



Case Statement for Public Education Partnership Summer 2014

There are over 500 K-12 public school districts in the Great Plains United Methodist Conference. Whether they are urban, suburban, or rural in nature, they face similar challenges in at least three general areas: finance, accountability and their relationship with both employers and higher education.

FINANCE

Funding K-12 education is the largest part of the state budgets in both Kansas and Nebraska. The state constitutions require that schools be adequately funded, but the definition of adequacy is a moving target. Funding for K-12 education in both states depends on property taxes, which creates inequalities among farmers/ranchers and others, and demographically from the less populated western parts of the region to the more populated eastern part. Efficiency is jeopardized in communities of aging and declining population. Course offerings and activities are reduced. Salaries and benefits for staff are difficult to maintain.

There has been a substantial increase in the numbers of students with greater than average educational need in both states over the past few years. English language learners, students with disabilities and students with moderate to severe mental health needs require extra resources to learn to perform academically at the level of proficiency required by federal mandates. State and federal financing for these special need areas has not been adequate, which causes additional stress on a local districts' budgets.

The effects of poverty on student learning are well documented. No area of either state is immune to the growing numbers of families who cannot sustain a "middle class" life. Whether a district is urban or rural, the fact that the statewide poverty rates have increased to nearly 50 percent has a distinct impact on the schools and the tax base that funds them.

ACCOUNTABILITY

2014-2015 is the school year in which all students were to have achieved 100 percent mastery of the core subjects, regardless of their mental or physical capacity, under the federal "No Child Left Behind" (ESEA) mandate. Failure of Congress to reauthorize and modify this law has had significant consequences for our schools.

- Kansas chose to apply for a waiver to the 100 percent mastery requirement. The provisional waiver is currently at high risk of being withdrawn over the issue of tying student achievement to teacher evaluations.
- Nebraska chose not to apply for a waiver in hopes that Congress would act to correct the obvious flaw of 100 percent mastery before the 2014-2015 school year.

Our schools have worked hard to close the achievement gap between "all" students and those in particular subgroups such as English language learners, students with disabilities, students in poverty, and students in different racial or ethnic minority groups. Without the waiver, our substantial progress becomes moot and virtually every school in both states will be declared failures. This is extremely demoralizing to our educators.

There is a profound concern among our people over issues of the new Common Core State Standards (in Kansas, the College and Career Ready Standards), new assessments of student learning, "teaching to the test," and perceived intrusion by the federal government into state responsibilities. Adopting new standards

can be positive, but the effort and expense involved in acquiring new resources and learning to use them effectively in the midst of a financial retrenchment is a stressor for the local districts.

USEFUL CONNECTIONS

Learning for its own sake is laudable. Practically, though, a strong K-12 education is a student's path to a successful, happy and meaningful life; to an ability to compete globally in the 21st century; and to be fully prepared for higher education or a trade school.

Nebraska and Kansas both should continue to explore ways to strengthen existing partnerships between industry and the schools in order to provide internships and develop the skills that employers need. Employability involves a host of attributes, and we need to ensure that our schools are aware of current and future requirements so that they can maximize student success.

In addition, both states should continue to cement relationships between K-12 systems and institutions of higher education. Students who enter post-secondary programs in need of remediation are an indicator that current practices need to be evaluated and changed to ensure that preparation in our high schools is adequate for all college-bound students.

CONCLUSION

United Methodists have a tradition of supporting public education. Our social principles (paragraph 164E) are clear: "We believe that every person has the right to an education. We also believe that responsibility for education of the young rests with the family, faith communities and the government. In society, this function can best be fulfilled through public policies that ensure access for all persons to free public elementary and secondary schools and to post-secondary schools of their choice."

Public education has a great impact on the future. Our challenges in the Great Plains Conference are not unique, but they are made more difficult by conflicting demands on the states' legislators resulting in declining financial support of schools. Education is a community responsibility. Our children deserve our attention!

NEXT STEPS

Public education is the responsibility of the public. The following actions, if taken, will demonstrate the commitment of The United Methodist Church to the children in our conference.

1. Share information about today's challenges for public education with church members and others in local communities. Highlight their successes.
2. Verbalize support of education by the community. Communicate with the Governor, the legislature, and local school board members.
3. Develop working relationships with all public schools within the community. Offer tangible support to staff after discovering specific needs.
4. Recognize and honor educators within each church, for their continuing service to children and youth.
5. Volunteers at the schools should try to make it clear that they represent the local church's support of education.
6. Investigate possibilities for supportive out-of-school time programs. Safe spaces for children before school, after school, during school holidays/in-service days, and over the summer are helpful to families and support ongoing development of social and employability skills.
7. Speak up for schools in a positive way, throughout the community.

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