I. Call To Action

The public service leadership challenge that I will be discussing is an issue I have had first-hand experience with and have developed a deep concern for over the past few months while working in the Lawrence school district. The challenge I have identified is the gap that occurs in a youth’s education when they are in the custody of the State and are placed in emergency care facilities. Under Kansas law, there are two types of stays in Emergency Care Facility: 1) emergency care that can result in a stay of up to 30 days or 2) planned placement that can result in a stay of up to 90 days.

These children usually have either an active Child In Need Of Care (CINC) case or a Juvenile Offender (JO) that requires they be placed in an emergency care facility. This placement occurs either when it is court ordered or the placing agency is unable to make placement within a foster home or with a family member on short notice. When placement is court ordered, the child will stay in state custody until released from custody by a judge. When there is a difficulty finding the appropriate foster home or facility children are sent to an emergency care facility while the placing agency determines what level of care she will need during their initial screening process. Therefore, until the necessary care level is determined and the agency finds a more permanent placement for the child, the child will remain with the emergency care facility.

Often these screenings reveal that the screened child requires psychiatric services more suited to a treatment facility than a foster home or foster facility. Before budget cuts went into place, children who needed additional services were placed with Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility (PRTF) where trained professional could provide the appropriate services.
However, budget cuts have meant the shuttering of some facilities and a reduction in referrals due to the costs associated with treatment. See “Kansas sees drop in treatment beds for severely disturbed children” Kansas Health Institute. This reduction in referrals and facilities can result in a child being bounced around to different emergency care facilities as they time out of the 30-day or 90-day placement period.

Before a child in state custody can attend school, the facility has to provide the child’s new school with her previous school records as well as her immunization records. Compiling these records may take a few days or up to a few weeks. Case managers may have to contact two or three schools to obtain accurate and complete records. Because of the State’s 30-day and 90-day rules, a child in state custody often will attend three to four different schools in one school year, making it more difficult to compile the student’s records at each new move while also creating continued disruptions.

Once a school receives the necessary records, they test the student before enrolling them. School counselors often have to wait a few days to receive the test results before they can enroll the student, increasing the educational gap yet again. The school missed by a child who has gone through three or four consecutive emergency facility placements adds up to a substantial amount of missed school between record collection, testing, and enrollment. This lost school time leaves students in state custody behind their peers, constantly attempting to catch up in a new school and home environment.

II. Crafting A Vision And Leading Change

Working daily with students who are in state custody and living in emergency care facilities has let me witness first-hand the educational gap that occurs with every student I work
with. However, neither the state nor the school district’s management view this gap as a problem worth addressing. This may be because of the relatively few students it impacts or because there is a belief that missing what at first glance appears to be only a few days of school is not detrimental to a student’s development. Whatever the case may be, to address this issue effectively a leader will have to institute a new vision for children in state custody and lead a change in procedures that will most likely be faced with resistance.

The vision that I would develop is one of providing education for students regardless of the transitional situation they face. Economic changes, specifically in the budgets for both schools and PRTFs, may have gradually increased the challenges of providing students in state custody with an uninterrupted education. With more children moving from emergency placement to emergency placement, the incidences of educational gaps will increase, requiring changes be made to provide services. Within schools, principals, counselors, and teachers should take on the responsibility of integrating students as quickly as possible. It may be that schools see children in state custody as temporary students who will often be moved before any progress or connections can be made. Addressing this issue must also be a part of the new vision adopted by schools and the state.

Additionally, state actors as well as school employees must begin to understand the potential harm that can be done to students who are continually removed and barred from schools because of administrative red tape. Educating management and communicating the new vision to all staff will be a significant challenges towards the common goal of removing educational gaps.

Leading the change a vision such as this will require is an unenviable task. As noted, the current system does not view these educational gaps as significant problems that require the
dedication of resources. While the system has gradually changed because of funding reductions and increased statutory requirements, lengthening the time a child will be held out of school and increasing the frequency with which this occurs, most of the people who a leader would be asking to change will not be aware of this gradual shift and may be resistant to any vision that identifies a problem they have failed to address. Ensuring that all participants are aware that this is a shared problem that has occurred not through malice or neglect, but the natural progression of a complicated bureaucracy is essential to changing people’s attitudes. Democratic and Republican administrations have presided over the funding and regulatory changes that have created educational gaps. Stressing the idea that this is a shared problem that requires attention and resources may be more likely to gain traction as it decreases the likelihood of defensive overreaction by singled out individuals or organizations.

III. Developing A Plan Of Action

These concerns and concepts must be kept in mind when developing a plan of action. While removing the 30-day and 90-day rule for emergency care facilities would alleviate this issue completely, it may also cause a host of unintended consequences, so I am proceeding based upon the understanding that these regulations are permanently in place. The first step I would take would be to facilitate communication with the students affected by these gaps. Too often the opinion and voices of the individuals who will be directly benefited or harmed by a policy are not consulted with before change occurs. The input received from students in state care should be used to then guide all subsequent discussions and communications about this issue. Perhaps the students are not so concerned about the days they are not in school, but more concerned about receiving additional tutoring because of the work they must make up once enrolled.
Aside from the child, the next most important group of individuals to discuss the possibility of change and what action should be taken is the staff of the emergency care facilities who work directly with the students. These conversations with facility staff should focus on what changes they believe need to occur to address this issue would like to see and poll any suggestions. If there are staff who are skeptical of the problems created by this gap then providing them with information about the detrimental effects of missed school days and what students themselves have had to say about these gaps might help inform their thinking and change their viewpoint.

Realistic, small step solutions should also be prepared to present to staff. Such steps could include recruiting volunteer tutors through the education departments of local colleges and universities to help tutor students during the gap or once enrolled in a new school. Additionally, better communication should be established between schools, volunteers, and Emergency Care Facilities so any new developments or concerns can be brought to the people in direct contact with the effected students. While tutoring may address the fundamental issue of not leaving students behind, there may be additional benefits to partnering students in state custody with college students. College students could serve as a mentor while students are in custody and help show them the importance of continued education.

Addressing the educational gap students in state custody encounter will require leadership from not just a single person, but throughout multiple agencies and myriad schools attended by these students. Only by drawing attention to this problem, crafting a vision that will convince state and school staff that this is a problem worth addressing, and developing open lines of communication and repeatable, appropriate solutions will students be provided the services they deserve.