



*Reading, Writing and a Worthwhile Education for Kansas Kids:
What Kansans Said About What They Heard*
August 2010

Since the summer of 2007, the Kansas Learning First Alliance has looked to the Partnership for 21st Century Skills¹ as a framework to drive curricular, instructional and assessment reform. Members determined it offered the most comprehensive strategy to transform Kansas schools into ones that provided intellectual challenge, practical relevance, and social and civic development for both students and staff. The question then became how to best disseminate that framework not only to the members of KLFA organizations, but also parents and community and business leaders. Given the regard for local control at the school district level and the understanding true reform must have grass roots buy-in, the Community Engagement action team, one of three KLFA workgroups that move concepts into action, went to work to create a plan.

After many months, consideration of a number of options and gaining access to the resources of the local public television station, KTWU, a plan emerged to stage an event in the fall of 2009 designed to start the discussion among Kansans as to what may lie in store for Kansas students. The production, titled *Reading, Writing and a Worthwhile Education for Kansas Kids*², was taped Sept. 2, and shown on all three Kansas public television stations Sept. 23. The show's format was simple: groups of parents, business leaders and educators were given data about emerging trends in technology, student demographics and business and industry. Discussion among the three panels ensued, facilitated by co-hosts Brad and Judy Stauffer, one following the other. The only editing

¹ <http://www.p21.org/> The Partnership for 21st Century Skills is a national organization that advocates for 21st century readiness for every student. As the United States continues to compete in a global economy that demands innovation, P21 and its members provide tools and resources to help the U.S. education system keep up by fusing the three Rs and four Cs (critical thinking and problem solving, communication, collaboration, and creativity and innovation). While leading districts and schools are already doing this, P21 advocates for local, state and federal policies that support this approach for every school.

The Governor's P-20 Education Council oversees the P21 in Kansas.

² The show, and all supporting documents necessary to host a "Watch and Talk" party, can be accessed at <http://www.klfa.org/>.

for the final product was to tighten up gaps in transition; no editing or scripting was done for the conversations.

KTWU personnel estimated as many as 10,000 Kansans may have watched the show. But watching the show was only part of the event. Throughout the state, “Watch and Talk” parties were held in conjunction with the showing. After the show, facilitators led discussion among those who had come to libraries and schools wanting to share their own opinions about both the data presented and the comments made on the show. Evaluation surveys indicate at least 11 parties were held that night. At least another seven have been held since.

Survey Results

Access to an electronic survey was part of the material available for those who hosted an event. Those interested in seeing the results in their entirety can find a link to them at the KLFA Web site.

A snapshot of the meeting locations and participation reveals the following:

- Events were staged from east to west as from the Kansas City area to Colby, and north to south from Hiawatha to Wichita. Most were in metro areas but a number were in smaller, more rural communities.
- The size of the events varied tremendously. The largest was held at the Kansas Exemplary Educators Network conference sponsored by the Kansas State Department of Education. Almost 250 people participated. The smallest had two participants. The mean of the events was 26, the median was 16. On average, 22 of the participants listed themselves as educators; the median was nine educators. Averages would suggest 55 percent to 85 percent of participants at any given meeting were educators. In total, over 550 people participated.
- Almost all hosts commented the materials provided to them for staging the event were sufficient.
- About two-thirds of the meetings held to date were conducted the night of the original showing. (The show was broadcast statewide on two other occasions, with KTWU showing it a fourth time.)

What Participants Said

As a summary activity, participants were asked, after discussing the show’s contents, what statements/concepts could they agree to as a group. Given the comments covered a wide range of topics and the fact a number of people touched on issues that are interrelated and have interwoven and interdependent relationships, there was not a definitive method of quantifying the “What did your group agree upon?” segment of the survey. However, certain themes consistently emerged.

Most common was the need to develop broader cultural literacy, including teaching foreign languages and cultures as early as grade school. Nearly one-third of the groups specifically mentioned this concept.

Following cultural literacy were acquiring 21st century skills, the need for thinking critically, and the importance of parental involvement. “Our group agreed that we needed to ‘marry’ 21st century skills to the current model of education so the curriculum is guaranteed and students can show they know in many ways, especially demonstrating critical thinking skills and creativity in order to create products of learning,” was how one group tied several themes together. Another group said education in the future “must integrate skills and knowledge embedded in a practical/relevant curriculum that relates to real life.” A third said, “Education needs to be rigorous with skills and knowledge as key components.

Several groups lamented the lack of strong parental involvement for many students. One simply said, “The missing piece is parent involvement.” Another noted “that fathers have such an effect on school climate.”

A number of additional themes emerged as frequently. They included: business, parents and educators would need to work together to create a system that would be beneficial in the 21st century; there must be skills and knowledge integration; there must be a practical, relevant curriculum; community service should be embedded in the curriculum; and resources would be the key to allowing a better system to emerge. One group touched on several of these when it noted, “Financial backing from business [is necessary] to help support the creation of strong teachers who will be able to deliver a more integrated curriculum, and parents, business and educators must work together to create change in our classrooms...a change focused on more applicable skills most likely made possible through a more integrated curriculum.” Another group noted “the parents, business people and educators” [on the show] touched on some important issues,” but were unable to fully address the complexity of the issue. That same group also noted “Resources are still an issue.”

A number of other issues were mentioned. They included the need for strong business partnerships; technology education; and the ability for students to “learn how to learn.” It was noted by the same number of groups an important voice in the discussion, early childhood education, was not included among the original participants.

What Does It Mean?

When conceptualizing, planning and executing the program, there was never the intent to fully “answer” the question of what a quality education will look like for the children of Kansas in the years to come. The show’s underlying purpose was to start discussions among many Kansans, not just the 15 or so on the show, as to not only what it would look like, but, perhaps as importantly, who would be involved in moving the discussion forward and how a system that was clearly “more,” not “less,” would be financed. In that regard, for an initiative with roots in 2007, the effort has proven more than timely. The

key issue of the 2010 legislative session was determining if there would be more substantial cuts in public services, including education, or generating new revenue. A one-cent sales tax originally proposed by the Governor eventually passed by the Legislature was the result of this debate. Concerns regarding the long-term damage of cuts over last two years continue to be expressed.

The decision to raise taxes, however, could easily be seen not as the end but as the beginning, as the elections of August and November are perceived by many to be a referendum of those who voted for the tax increase or those who didn't. Given that the K-12 portion of the state budget is over 50 percent, it seems now is the perfect time to bring three critical questions to the forefront as the electorate chooses those headed to Topeka and Washington in January, 2011:

- How will public schools in Kansas teach students so they can compete economically with students from around the world in a rapidly changing, technologically-based economy and have the civic skills to lead a productive life based on self-governance and responsibility here at home?
- How will public education be financed so it is fair to all Kansas taxpayers and supports all Kansas children equitably and adequately?
- What are the ramifications of not answering the first two questions successfully?

Kansans need to become familiar with the issues and actively discuss them with their friends and neighbors. This project would indicate resources and policies are needed to create the changes indicated by participants as necessary for an improved and competitive public education system for Kansas children.