
PERSPECTIVES FROM THE PRESIDENT

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Abstract

KATE President Nathan Whitman, who doesn't watch football, provides an analogy to the 2022-2023 school year using football terminology in an attempt to reflect on the state of education in Kansas. Will it be a touchdown or a fumble? Read on and find out.

Keywords: education, politics, Kansas, LGBT, vouchers, inspiration, motivation, reflection, teaching, awards, appreciation, perseverance, artificial intelligence, advocacy

As much as I would like to start on a hopeful note and say that the state of education in Kansas has improved since 2022, I would be woefully ignorant to declare it is the case. It's no coincidence that more educators than ever are leaving the profession. Last year, there were approximately 1,700 education vacancies in the state of Kansas (Educate Kansas, 2022); this year, there are 1,800 (Educate Kansas, 2023). Education continues to be a political football on our hyper partisan turf, and in our football-loving state, teachers are tired of being sidelined by legislators who continue to refuse to fully fund special education, who promote vouchers under the guise of ESAs and tax credits (Carpenter, 2023), and who stoke the fires of rivalry between communities and schools through baseless claims of indoctrination and predation (Mipro, 2023). Our most vulnerable students are being targeted by anti-LGBT legislation that affects them both in and outside of the classroom (Hanna, 2023). It's hard not to see the writing like a slur on the locker room wall. It's easy to see all this and lose hope. However, we're only at halftime.

Like any team facing a defeat, we need a pep talk. What are we doing well? Where are our victories? For one, Kansas educators are still doing wonderful things in their classrooms and are being honored for their contributions to the profession. Case in point, the Kansas Exemplary Educators Network welcomed more than 32 new members into its ranks at the first in-person KEEN Conference since the pandemic began, recognizing Horizon Award recipients and Milken Educators, and Presidential Awards for Excellence in Math and Science. KATE member Aaron Miller was one such recipient of a Horizon Award (Kansas State Department of Education, 2023). Additionally, KATE's *Kansas English* editor Dr. Katie Cramer received Wichita State's CAS Research Award (College of Applied Sciences, 2022). Finally, Wichita East High School teachers Stacy Chestnut (KATE Conference Chair) and Kiara Suarez-Sosa (KATE Graphic Designer) both received Distinguished Classroom Teacher Awards (*2023 Distinguished Classroom Teachers*, 2023). I'm sure that there are many other success stories that I did not know about to highlight. Unfortunately, it's not enough to be doing well, especially in a metaphorical football game.

One has to fight.

The only way to win a game is to fight back and persevere. During the tail end of the legislative session, grassroots efforts to voice opposition to harmful school bills had some effect in

combatting them, such as Senate Bill 83 (Bahl & Tidd, 2023). It's easy to forget that lawmakers need to hear educators' voices because it's equally hard to find time to craft a well-written letter of opposition or advocacy, especially when we're in the middle of grading, projects, and test prep. Even if you can eke fifteen minutes out once a week, take the time to communicate with lawmakers. You can find your representatives at [Openstates.org](https://www.openstates.org). There are plenty of templates you can find to help ease this, online communities for support, and even artificial intelligence can take some of the bite out of this added burden: ChatGPT is very skilled at writing basic form letters, and Resist.Bot can easily send your letter wherever it needs to go—just be sure to use your personal email address.

In addition to writing to lawmakers, talk to your immediate relatives and community members. If we're ever to dispel misinformation and disinformation, we have to tap into the local ethos. Remember, it's a lot harder for people to stigmatize educators when face-to-face in civil conversation. Oftentimes, these concerned citizens only know what their news sources have told them, and an educator functioning as a primary source of information may make them think twice about any anti-education rhetoric or propaganda they may have encountered.

Finally, the best way to win the game without having to punt this problem to future generations of educators is to teach your students to be critical thinkers and engaged citizens. If at all possible, stay in the classroom. The best defensive line is in our students who will be the next generation of voters. Effect change one pupil at a time, one class at a time, one year at a time. Our situation will not improve with one play, but through a long-form strategy. If you must take yourself out of the game, I'll reiterate with how I ended my previous letter: run for office, run for school board, advocate for education in any way you know how. Just like we need fair referees, we need elected officials who understand and support K-12 education. That could be you.

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Mary Harrison's classroom library at Wichita West High School