Teaching teachers about economics

By Amy Geiszler-Jones*

The work Jim Clark does as director of Wichita State’s Center for Economic Education is based on a simple business principle — that of supply and demand.

Kindergarten through high school teachers need a resource to learn how to integrate economic concepts into their curriculum, and Clark, along with associate director Jan Wolcutt, is available to supply that resource.

For more than three decades WSU has operated the center, which is part of the Kansas Council on Economic Education. Each of the six Kansas regents’ universities operates a similar economics education center, with their service area being the same as the university where it is located. For example, WSU’s center serves south-central Kansas.

The state council, housed in WSU’s Devlin Hall, has existed since 1959, and its parent organization, the National Council for Economic Education, started after World War II. In the United States, there are more than 300 centers, all based at universities, that share the goals of exposing teachers to economics and providing materials that help them incorporate economic concepts into subjects such as social studies, U.S. and world histories, civics, government, math, science and even children’s literature.

It’s a much-needed service, when you consider recent national survey information found on the KCEE’s Web site. Nearly two-thirds of U.S. students didn’t know that in times of inflation, money doesn’t hold its value. Forty-six percent of adults and 77 percent of students didn’t know that when the government spends more than it takes in it’s called a deficit.

At the WSU center, and those like it across the nation, “the idea is that everybody ought to understand economics and how our basic economic system works,” says Clark, an associate professor of economics at WSU. “If you don’t understand the basic concepts
of economics, it’s hard to make good decisions as a consumer, as an employee, and as a voter, a citizen.”

Considering economics seems to share a similar reputation as science classes — that it’s a difficult subject — there’s a dramatic void in educating students about economics in K-12 and to some extent in college. In the Wichita public school system, for example, Clark cited that only the rigorous international baccalaureate program at Wichita East High offers an economics class and a college-level instructor has taught that course for the past few years. (Clark even taught it for two years.) Many college students tend to avoid economics classes, as well, unless it’s a requirement.

Centers such as the one at WSU, therefore, are a valuable resource for school districts and teachers who want to learn more about economics so that they can incorporate concepts into the curriculum. In Kansas, the incorporation of such concepts is especially important, considering that 20 percent of the social studies portion of the state assessment tests deals with economics.

“Teachers are concerned that they don’t know enough to effectively teach their students, and with newspapers like (The Wichita) Eagle publishing test results, no one wants to look bad,” Clark notes. “That pressure is driving our business at the center up significantly.”

Through the center, teachers can take workshops and receive curriculum materials and lesson plans. One resource the center offers is a CD-ROM called “Virtual Economics,” which has 150 documents and 30,000 pages of instructional material for teachers to create their own economic lessons or to use an available one from the CD.

Teachers also can enroll in a WSU telecourse offered during the spring and fall semesters. In a telecourse, the student views instructional videotapes and meets occasionally on campus with the instructor. It’s an option that draws anywhere from 10 to 25 teachers each semester. This year for the first time, students can receive a CD that incorporates both the instructional video as well as other materials.
The WSU center conducts custom-designed workshops for various schools in its service area. For example, recently Clark and a KCEE staff member conducted a Saturday workshop for K-12 teachers in Augusta. Working with the Wichita public school district, the center offered summer workshops for elementary-level school teachers. USD 259 purchased the materials, and the school district and KCEE paid the workshop tuition. About 250 teachers enrolled during the past two summers the classes were offered. This past summer, Clark and Wolcutt also taught a workshop with math teachers from Wichita’s middle and high schools. Similar workshops will be offered again next summer.

So how would an elementary teacher introduce economic concepts to his or her young pupils? The most popular venue is children’s literature, says Clark. “There’s a lot of books that teachers have students read anyway that have economic ideas in them. The basic idea of economics is that you can’t have everything you want.” And a number of books address that concept.

Introducing those concepts in elementary school helps make it easier for the child to learn about economics later in their educational journey. “Economics has a reputation that it’s difficult, like science,” Clark says. “It takes some ability to think abstractly and a lot of people have trouble with that. It’s something you need to practice and start on at a fairly early age. That’s what some of the lessons are intended to do — to not just help kids understand concepts but to understand how to think logically and practice that at an early age.”

Teachers apparently find the workshops and materials useful. In a recent KCEE survey, in which 87 of 300 teachers surveyed responded, nearly 75 percent of the teachers reported they had used almost all or a significant part of what they learned in these courses to teach economic concepts in their classrooms. The majority of the respondents (76 percent) were elementary school teachers; and nearly half those
elementary school teachers reported that before taking an economic education workshop they had had no prior economics training.

The lessons and other materials are written by the staff members at the various economic education centers around the country. Clark, for example, has written some lesson plans involving world history and pieces for a high school advanced placement economics book.

Corporations play a role in providing this resource to teachers, as well. Some of the curriculum materials are made possible by corporate gifts. For example, State Farm Insurance provided funding for new curriculum materials that help math teachers incorporate economics. The KCEE raises private and corporate funds to help offset tuition costs for teachers enrolling in local workshops.

Clark joined the WSU economics faculty in 1976, and he teaches introductory classes, as well as economics of e-business and transportation courses. He’s been director of the WSU Center for Economic Education since 1986, and he finds his quarter-time position very rewarding.

“It’s fun to work with teachers,” Clark says. “These are the people, after all, (whom) we trust our children to and if we can help them do a better job that’s pretty satisfying.”

To find out more about the Kansas Council of Economic Education, visit its Web site at www.kcee.wichita.edu. The National Council of Economic Education’s site can be found at www.econedlink.org.

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