students.
- These schools must submit an annual report that indicated their growth and performance.

The Department of Education will conduct an on-site visit to each virtual school in the state.

These policies and procedures were among the strongest in the country, as noted in the national report, *Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning: A Review of State-Level Policy And Practice*. The report stated, "The Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) has perhaps the most-developed and well-documented system for tracking online programs of any state in the country..." Unfortunately the Department of Education has been unable to provide the oversight outlined in these policies. Turnover

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in staff, new leadership in the department and increased demands in other areas has resulted in a break down in the intended follow-through. Further, there has been a focus on less oversight rather than the degree outlined by the initial policies and procedures. The virtual school advisory board also recommended relaxing or eliminating several of the requirements. As a result of these factors, some information was removed from reports and all reports were not gathered and processed as originally expected. On-site visits to new virtual schools have not taken place. It became apparent to Legislative Post Audit that there were inherent risks related to our virtual schools that should be considered by the legislature, to ensure more oversight by the Department of Education. Specifically they looked at how the local districts and the Department of Education addressed the following risks:

- Ensuring that virtual students live in the state of Kansas. In the future, the department will gather home zip codes.
- Monitor the number of adult students pursuing their high school diploma. Districts receive full funding for these students, however, they are not required to take state assessments. Also in doubt was whether these students worked online the required time to be considered full-time students.
- The distance of students from their brick and mortar school could enable districts to “give” or “trade” virtual school students. LPA found four rural school districts who were sharing students in an effort to offset the affects of declining enrollment. Districts are allowed to share students when they have entered into an inter-district agreement. In this instance, two of the four districts had such an agreement.
- Allowing the virtual school district to determine where their students were counted creates the risk that districts could manipulate state funding and assessment results. They could place students in districts where low enrollment weighting was greater or shift them to show greater achievement gains.

The report of Legislative Post Audit department to the Legislative Post Audit Committee stimulated a wide range of questions. Acting Commissioner Dale Dennis told the policymakers that staff would have to be shifted from other areas to provide more direct oversight of our virtual schools to address all

the concerns raised by the post audit report. The Legislative Post Audit Committee has recommended that virtual schools be considered for an interim study this summer. The 55 page report can be accessed at: <http://www.kslegislature.org/postaudit/>

*Val DeFever*  
*Public Relations Representative*

## Foundation for Rural Education and Development Technology Grants

**Description:** The Foundation for Rural Education and Development (FRED) in cooperation with the Rural Telephone Finance Cooperative (RFTC) created the Technology Grants for Rural Schools program to help meet the growing need for innovative technology in the classroom. This includes adding new programs and curriculum for technology education and purchasing new equipment. As the role of technology in classroom grows, it becomes a powerful tool to improve both teaching and learning. Many schools are incorporating new, innovative technology in an effort to help motivate and inspire their students. Their goals include bringing modern computers to every classroom, connecting every classroom to the information superhighway and making sure that effective and engaging software and online resources will be an integral part of every school curriculum.

**Deadline Date:** September 14, 2007

**Size of Grant:** \$50,000

**Cost Sharing or Match:** No

**Web:** <http://www.fred.org/teachtech.html>



## Ten Reasons Small Schools Positively Impact Students and their Learning

While numerous studies have documented that small schools effectively boost student achievement, especially among at-risk students, a new report now summarizes the vast research literature that explains just why small works in schooling.

The report, *The Hobbit Effect: Why Small Works in Public Schools* from the *Rural School and Community Trust*, identifies ten research-based attributes of small schools that are proven to have a positive impact on kids and their learning. These elements are either normally found in most small schools or are more common in smaller schools than in larger schools. In the report, author Lorna Jimerson explores the evidence of each element's impact and why it confers advantages on children. Among the attributes identified are: greater participation in extra-curricular activities, increased school safety, smaller class size, and wider grade-span configurations.

Jimerson found that small schools intrinsically foster close relationships that not only help children feel connected to the school community and reduce alienation, especially among older students, but also lead to increased student learning. The close relationships inherent in small schools also have a positive impact on educators. For example, teachers in small schools tend to be more satisfied with their jobs, have less absenteeism, and take more responsibility for ensuring that their students are successful in school.

Jimerson says the research evidence clearly documents that efforts underway in some states to consolidate small schools (and small districts) are unnecessary, irrational, and imprudent. Far from improving student learning, these actions will divert energy and focus from effective school reform and will wrench children from community-centered schools that have the most likelihood of meeting their needs. "Rather than eradicating small schools, policymakers would be wise to invest in small schools and elements that make them effective and recognize that smallness is not a curse, but a blessing," says Jimerson. This report is available online at [www.ruraledu.org/hobbiteffect](http://www.ruraledu.org/hobbiteffect). Contacts: Lorna Jimerson, Ed.D. (author), 802-425-2497 and Marty Strange, Policy Director, 802-728-4383.

*The Rural School and Community Trust*

## President's Message

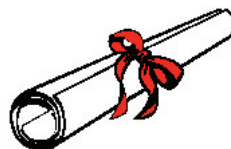
Our hearts and prayers go out to all who have suffered loss in the recent wave of severe weather. I especially want to pray for USD 422 Greensburg, one of our member districts.

The school year is quickly coming to a close following closely on the heels of the ending of the Kansas legislature. The majority of the efforts on your behalf by SQE coincides with the legislature being in session. Val DeFever, our public relations representative, does a great job of keeping our issues and point of view before the Kansas legislature. Her efforts continue on to State Board of Education meetings and any committee meetings that may affect our organization. Val keeps us informed with weekly e-mail updates. If needed, she calls individuals and districts to help testify on specific issues. She is currently working with the Legislative Economic Development Committee to show some what our member districts are doing. If you don't currently receive Val's e-mail updates and would like to, contact Barb Havlicek at [barbhav@ksu.edu](mailto:barbhav@ksu.edu) and ask to be on the electronic mail list.

Each year we hold a public relations breakfast in Topeka early in the morning on the same day of the KASB Governmental Relations Seminar. This is a great time to meet legislators and establish or renew relationships with them. In October, SQE holds its annual meeting, often in conjunction with the Center for Rural Education and Small Schools conference in Manhattan. I am always impressed with the quality of speakers and topics that are geared to small schools' interests.

If you haven't already visited our website, you will find it at <http://coe.ksu.edu/sqe>. There you will find information about other activities that SQE supports. I've tried to share some of the many different activities that SQE supports with the money you contribute through your membership. If you have suggestions on other ways we can work for you, don't hesitate to let us know. You will be getting a request for membership renewal shortly. Keep these things in mind, as your continued support will mean our work on your behalf will continue.

Steve Watts, SQE President  
USD #292 - Wheatland



## Mark Your Calendar

### Centennial Convention

"NREA: Crossing Into Our Next Century"

November 12-14, 2007  
Hilton Garden Inn Hotel  
and

Clarion Convention Center  
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Enjoy Your Summer!



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