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Dollars and Education Performance: Same Old Story

In the recently released *Governor's Report on State Performance*, the pages are filled with the typical puffery about the Commonwealth's accomplishments since the Governor took office. The usual items are highlighted; increases to the state's economic indicators such as employment, per capita personal income and state gross domestic product—although as usual, there is little context for the state data in the form of comparisons to the U.S. or states with strong performances.

However, in an unusual twist, the Governor mentions the inadequate performance of the state's education system, particularly Pennsylvania students' performance in math when matched against those in other countries. This twist is out of character with the normal self administered back slapping tone of the rest of the report, but clearly this is nothing more than a ploy to justify throwing more dollars at education. Indeed, the Governor's latest budget proposal calls for \$290 million in additional education outlays for the coming fiscal year. A mere down payment on the massive \$5 billion more in state spending the Commonwealth's education lobby claims is necessary to lift all students to proficient levels in reading and math. A claim based on one of the most fatuous studies of education and spending every produced.

The Governor's Report notes that only 38 percent of Pennsylvania's students mastered math skills as measured by an internationally administered test while students in other countries, specifically Asian countries such as Singapore (73 percent), Hong Kong (66 percent), and Japan (57 percent) are doing remarkably better. Pointing out this deficiency is followed by this statement: "Ensuring that all children in the Commonwealth have access to an education that prepares them...is the goal of Pennsylvania's publicly-supported education system." The Report then lists the programs and money this administration has spent since taking office, such as "\$2.4 billion in new state investments to schools" to make sure these students can compete in the "competitive knowledge-based economy".

But what is not mentioned is how much these other countries spend to get the much better results they achieve. For example, in 2003 Japan spent about \$7,500 per pupil whereas Pennsylvania spent \$8,916. Singapore recently (2006) spent about \$6,500 per student (and that includes post-secondary) whereas Pennsylvania's recent data (2005-06) show public school per pupil expenditures of more than \$10,000. If the Governor wants to actually increase educational proficiencies, maybe he should consider options other than spending more money. Enlarge the corporate donation scholarship program and create a voucher program open to all, with per student vouchers worth at least 75 percent of the current per student spending in Pennsylvania.

While critics will contend there are cultural differences between students from different countries, we don't need to go overseas to show how public school students fare in Pennsylvania—we can make a comparison based on private schools in the Commonwealth. The most recent SAT scores

(2007) show a significant disparity in educational achievement. According to the College Board (the group administering the SAT exam), Pennsylvania's public school students scored a combined average of 986 (Math and English). Meanwhile, students attending religiously affiliated schools scored an average of 1024—and most religiously affiliated schools do it for thousands of dollars less per pupil than the state average of more than \$10,000. Students claiming to have attended independently affiliated schools had an even higher average score of 1056.

Spending more money on public education does not translate into higher scores. If that were the case those attending Pittsburgh Public Schools, where per pupil expenditures exceed \$18,000, would show proficiency levels well above the state average and rank higher than the foreign countries mentioned in the Governor's Report. Instead, the eleventh grade math proficiency rate as measured by the state PSSA exams comes in well below the state average—with three of the City's high schools at less than 15 percent proficiency.

Throwing more money at the problem clearly isn't the answer. It merely rewards those who have been responsible for the unsatisfactory outcomes of the past and who continue to try to convince the taxpayers and the legislature they know best. Just another \$5 billion will do the trick they now say. What a windfall for consultants and curriculum design "experts" that would be.

Some Pennsylvania schools and districts perform reasonably well. But the same students in private settings with the same level of spending would almost certainly perform even better than they do now. Unfortunately, many school districts are not doing well at all and throwing money at them is not the answer. What is needed is a genuine and dramatic overhaul of the system. Create vouchers for parents and students who want real choice.

The state has a constitutionally mandated role to play in establishing a thorough and efficient system of education for the people of Pennsylvania. That system does not require the public sector to be the monopoly provider. Other countries offer choice. It is not rocket science. It can be done here if those who truly care about our children's future would demand and work for real change by challenging the entrenched education establishment. Otherwise it will be more of the same. Underperforming students, ever more spending and higher taxes; something Pennsylvania can simply not afford to continue doing.

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