

NEWS RELEASE

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KASB Issues Statement on School Choice and Competition Proposals

The Kansas Association of School Boards today presented a statement on proposals for school choice and competition to the Kansas State Board of Education. KASB said the proposals would not expand choice and competition, and would lead to a two-tier system of schools in Kansas.

The State Board will be considering these proposals on Wednesday, Nov. 9, as part of its Legislative package for the 2006 Legislative Session.

KASB said that public schools are willing to compete as long as all schools must follow the same state and federal rules and regulations, and noted that proposals for school choice give private schools, rather than parents, the real choice because they can set their own standards for admission, academic performance, and behavior, and set tuition and fees.

Also, KASB noted that the Kansas Constitution prohibits public funding for religious schools and requires that public schools operate under the control of local boards. No evidence has been presented to show that private schools serve at-risk and special needs students better than public schools. Finally, the statement notes that choice and competition do not always reduce costs and improve service, especially for public services.

The attached statement may be reprinted as an article, opinion piece or letter-to-the-editor.

KASB staff members are available for interviews or as guests on public affairs programs.

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Statement on
School Choice and Competition Proposals

To the
Kansas State Board of Education

By Mark Tallman, Assistant Executive Director/Advocacy
November 8, 2005

The State Board of Education agenda for tomorrow morning includes several proposals that proponents say would improve public education through school competition and parental choice. These proposals would neither expand choice nor provide real competition. Instead, they would undermine a system of public education by creating a two-tier system of “choice” schools that could pick and choose the students they can serve most effectively – or profitably – and leave public schools to serve only the most vulnerable and expensive students that the “free market” doesn’t want.

The State Board has information on two bills to create private school vouchers programs (HB 2906 for “at risk” students and SB 169 for special education). Both bills had hearings in the Legislature; neither were recommended for passage. The Board is also being asked to consider changes in the state charter school law only a year after the Legislature adopted a number of amendments following a thorough study.

We urge the State Board to join the Kansas Legislature in rejecting these proposals for the following reasons:

Public schools will compete if the rules are the same for all schools. Under both HB 2906 and SB 169, private schools could receive public funding through “scholarships” for certain students, but would not have to follow virtually ANY of the state and federal laws and regulations that apply to public schools. Nor do those bills CHANGE any requirements for public schools.

Public education is often accused of resisting competition, but the supporters of these bills apparently do not want private schools to compete under the same rules. They want private schools to receive the benefits of public funding, but be exempt from the accountability that applies to public schools.

“School choice” usually means the school makes the choice, not the parents. Public schools must serve all children, regardless of their needs or ability. Both the No Child Left Behind Act and State Board regulations hold public schools accountable for the success of all children. Yet HB 2906 and SB 169 allow non-public schools receiving vouchers to their own standards for admission, academic performance and behavior. They can charge whatever tuition and fees they want, so there is no guarantee that a state funded voucher will really make the school available to low-income families. Finally, they are not required to provide transportation, textbooks or support services to help “at risk” children succeed.

Federal law already requires public schools to provide special education and academic assistance to private school students – but under the authority and accountability of the public school district.

The Kansas Constitution prohibits public funding for religion schools and requires that public schools operate under the control of local boards. At a time when many argue that the Legislature and the Courts should follow “original intent,” it is important to note what the Kansas Constitution says. Article 6 states that “No religious sect or sects shall control any part of the public education funds.” Clearly, the people of Kansas did not want public funds used to pay for religious instruction. Article 6 also says that public schools are to be “maintained, developed and operated by locally elected boards.” The people believe that schools in their community should be managed by public officials elected by those communities.

KASB supports experiments with public schools choice plans, but agrees with the constitution adopted by the people of Kansas that those plans should be approved by their local boards, not some outside entity.

Like public schools, private schools have had an “achievement gap.” Information about student performance, demographics and funding is available for every Kansas public school and district. No comparable information is required for private schools. However, past studies have shown that private schools have similar performance to public schools when they have similar student populations. No evidence has ever been presented showing that private schools do a better job educating at risk or special education students.

If the State Board is really interested in school choice and competition, it should start by collecting and making available to the public the same information about private schools it requires of public schools.

Vouchers will tend to make public education the “choice of last result.” HB 2906 proposes to help “at risk” students, but the aid would be offered to all students who qualify for free lunch, not those who are actually struggling academically. Private schools could accept only low-income students who are doing well in school rather than those who are falling behind. Likewise, SB 169 is targeted to special education students, but private schools could choose to admit only gifted students and leave those with serious and expensive disabilities for the public schools.

These features cause us to believe that the proponents are not really interested in closing the achievement gap or serving students with special needs. These bills lead to a system where the “market” competes for the students most likely to succeed and leave out the most expensive and needy children.

Choice and competition models for private consumer goods do not apply to many public services. The cost of our “market-based” health care system has increased dramatically, and has not improved health care for the poor. “Choice” in higher education through scholarships, grants and loans has not controlled cost; it has simply allowed tuition to rise faster. Many small Kansas communities have no “competition” among many private businesses, or have seen services disappear entirely because it isn’t profitable.

The State Board’s own assessments show that public education in Kansas is improving; the achievement gap is narrowing despite a long way to go; and Kansas ranks among the top states in the nation, especially for the dollars spent on each student. None of the proposals before the Board would really provide choice and competition. Instead, they would divide schools and students among haves and have-nots, and weaken our tradition of public education for all.