



Posted on Wed, Apr. 23, 2014

Speaker Ray Merrick: School bill empowers students

By Speaker Ray Merrick

With the education bill officially signed into law, Kansas children will now reap the benefits of more money in the classroom, broader local control, expanded opportunities for those from low-income families, and millions in property-tax relief.

The key focus of the lawmakers who voted for the bill was Kansas students. Too often in debating school finance and policy, the conversation somehow gets twisted into what's best for the institutions, teachers and administrators. That's a dangerous distraction from the true purpose of Kansas schools – providing the best education for our students and preparing them to achieve success in the real world.

The Kansas Supreme Court in the Gannon ruling stated that the true test of providing children an adequate education is not spending but student outcomes. The Legislature set out not only to equalize school spending across the state but also to improve outcomes through student-focused reforms. Now, districts will have the ability to remove underperforming teachers. Granting the districts this option will enable them to better manage their employees, ensuring the best teachers in the classroom.

There are other student-focused reforms that Kansas families are excited about. School districts can now hire teachers based on real-world experience in areas such as science, engineering and technology. These new teachers will be required to have a degree as well as at least five years working in that sector, similar to having an adjunct professor teach at universities. Many of us have been inspired by the passion of someone who truly loves his or her field and wants to share it with others. Now we're giving that chance to more students.

Despite dramatic funding increases for at-risk students over the past 10 years, achievement levels for those from low-income families have remained stagnant. To address this, legislators created a new scholarship opportunity for low-income families that want to send their children to private school, which could completely change the course of a student's life. The scholarships will be financed by donations from businesses, which will receive tax credits, further incentivizing the private sector to get involved in helping prepare a well-educated future workforce from all income backgrounds.

Further, the education bill expands the number of innovative schools for districts with high populations of low-income students. The districts will be able to use new and groundbreaking ideas for reaching students, helping them achieve success.

All this is in addition to another \$134.4 million appropriated to equalize schools, on top of the \$5.9 billion already invested in education in Kansas by taxpayers. Plus, Kansans will now receive up to \$78 million in proposed property-tax relief.

The education bill is truly a historic achievement that will empower generations of Kansas students for success.

Rep. Ray Merrick, R-Stilwell, is speaker of the Kansas House.

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