

# Divided by Unison

By John LaPlante

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Which is more important – community building or educational choice? A controversy in one city in south-central Kansas raises this important question about the definition of a community, and its relationship to education.

The town of Bel Aire, in the northeast corner of the Wichita area, has a population of over 6,600. With an eye towards economic development and population growth, the town purchased and annexed 2,400 acres of largely undeveloped land.

However, the annexed parcel fell within the boundary of the Circle School District, based in a neighboring county. As a result of the annexation, half of Bel Aire's land was now in the Wichita School District and half in the Circle School District. (The city of Bel Aire does not have its own district.)

On September 17, the Bel Aire City Council, by a 4-1 vote, expressed its support for shifting the boundary between the two school districts, removing the 2,400 acres from the Circle School District and giving it to the Wichita School District.

As you might expect, the Wichita School District thought this was a good idea, while the Circle School District vowed to fight it. Meanwhile, some Bel Aire residents are talking of circulating a petition to block the move.

In local discussions on the topic, several themes stand out, but the predominant question is whether Bel Aire needs one school system or two, and whether the answer to that question trumps everything else.

One position, the one that prevailed in the Bel Aire city council, is that having the whole city within a single district would unify the city and be good for community spirit. "We do need one school district here in Bel Aire," said one resident. One newspaper account said that proponents of the single-district idea imagine families "gathering at their local high school to cheer for the same team, instead of sending their kids to more than a dozen public and private high schools."

Another position is that having options among schools and school districts is itself a valuable part of the community and contributes to the education of children. Each district has different offerings. "Why not have the best of both worlds?" asked one mother who led the failing cause. Winston Brooks, superintendent of the Wichita School District, gave a nod towards the value of choice when he touted his district's ability to offer Bel Aire residents more intra-district choice than the Circle School District could. So who's right?

The belief that a single educational option is required for community life is a curious one. It is curious because public schools are often sources not of unity but of controversy and division.

For example, does a school district offer too much sex education? Too little? The wrong kind of sex education? These and other questions are likely to arise as long as there is an expectation that everyone should be served by the same system. Indeed, the history of public schools is filled with controversy and even violence over disagreements on subjects ranging from textbooks to busing to how to teach math. In a recent analysis, for instance, the Cato Institute's Neal McCluskey documented more than 150 instances of "political combat" in public schools during the 2005-06 school year.

The claim that community harmony requires having only one school district is mistaken for another reason: it neglects the other ways we build community and social harmony. Arts groups, business and professional organizations, churches, and social service organizations such as soup kitchens, not to mention chance encounters among citizens while walking the dog, all build a sense of place, belonging, and community.

In short, the belief, in Bel Aire and elsewhere, that the good life requires a single provider of education in a community is simply misplaced. Equating a single school district with a strong community and setting that option against educational choice presents a complicated matter in far-too-simple terms. Sacrificing greater choice for the sake of having a single football team to rally around is an unfortunate outcome for Kansas education. In a society that values choice and having options, we should place more, not less, importance on having options in schooling.

*(Mr. LaPlante is an education policy fellow with the Flint Hills Center for Public Policy, an organization based in Wichita, Kansas. See [www.flinthills.org](http://www.flinthills.org) for more information. Reprinted with permission)*