

Position Paper  
Citizens for Better Education  
August 30, 2008

In two August Wichita Eagle columns, Eagle writer Mark McCormick challenged school bond opponents to offer alternatives to the district's proposed \$370M bond. McCormick specifically asked Citizens for Better Education to respond to the four most emotional aspects of the bond. That response is included below in expanded form and also addresses what we believe to be the real and most critical need of USD 259, which is student achievement.

Citizens for Better Education was specifically asked to respond to the four most 'emotional' issues included in the \$370M bond proposal and can easily do so, but focusing on these issues masks the most important needs facing USD 259: low student achievement and high drop out rates.

Mr. McCormick leaves no doubt that he enthusiastically supports an additional expenditure of \$370M on top of the \$284M spent in 2000 and the 2006 mill levy increase. He also leaves no doubt that the media has long been a champion of school funding. Favoring accountability, as CBE argues, is not so noble. When is enough, enough? And when will this district be held accountable for the academic achievement of our children and in the maintenance of our existing facilities?

A weakened economy, increased taxation, rising fuel and food costs, an indecisive school board and a district without leadership are all points of agreement and should be taken into consideration. Many Wichitans are struggling.

Let us first address these four 'emotional' issues.

1. Ensure the safety of our children and do so cost effectively. No evidence has been offered that a FEMA safe room is the only way. FEMA funds are available to do it "their" way but will only partially contribute to the total cost. Surrounding districts use below ground shelters as cost effective alternatives.

It should further be noted that to qualify for the \$15-\$18M in FEMA funds (which will provide the wall “hardening agent” that will give the shelter its FEMA designation) the district must spend \$72M in new construction.

Is this a prudent decision?

2. Athletics are a great American tradition and pastime. Events bring people together, nurture and revive our inherent competitiveness and instill in those that participate a self-discipline that will last a lifetime.

Andover, Derby and Maize utilize YMCAs and Swim Club for swimming. (USD 259 presently uses public golf courses). Existing facilities at WSU, Friends and Newman could accommodate track and field events, football, baseball, basketball, etc. when larger facilities are needed or when no USD 259 school facility exists. Football games that require accommodating larger crowds could adjust scheduling to include Thursday night or afternoon games as well as the traditional Friday night games. Public and private tennis courts, east and west soccer complexes, etc. can all be utilized to save millions of dollars and still provide athletic opportunity. Talk about connecting this community!

Kids adapt to the facilities that are offered.

What is the effective utilization of millions of dollars of swimming pools, not to mention the maintenance, thereof? What is the effective utilization of many of these expenditures when only one year of PE is required for graduation?

Where is it written that all schools must be equal in athletic facilities? Perhaps the district should consider an east and west side sports complex rather than duplication at each school?

The maintenance of many athletic facilities has not been a priority. Are we to build new every time the lack of maintenance has taken its toll? The district needs to be held accountable for maintaining what it has.

3. The end to forced busing is highlighted as a critical need to bring parity to the Assigned Attendance Area. The new state-of-the-art Gordon Parks Academy located in this area was paid for with capital outlay funds. USD 259 receives \$35-50M in capital outlay funds annually. This fund is used for

emergency maintenance needs as well as budgeted construction needs such as building a new school. \$110 M has been carried over from last year as “unencumbered cash” (p. 38 USD 259 2008/2009 Budget) . Yes, that’s right, carried over. What is this being used for? It’s almost 30% of the proposed bond.

There are 9 schools in the AAA and directly adjacent areas. None of these schools is at capacity. Even though Isley has the capacity for 450 students, only 202 students are presently enrolled. A new addition was built in 2005 but the 2008 bond proposes to tear down this school and spend \$10M to replace it. This confounds responsible fiscal responsibility!

USD 259 uses the end to forced busing as an argument for the \$370 bond passage. However, it should be noted that less than 6% (\$20.5M) of the bond has been designated for the area. And \$10M of that can be saved if Isley is not torn down. Remember all that unencumbered cash (\$110M)?

4. The 2000 bond supposedly added 500 classrooms; yet, enrollment remains flat. Why are another 275 proposed?

Address overcrowding by nudging boundaries where feasible. Promote open enrollment and at the same time nurture that ‘American competitiveness’ amongst schools. Take advantage of online education and virtual schools to alleviate space constraints and overcrowding. Are we expected to build every time a neighborhood changes?

Several Connecticut districts offer subsidies to students to attend private, parochial or home schools to combat overcrowding and save millions in construction dollars and the staffing of new buildings. Why are we not thinking out of the box and considering the successes of other states?

Other states offer similar programs in the form of vouchers, charter schools, online education, home schooling, etc. If this were truly for the children every window of opportunity should be considered. Thinking cost effectively also allows parents and kids many choices to succeed academically. As long as the status quo, controlled by teachers’ unions and district administration, has the upper hand, taxpayers will continue to be asked to throw more money at a system not dedicated to the best academic interests of its children.

Where is the conclusive evidence that bricks and mortar improve academic performance? Wants and needs should not be confused. Recently released SAT scores (the standardized college placement exam) for Kansas are the lowest in 13 years despite the 2005 Kansas Supreme Court decision to earmark hundreds of millions of dollars aimed to bolster education. Kansas scores are the same or slightly worse than Mississippi and South Dakota where state spending on education is typically lowest. Conclusion: there is no correlation to student spending and academic achievement.

Further, it should be noted there is mixed evidence amongst the experts that smaller classrooms promote higher achievement.

The argument for school choice is made even stronger as parents are required to commit to the rules and regulations of an alternative school or lose the opportunity to have their child enrolled in that school. Perhaps this is a great way to engage parents?

The 2007 official state report card noted that two out of five high school students in Kansas couldn't perform at grade level in Math. One out of five cannot read at grade level. And according to Collin Powell's America's Promise Alliance, only 60% of Wichita students graduate on time. Wichita district officials argue that the number is closer to 71 % but it doesn't really matter, as either number is too high.

Upgrading technical education is a highlighted district need included in the bond. We argue that technology taught today, changes tomorrow; therefore, this is an ongoing expense. It should be a line item in the district's annual budget not a part of a bond proposal.

In the 2000 bond \$2M was earmarked for the Wichita Area Technical College, which was under USD 259's authority. The district relinquished that authority in 2004 but what happened to the \$2M?

The bond includes plans for a yet to be determined technical education program to be housed in one of the magnet high schools. What kind of technology is uncertain. Are we to pay now and decide later?

At one point aviation technology was rumored. However, Wichita taxpayers have recently given \$54M to Jabara Airport to establish such a facility. Why would USD 259 even attempt to duplicate an existing offering?

Proponents conveniently chart the annual impact of this bond to taxpayers based upon one's home value. At first glance this seems a relatively small price to pay. What they fail to note is that commercial properties are taxed at over 2X the rate of a homeowner and utilities are taxed even higher. These costs will be passed along to the consumer in the forms of higher rental rates be it office, apartment or leased living space as well as the cost of consumer goods. If the grocery store or mall tenant pays higher property taxes the cost will be absorbed in the costs of consumer goods. Utility rates will rise to cover their property tax impacts. The consumer will also absorb those increases.

Trying to maneuver the USD 259 website is a trial in patience and frustration. ACT test scores have not been updated in 3 years. This surfer could find no grade competency scores posted anywhere, for any years. Nor could the district's square footage be determined or cost per pupil expenditures etc. None of the transparency that should be easily available is available. Trying to prepare a factual argument for this position paper was made all the more difficult as numbers are not easily available and vary within the district itself.

In our opinion, as evidenced by this bond campaign, priorities are seriously misplaced. When will academic achievement and accountability be addressed as the real critical needs that face this district and dealt with first and foremost? To continue to operate under the guise of business as usual is no longer acceptable and becomes yet another exercise in futility.

It is our hope that the failure of this bond will force a wake up call to the elected officials and administration that academic achievement is the #1 priority of the community. All else pales in comparison.

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