

## A K-12 Version of the Hunger Games

According to the KS Supreme Court, Kansas has been failing to provide “adequate” and “equitable” funding for public education since 2008—the funding crisis appears to be subsiding, but the “Us vs. Them” mentality inherent in the current structure has created a K-12 version of the Hunger Games that is quite literally, tearing communities apart.

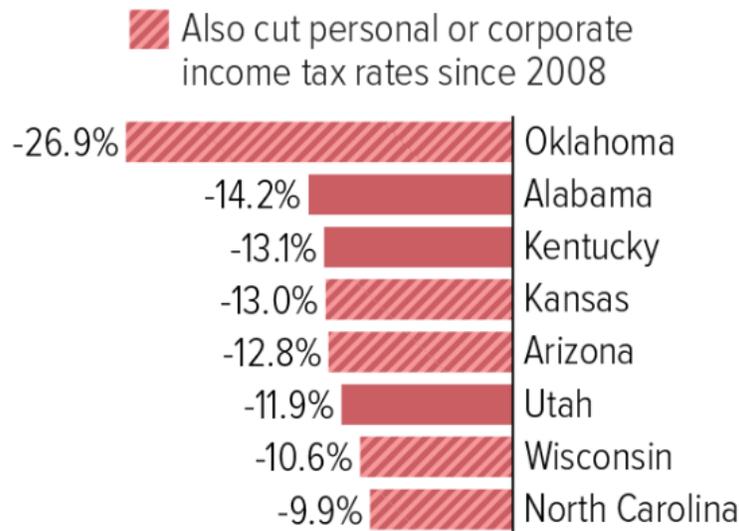
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Kansas has been in the national spotlight for education funding issues for [nearly 20 years](#). According to the National Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), education funding took a serious hit after the Great Recession rippled across the nation in 2008. In the years immediately following the recession, Kansas’s funding per student dropped **13% below the 2008 level**, making Kansas’s school funding cuts “[among the nation’s deepest](#).” According to CBPP’s research, Kansas had the 4th largest cuts to education in all the nation.

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### Five of Eight States With Deepest K-12 Cuts Also Cut Income Taxes

States with deepest formula funding cuts,\*  
2008-2017



\*General or formula funding is the primary form of state K-12 funding. States also typically provide revenue for other, more specific purposes, such as bus transportation and contributions to school employees and pension plans.

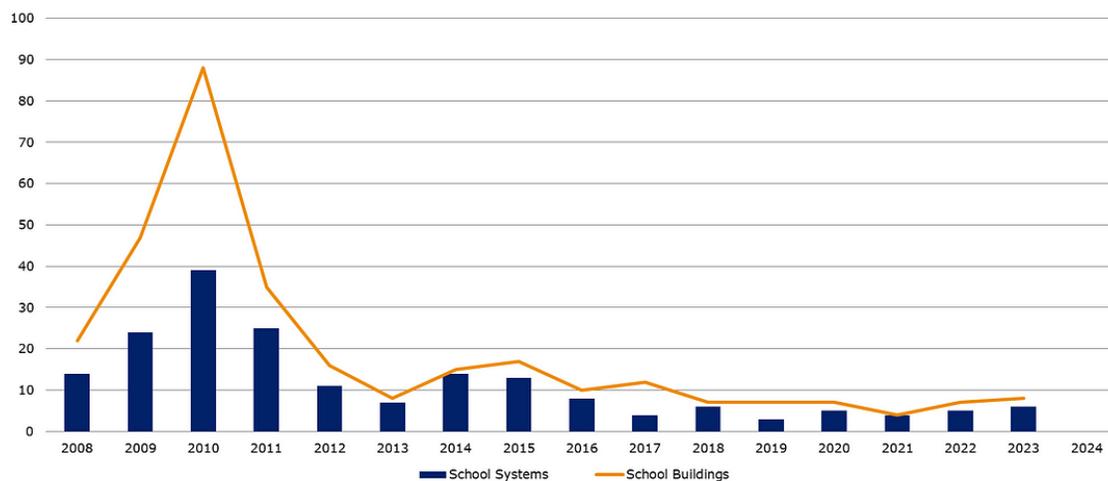
Source: CBPP budget and enrollment analysis.

Although budget issues were occurring all across the nation, the cuts in Kansas were so significant that, in 2010, a group of school districts [filed a lawsuit against the State of Kansas](#) claiming the state violated Article 6 § 6(b) of the constitution by failing to provide “adequate” and “equitable” funding to educate Kansas students.

Apparently, this was not a “boy who cried wolf” situation. The [Building Open and Close Dates report](#) from KSDE Data Central shows that 38 schools (comprised of 69 elementary, middle, and high school buildings) closed in 2008 and 2009.

**This was not a “boy who cried wolf” situation—nearly 70 school buildings closed in 2008 and 2009 and the number spiked even further in 2010.**

School Building Closure Report – KSDE Data Central



Source: KSDE Data Central, Building Open and Close Dates Report (2008-2022), data pulled August 9, 2023.

Notes: Technical closures caused by consolidations not clearly marked in data; some school closures (especially in the year 2010) may be double counted for this reason. Data filtered to only include public K-12 schools (Building Level = Elementary, Junior High/Middle School, High School, and Org. Code = D). 2023 values subject to change as closure data is recorded – Wilson and Walton schools added to the 2023 count manually.

### KSDE Building Close Report.

With schools struggling to stay open all across the state, proposals began to emerge suggesting that small schools could *stay open* if they merged with neighboring schools to save money.

Although the consolidation proposal was a noble attempt to manage the crisis and stop the bleeding, a report by Kansas’s 2010 Commission on Education concluded,

“We cannot [sacrifice a generation of Kansas students](#) because the economy is weak. It is time for the Legislature to take steps to ensure that the revenue and funding policies of the Legislature allow every Kansas student to achieve his or her full potential.”

With political pressure on the rise, the state pushed consolidation proposals forward by announcing a [financial incentive](#) that would provide 2–5 years worth of “guaranteed funding” (between 2010–2015) for any school that entered into one of these “cost-saving” consolidation arrangements.

According to KSDE data, **nearly 100 school systems** were impacted by consolidations or closures between 2010–2015 as schools clung to the consolidation incentive as a way to stay alive.

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## **The consolidation tourniquet**

With the consolidation tourniquet firmly in place, the court went to work pushing lawmakers to correct the education funding issues which started in 2008.

Between 2010 and 2015, the Kansas Supreme Court issued **5 rulings**, **slowly pushing the state back towards “adequate and equitable” education funding levels.**

Although Supreme Court rulings indicated that funding was expected to return to adequate levels between 2016–2022, many of the newly consolidated school districts were forced to deal with what local superintendents referred to as a **“fiscal cliff”** in the 2015–2016 school year.

This fiscal cliff, which was set off by the expiration of financial incentives provided to newly consolidated school districts from 2010–2015, required many schools to return to normal (and arguably inadequate) funding levels in the 2015–2016 school year. Without the extra funding for the 2016 school year, many districts were forced to make substantial budget cuts.

**These budget cuts, which were severe in some cases, incensed relationships between neighboring communities and intensified the “us vs. them” mentality inherent in consolidated school districts.**

Thirty-one school buildings (21 of which were elementary school buildings) closed between 2015 and 2016 alone, and many schools and communities **feared they were next.**

*“...this election is a choice between an amputation to save the majority of the animal or allowing that animal to die of gangrene just so it can die whole and complete.”—Sam Hughes, Sabetha Kansas USD 113, [The Sabetha Herald, Letter to the Editor](#), April 1, 2015*

*“In our district, future board members will likely be tasked with the choice of either closing schools in Axtell and Wetmore, or drastically slashing educational opportunities in Sabetha.”—Brad Lippert, Sabetha Kansas USD 113, [The Sabetha Herald, Letter to the Editor](#), April 1, 2015*

Local schools were fighting one another to stay alive; meanwhile, Kansas lawmakers were still struggling to find a school funding formula that the Supreme Court deemed adequate and equitable.

Pressured by another spike in school closures in 2015, legislators announced a plan to provide districts with **“Block Grant”** funding for the 2016 and 2017 school years. The “Block Grant” funding solution essentially extended the 2010–2015 consolidation incentive and funded districts

at the same level they had in the 2014–2015 school year—regardless of any changes to enrollment.

This “[stop-gap](#)” measure put a temporary slow-down on school closures between 2015–2017, but the state’s education funding issues were far from over.

*“It is truly the Armageddon if they don’t make the funding requirements and provide equity as the courts have indicated they need to do,” says Alan Rupe, the lead attorney for the plaintiff school districts, including Kansas City, Kansas.*

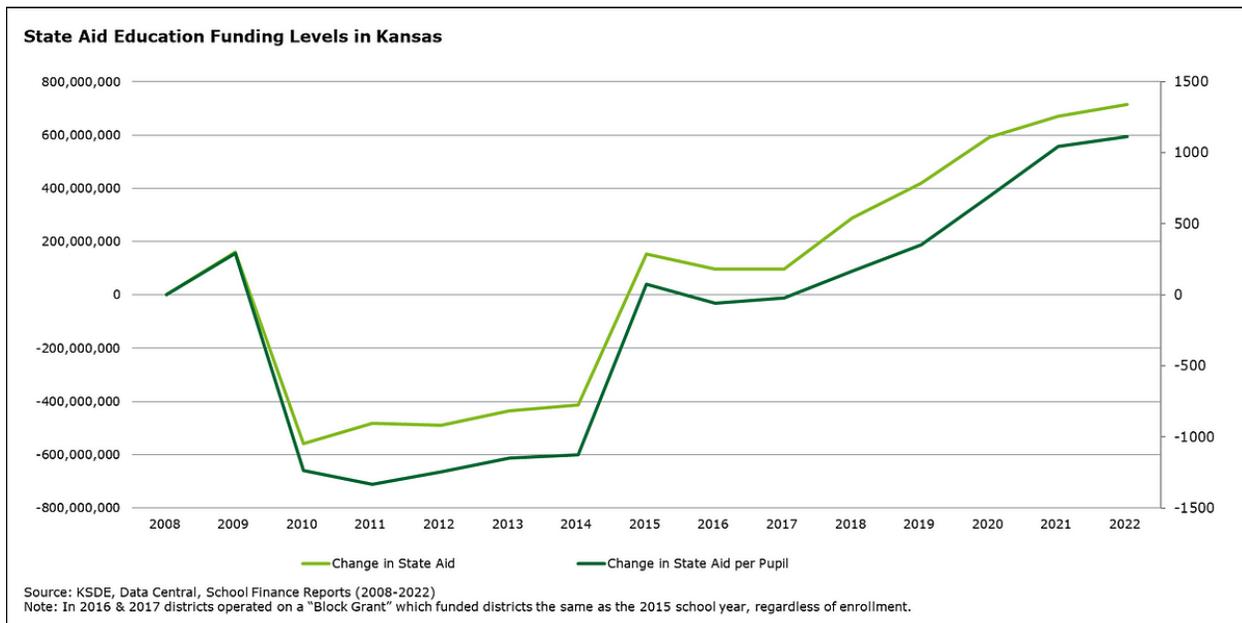
— Sam Zeff, KCUR, [Kansas Supreme Court Rules Block Grant School Funding Unconstitutional](#), February 11, 2016

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## Gannon case resolved

Finally, on June 14, 2019, [the Kansas Supreme Court ruled](#) that the state’s recent legislative adjustments to the education funding formula could be deemed “equitable,” and the court said the state was “on track” to provide “adequate” education funding by 2022.

A quick look at the state aid and funding per pupil data since 2008 supports the Supreme Court’s ruling. According to KSDE Data Central School Finance Reports, total state aid (for education) has grown by 20% since 2017 and over 50% since the peak of the crisis in 2010.



## The Hunger Games Rage On

So, if state funding (and [state tax revenue](#)) are going up, why are local schools and communities still crashing down?

Only seven schools closed at the end of the 2023 school year, but [two of these schools showed up at the statehouse for the 2023 legislative session](#) to let lawmakers know that more Gannon-like interventions could be on the way if the state doesn't start paying attention to what's happening on the ground in schools across Kansas.

**“Doesn't matter what the data says...we can do whatever we want”—Jim Scoby, USD 113 Board Member**

[Whose Line Is It Anyway | USD 113 board claims they can do whatever they want, despite what the numbers say...](#)

[USD 113 board barrels forward with closure proposal despite serious questions regarding the district's audited financial statements and allocation methods...fb.watch](#)

Although local boards cited financial concerns as the primary reason for closure, the significant increases in state funding over the past five years, and the [analysis of district financial statements](#) called the local school board's motives into question.

*“The school board's decision to close the Wetmore Attendance Center baffles me.*

*Their determination appears to be totally irrational to me based upon the financial numbers that have been presented...*

*The five [school board members] who voted for closure reside in the northern part of the district and most of their children will or have attended the Sabetha schools. The only plausible explanation I can arrive at is the state aid that will continue to flow to the district for the next two years, even after closing the WAC, will allow them to proceed with capital improvements that would not have been possible otherwise.”*

— Jim Achten, *The Sentinel*, [Sabetha High School track renovation may doom Wetmore Academic Center](#), February 12, 2023

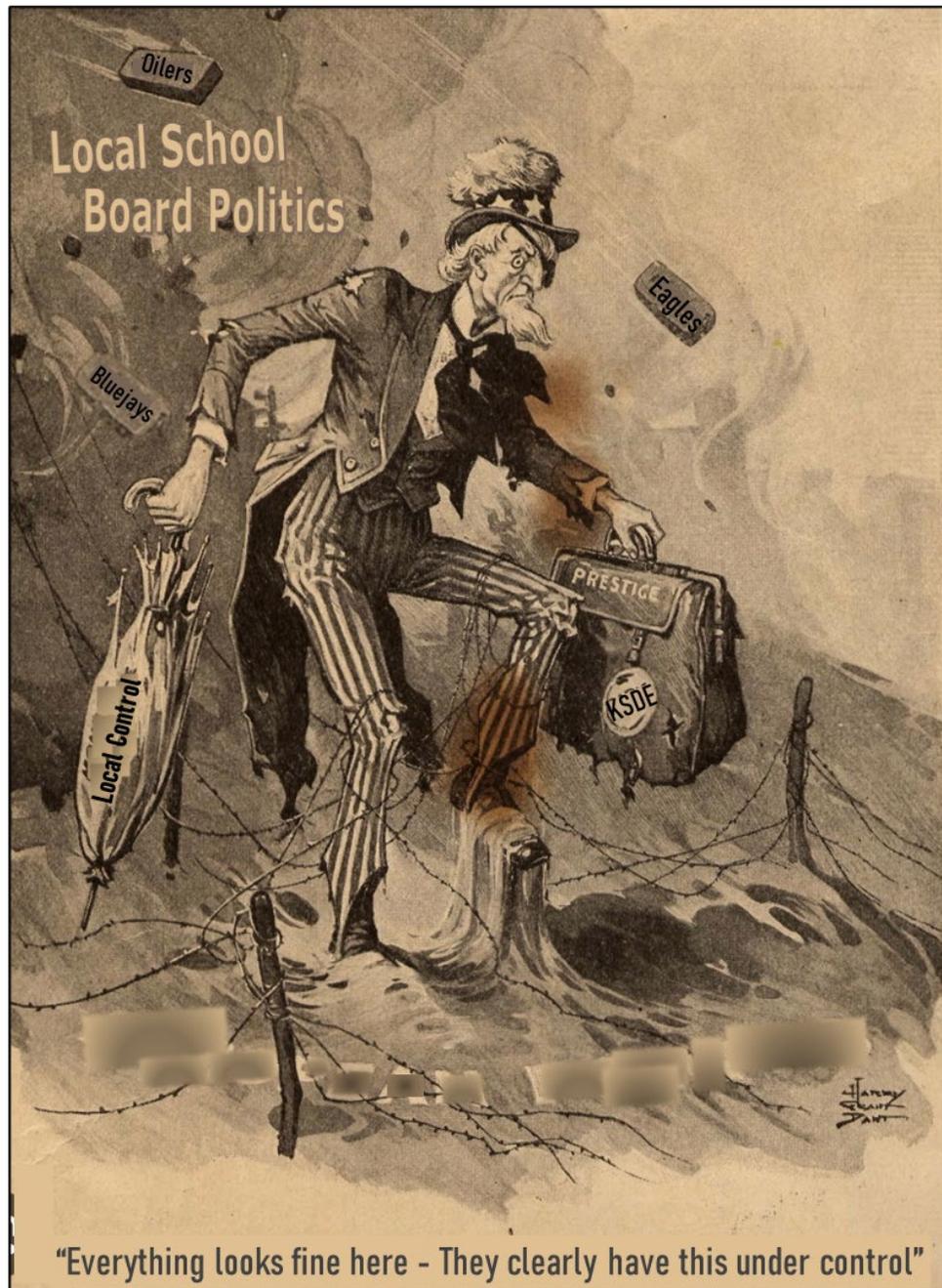
Both communities believed that the school closure proposals in their districts were not financially necessary, ethically justifiable, or procedurally defensible.

Both communities ordered an independent 3rd party review of district financials. Both reviews found that the schools proposed for closure were financially viable when revenue and expenses were allocated correctly. Further, the independent reviewers also uncovered multiple procedural issues including ineffective data management systems and controls (e.g. no single source of truth), inconsistent revenue and expense allocation methodologies, and lack of standardized reporting structures and expected outcomes or key performance indicators.

The findings and recommendations were documented in a [13-page report](#) and shared with the Kansas Department of Education in February 2023. Interestingly, the report also included concerns about the way funding for “At-Risk” student funding is being tracked and managed at the local, which was [further escalated in recent findings from the LPA Post Audit](#) which showed

that “over 97% of at-risk expenditures were spent on general education services, rather than for services that provide at-risk students with additional opportunities, services, or supports.”

**Both communities went to the State Board of Education, the Kansas Department of Education, and the Kansas Association of School Boards looking for help.**



1919 Life Magazine political cartoon, repurposed for modern issues.

**Both communities were repeatedly told that these were “local issues” and there was nothing they could do to help.**

## 2024 Outlook

This complex collision of events over the past 15 years has put school districts, communities, and state officials in a difficult position.

Although school closures slowed during the pandemic (2020–2022), the slow and painful unraveling of Kansas’s K12 public education system seems to be on a continued downward spiral.

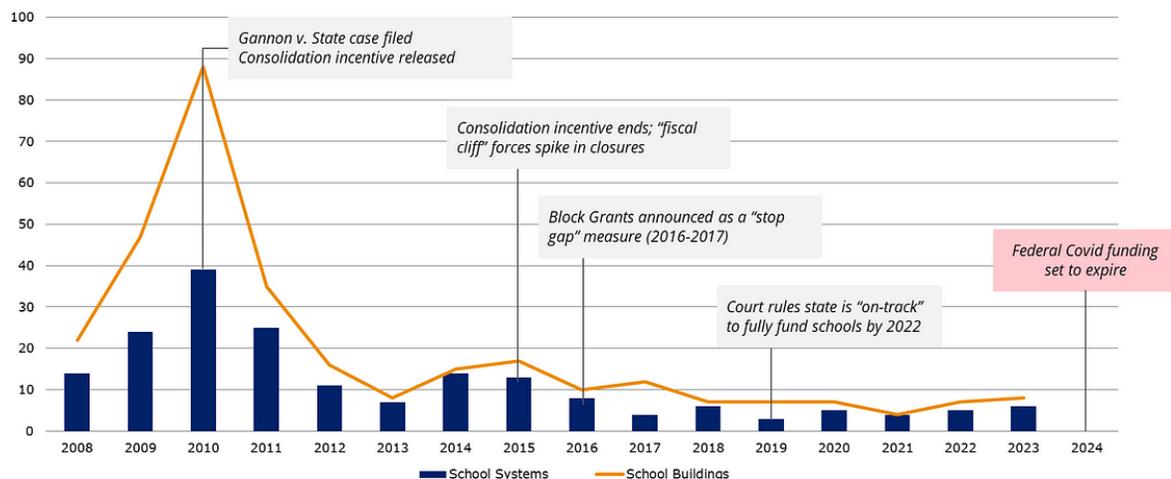
Some legislators are worried that school districts could be facing another fiscal cliff (and another spike in school closures) when pandemic-era federal funds expire in September 2024.

According to the Kansas Education Commissioner Randy Watson, the number of students enrolled in Kansas public schools [dropped by more than 15,000](#) since the start of the pandemic, and only 40% of school districts ([114 out of 286 total](#)) have returned to pre-pandemic enrollment levels.

*We will have to start to reduce the budget footprint, because the student footprint is down,” said Susan Willis, chief financial officer for the state’s largest district, in Wichita. “And it appears to be more permanently down, and not just a one-year COVID anomaly.”*

[KMUW](#)—Susan Perez, May 5, 2022

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KSDE Building Close Report—with historical notes.

The state doesn't seem to have clear data as to where these families and students have gone, but the local education beat indicates that Kansans may be growing tired of the once loved institution formerly known as "public education."

Approximately 10% of Wetmore's student population have exited the public education system since the closure, and many more are moving forward on a "trial period" basis as they assess whether the longer distances to school will work for their family over the long run.

This is true for families being impacted by school closures, but it is also [true for families all over the nation](#) as people and families come to terms with who they want to be and how they want to live in the post-Covid economic environment.

Enter, Devan Dellenbach from Abbyville, Kansas, population 83. Devan is a former school teacher, turned home-school-mom, turned one-room-schoolhouse-founder who [opened a small school](#) in her home town after becoming frustrated with the lack of quality education options available in their region. Most families in her community can't afford to pay "tuition" for the school, but as most families in Kansas know how to do—they are making it work—with some families even paying with meat and/or hard labor to make up the difference.

Like so many of the families impacted by school closures, this young mother didn't like the idea of putting her five-year-old daughter on a bus at 6:45 in the morning and not seeing her again until 4:30 in the afternoon.

This time; however, she decided to do something about it.

**[Entrepreneurial Teachers Create New Education Options For Rural Families](#)**  
*[Founded earlier this year by former Kansas public school teacher Devan Dellenbach, this rural microschool currently...www.forbes.com](#)*

Her journey began as a homeschooling parent, but she recently opened her doors to other families in her community as more and more parents began to feel that the current institution was no longer meeting their needs.

New innovations like [micro-schools](#) and [hybrid learning pods](#) seem to be popping up all across the state.

**[Kansans show micro schools and hybrids offer innovations in learning—The Sentinel](#)**  
*[Two moms who founded micro schools in Kansas say students are thriving and their parents are very happy to have the...sentinelksmo.org](#)*

To the untrained eye, these tiny schools and willing educators look like the perfect answer to Kansas's education dilemma. The only problem is, no one knows how to govern or support these types of unconventional education programs.

Public school advocates don't know how to classify them (they seem to serve more low-income families than related historic examples), administrators don't know how to manage them (the

former teachers don't seem to need much input from the state when they are simply focused on teaching), and lawmakers don't know how to govern them (though it looks like these families are going to move forward with or without endorsement and funding from the state).

Although there are a growing number of school choice advocates speaking up for these types of education programs, many legislators are divided on whether unconventional learning structures like [Re\\*Wild Family Academy](#) should be eligible to receive education funding from the state.

Regardless of what education think tanks and lawmakers may say, public education officials may be in for a rude awakening if they don't start listening to the parents and communities they serve.



## **The Education Governor's Dilemma**

It's been a rough decade for public education in Kansas, and many students, educators, and communities have suffered because of it.

With 100's of schools and communities negatively impacted by the school funding crisis since 2008, we're in a place now where parents don't trust the school officials, school officials don't trust the politicians, and the politicians don't trust each other.

Irrespective of all the who's, and what's, and why's that got us into this mess, one thing is clear. Kansas is desperately in need of a new vision, a new plan, and a new way forward.

**We cannot sit idly by while our communities are forced to fight to the death and pillage one another as they argue about whose children are more important.**

Regardless of your political party affiliations or typical leanings in the Public School vs. Private School debate, perhaps it's time we can all agree...

*It's time to make our children—and their future—a top priority again. Parents, teachers and business owners get it. They know that great schools—and early learning programs—are the key to a bright future and growing economy.*

Governor Kelly, [Laura Kelly for Kansas website](#)

The great education debacle of the past decade has created multiple compounding issues, and history has shown us that one size fits all solutions are not going to work. We need leaders who are willing to engage at the local level and have honest conversations about what is and is not possible, and what is and is not good for the people and the future of our state.

I believe there are reasonable compromises out there that can help our families bring this system back to life, but we will not see that progress if the state continues to create policies that tie our hands and send us into a ring where we must fight one another to survive.

The people of Kansas are a people of great ingenuity, and we know how to weather a storm. It's time for the statehouse to stop prioritizing institutions over people and start focusing on what matters most—the kids.

The stakes have never been higher, and the future of our children (and our state) depend on it.

Will our "Education Governor" be able rise above the political infighting and start working across party lines to establish a vision and chart a course for the future, or will your children be next?

**May the odds be ever in your favor.**