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Post-pandemic to Post-secondary Success

John Heim

Ten years ago, the Kansas Association of School Boards Board of Directors authorized a statewide research project to determine how Kansans felt about their public schools. Local boards were encouraged to bring their communities together and ask them some basic questions about what they like and dislike about education in Kansas. One hundred districts ranging in size from Blue Valley to Republic County facilitated community meetings. Over 1,000 Kansans participated. The most common concern reported was that there was too much emphasis on testing.

For context, we must go back three decades, to the early 1990's. Education policy in the early 1990's can be summarized through a 1992 law called "The School District Finance and Quality Performance Accreditation Act." The law codified two changes to education policy that have affected school district governance and operation until this day.

Prior to 1992, schools were accredited based upon *inputs* such as courses offered, services provided, and even whether they flew the flag every day. Quality Performance Accreditation (QPA) changed the accreditation metric to emphasize *outcomes*, measures of how schools were improving students' performance. That same law established QPA in statute and created a new finance system that shifted funding from primarily a local responsibility to primarily a state responsibility.

These two changes led to a change in school governance as school boards were no longer primarily concerned with setting mill levies and instead had to become more concerned with curriculum and instruction. Their districts were no longer being judged based upon who had the lowest mill levy or the biggest library; student learning was now at the forefront. QPA meant school boards set goals for improvement based upon local needs and concerns. It was a time when school leaders had to focus on the performance of students in their systems.

Policy-makers at the state and federal level were not satisfied with a system based upon simply improving performance on locally determined measures. In 2001, Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). NCLB set benchmark standards on state assessments in reading and math. The law included provisions for states to sanction schools that did not achieve these benchmarks and encouraged comparisons between and among schools. School boards were in a position of overseeing accountability efforts, but the mandates for achievement and improvement came from Washington, DC. After over a decade of this system, parents, educators, board members and school patrons had had enough. Schools had become so focused on reading and math test scores that other subjects and goals were lost. It was all about that test in the spring.

Around this same time, the Kansas State Board of Education, working with a new commissioner of education, undertook a project to answer a simple question: "What do we want for our children?" Commissioner Randy Watson toured the state, talking with business leaders, teachers, parents, administrators, and school board members. What he heard was not surprising—Kansans want their children to be successful after they graduate. Parents, educators, and school leaders told the Kansas State Board of Education that academic skills are important but are not measured

solely by a test. More importantly, they talked about social and emotional needs and how those factors into post-secondary success. The state board used this data to set a new vision for Kansas education. School Boards were given a new and exciting challenge.

With the new “Kansans Can” vision, local districts were asked to look beyond indicators like scores on standardized math and reading tests. New data about how students performed a year or two out of high school became the standard for success. A new vision, viewed in the context of more inspirational data, meant that school leaders would need to look systemically at how they prepare students.

Systems become perfect at producing the results they get, and the system we had in Kansas was designed to produce results on a one-time test of reading and of math. By broadening the vision, and looking at different results, it became apparent that schools would have to change. The Kansas State Board of Education asked Kansas schools to take a big risk—redesign your schools with a focus on post-secondary results.

Three years into the project we have seen successes and setbacks. School boards engaged in processes focused on second-order change. The shift from monitoring accountability measures set by Congress to learning and adapting in real time presents new challenges for the local culture. Trust among stakeholders becomes strained when input and communication breakdown. Redesign is hard, time-consuming work that is also exciting and challenging.

Then, in the middle of March everything changed. A once-in-a-century pandemic closed schools and focused educators in a whole new way. Managing the virus became paramount. Redesign took a back seat to figuring out how to educate students while keeping everyone safe.

A crisis such as the global pandemic can be an accelerant to change. When we emerge from the current state and learning no longer must be mitigated by safety measures, what lessons will we learn? We have already seen school boards grappling with the concept of assigning credit based upon competencies and not seat time. Will we be able to leverage what we learn about using time as a variable and learning as a constant and apply those lessons to a post-pandemic redesign process? Schools are learning about how to partner with parents and communities to provide custodial care for children outside of the normal education structure. Are there lessons here that will help with redesign in the future?

It has been said that in our current COVID-controlled world there is only yesterday, today, and tomorrow because time has become a soup and not a line. In a time when all of our energy is focused on the virus, it is hard to think about what comes beyond tomorrow. But it will be essential to do so as we move from post-pandemic to post-secondary success.

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