

Q&A: Kansas State Senator John Vratil

Contributed by PT Editors
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Policy Today talks with Kansas State Senator John Vratil about the future of education in Kansas and the problem of educational inequality in America.

PT: The United States' public education system has long been considered one of its greatest achievements and the bulwark of our equalitarian society. Is ensuring social and economic equality still among policymakers' priorities when it comes to education?

Vratil: I feel that it is. I believe that there is a major nationwide emphasis on providing equality of opportunity in our public school system. But I think it's important to distinguish between the bold statement of "equality" and the more refined statement of "equality of opportunity," because we cannot guarantee that every student will be equal. In fact, I think I can guarantee that every student will not be equal. But we can strive toward that latter goal so that every student has the opportunity to succeed.

I think it's an extremely important distinction to make because many people will look at discrepancies in student performance and attribute it to inequality. That is absolutely untrue.

PT: It sounds as though our society may have some misconceptions about what equality actually means. Do you think that misconception carries over into policy debates about types of education, such as technical/vocational vs. university education? Is the former viewed as unequal to or less worthy than the other when it comes to funding and outreach?

Vratil: Yes, I think that has been the case for the last couple of decades. We have tended to emphasize the goal of sending all students to two- or four-year postsecondary education, but I think we're now beginning to realize that this isn't necessarily the best path for each and every student. Furthermore, we need technicians, craftsmen, and other skilled positions that don't require a two- or four-year degree. They need to be trained in vocational and technical aspects that are every bit as important to our economy as scientists and mathematicians.

PT: What is Kansas doing policy-wise to fill these needs and support students who choose not to pursue a two- or four-year degree?

Vratil: We actually have a technical/vocational education commission that has been appointed by the governor. They're studying our system and looking at things like systemic governance, coordination and collaboration between various institutions offering these courses, and financing. They have not made recommendations yet, and in fact some bills have been introduced in our legislative session that are actually out ahead of the commission with respect to governance.

The problem in Kansas is that we have a very disjointed technical education system. Moreover, it has no coherent funding mechanism.

PT: The lack of a coherent funding mechanism raises another question: What role do you see the federal government playing with respect to education policy? Are the states better able to ensure equality with minimal federal interference, or can the federal government more effectively "legislate" equality of educational opportunity from Washington?

Vratil: Well, I see a role for the federal government, but it is a relatively limited role. I think that ideally, it should provide financial resources to emphasize those areas of our educational system that they feel are neglected or of greater priority.

I also see the federal government providing research to the states on best practices in education. What I'm fearful of is a gradual takeover of our educational system by the federal government, which I believe would be absolutely disastrous.

PT: No Child Left Behind is obviously controversial in its implementation, but most people agree with the general premise behind it—that we want every child to be able to read, write and function in our society. Do you think the policy adequately addresses the problems it proposes to solve, or do you think there's a better way to approach it?

Vratil: No, I think there's definitely a better way to approach it. I agree, I don't think there's anybody who doesn't agree with the goals. On the other hand, I don't know of anybody with any knowledge of our education system who thinks that 100% proficiency is achievable. So, I think that NCLB is a little misguided in this aspect.

I think there is a much better way of achieving the goals of NCLB in a more realistic, flexible manner in which you really

have a partnership between the states and the federal government. Right now, that partnership doesn't exist.

The states and the U.S. Department of Education are at odds more often than not.

PT: What's causing the relationship to break down if we can all agree on common goals?

Vratil: The breakdown is that many of the requirements of NCLB are unrealistic and others are completely disingenuous or misguided. I think that the disaggregating of student assessment data is a good thing, but you have to be realistic about it.

One of the subgroups includes children who speak English as a second language. Like everybody else, NCLB requires those non-English-speaking students to be 100% proficient by 2014. Well, that's so absurd as to be laughable, because once those students achieve proficiency in English, they drop out of the group. So, by definition the only students in that group are students who are not proficient. How can you achieve 100% proficiency for students who are in that group because they are not proficient? The U.S. Department of Education won't acknowledge that.

PT: Would you say that part of that mindset comes from that distorted view of equality that you mentioned earlier, that we can make equal outcomes through legislation like this?

Vratil: Yes, absolutely. The goal of No Child Left Behind is total equality, which I said at the beginning is both unrealistic and will never happen. If the goal of No Child Left Behind was equality of opportunity, and that principle guided the policy, it would have been structured in a much different manner.

PT: With more emphasis on that state/federal partnership and educational flexibility?

Vratil: Exactly.

PT: Senator, thank you for your time.

Kansas State Senator John Vratil represents Kansas' 11th Senate District. He serves as the chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee and the vice-chair of the Senate Education Committee.