

Federally funded regional consortium to test ways to improve education

Kansas City Star, The (MO) - Monday, October 12, 2009

Author: *JOE ROBERTSON, The Kansas City Star*

With federal dollars flying at education at the speed of a national emergency, the Obama administration would like to know the money is fueling ideas that work.

Answers to that billion-dollar question soon may come from Kansas City.

Five universities from Kansas and Missouri are teaming up with at least 32 area school districts, plus Catholic schools and charter schools, to create an education research laboratory that is garnering national attention.

We are at a real crucial time in public education, John Q. Easton, a Department of Education administrator, recently told a group of educators and researchers in Kansas City.

Easton spoke of the burden weighing on himself and U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan.

We're spending billions of dollars, Easton said. And he (Duncan) said we don't want to wait to find out five or six years down the road what ideas are successful and what aren't.

Kansas City is an unlikely but potentially effective source for quick answers.

The region is unlikely because education data are splintered between two state systems and across a diverse field of small to medium-size school districts.

Only a few of the larger Johnson County districts serve more than 20,000 students. Kansas and Missouri also use different performance tests that resist comparisons across the state line.

All of that makes it hard to amass the kind of usable data that have marked a successful research collaboration between Chicago-area universities and the 400,000-student Chicago public schools.

On the other hand, the variety of ideas at work among so many school districts provides a rich opportunity, said Michael Podgursky, a professor of

economics at the University of Missouri.

MU, the University of Missouri-Kansas City, the University of Kansas, Kansas State University and Washington University in St. Louis have joined the consortium. The Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation has invested almost \$1 million in grants to help launch the effort.

The school districts have consented to expose their programs to scrutiny that may not always be flattering, but several superintendents who attended a recent conference at the Kauffman Foundation said they were ready.

This is the most important research project I've been a part of in 26 years in this profession, Independence Superintendent Jim Hinson said.

Too often schools under pressure to improve test scores react by throwing programs and money at problems, Hinson said. They are besieged by conflicting research.

We are so tired of being force-fed what we ought to be doing, he said.

Historically, university projects have more often followed the interests of the researchers than what's really happening in schools, Easton said.

And while many strong partnerships have happened in the Kansas City area, the projects have lacked the scale possible in a regional collaboration.

We all have felt we could do more, said Joe Heppert, an associate vice provost for research and graduate studies at KU. The full force (of research capacity) has not been brought to bear.

The timing could hardly be better, Podgursky said.

The federal government has given the states \$250 million just to build data systems, and more is coming. Kansas and Missouri have been developing identification systems to better track students.

Podgursky said he sees the consortium tackling many issues: Tracking students across state and district lines, and teachers as well. Charting where they were trained. Measuring the effectiveness of professional development.

Researchers could measure teacher effectiveness and study the accuracy of principals evaluations. They could look deeper into the effects of school choice and Kansas City s charter schools.

This is the age of data-driven assessment, and it s not going to go away, said John Rury, a KU professor of educational leadership and policy studies.

The aim, researchers agreed, is to get to the bottom line quickly and determine what works.

Kansas City in many ways will be a model for the nation, Rury said.

Section: News

Page: A1

Provided By: The McClatchy Company

Index Terms: Department of Education; University of Missouri; University of Missouri-Kansas City; University of Kansas; Kansas State University; Washington University; The Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation; Kauffman Foundation

Location(s): Kansas City; Kansas; Missouri; Chicago; St. Louis

Personal Name(s): John Q. Easton; Arne Duncan; Jim Hinson; Joe Heppert; John Rury

Record Number: consortium_101209---98558742997

Copyright (c) 2009 The Kansas City Star