

POLICY BRIEF

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Colossal Waste of Tax Dollars for Useless Education Study

The Pennsylvania Board of Education, with authorization of the Legislature, spent \$650,000 on yet another education study, this time to figure out how much money would be needed to bring every Commonwealth student to a level deemed by the state to be proficient in math and reading. To no one's surprise, the report (*Costing Out the Resources Needed to Meet Pennsylvania's Public Education Goals*) says it will require about \$2,500 per pupil, boosting the state's per pupil average to \$12,058 necessitating expenditures of almost \$5 *billion* more tax dollars. Considering the state's share of education funding already approaches \$8 billion with another \$11 billion plus coming from local sources, this truly would be a tall order.

To be blunt, this report is flawed to the point of being useless as a guide to the Legislature for policy making. The findings are simply too much at odds with common sense and experience to be credible. Granted, the assignment was an overreach. Since there are so few examples of schools achieving 100 percent proficient levels, it is hard to see how one uses their experience to build education models to reach 100 percent for all schools in the state. It is guess work at best, especially considering the wide variation in demographics across the schools in the state.

Indeed, to get even one school to 100 percent requires an extremely fortuitous set of conditions—with most having little correlation with money spent in the classroom or school. And unless the tests are watered down to the point of being meaningless that will continue to be the case. There are simply too many variables affecting learning to suppose that tweaking expenditures can bring about huge changes in achievement. In short, there is plenty of evidence demonstrating the lack of a correlation of academic achievement with expenditures. The last 30 years should have taught us something. How, for example, does ever increasing taxpayer provided health care costs for teachers translate to better academic achievement?

Ironically, the report itself shows that during the 2005-2006 school year the Allegheny County districts of Wilkesburg, Duquesne, and Pittsburgh were already spending more than the researchers determined should be necessary to achieve 100 percent proficiency scores yet these districts had abysmally low percentages of students scoring at the proficient level or higher. In fact, Duquesne's performance was one of the worst in the state prompting the Pennsylvania Department of Education to close the high school. By

the same token, several Allegheny County districts including Mt. Lebanon, Upper St. Clair, and South Fayette spent less than the researchers deemed necessary but nonetheless still rank among the best performing districts in the state with individual schools in those districts predominantly in the 90 percent proficient or higher range.

An obvious question is how did the researchers estimate each district's "necessary" spending level? They used a "professional judgment panel" to arrive at the amount needed to be spent to have all children score proficient in reading and math. According to the study "...panelists were instructed that their task was to identify what constitutes an "adequate" level of revenues for hypothetical schools and districts." While panelists were not to build their "dream school", they were asked to try to estimate how much money would be required to meet state standards for each district.

A review of the panel members reveals a largely self-selected group of teachers, principals, and school administrators. These are individuals with intimate knowledge of schools, but whose objectivity is questionable and most of whom probably believe that education funding is always too low. Conspicuously missing from the panel were critics of public education and/or spending on education or proponents of alternatives to the current public school model such as school choice advocates. It is equivalent to saying there is only one answer to the problem, how much money does it take to accomplish our goal, rather than asking if there are there other, better ways to accomplish our goal.

To further illustrate the wrongheadedness of the study, consider its recommendation for two Southwestern Pennsylvania school districts that are performing well, namely, Mt. Lebanon in Allegheny County and Peters Township in Washington County. The percentages of students achieving proficient or higher marks in elementary, middle, and high schools are remarkably similar for the two districts, with both posting scores in the 90s for the most part in reading and math. Proficiency scores in the two districts stood 25 to 30 percentage points above the state as a whole.

Here's the problem for the study's authors. According to their spending definition, Mt. Lebanon spent \$10,684 per pupil in 2005-2006 while Peters Township spent \$7,638. So what did the authors recommend? They say Peters should boost its spending by \$3,000 per pupil while Mt. Lebanon needs to increase its outlays by only \$200. In other words, to achieve essentially the same percentage improvement in already outstanding student test scores, Peters would have to hike its expenditures by 40 percent and Mt. Lebanon two percent.

Obviously, the study authors did little or nothing to examine the results for internal inconsistencies their methodology might be producing. One can understand why. A methodology primarily driven by the education profession trying to pigeon hole school districts by economic and demographic factors and using simulation techniques that incorporate guestimates of how effective different strategies would be in producing better scores for actual districts is at best a fool's errand—an expensive, ineffectual exercise.

Indeed, if the experts participating in the professional judgment panel know how to improve their students' performance significantly, why are they not implementing those strategies already? On the other hand, how can yet another education expert devised reading program possibly offset the lack of enthusiasm for learning so apparent in many schools?

Finally, if the study's findings are to be believed and accepted by the Legislature and the administration, then the state should immediately reduce its \$200 million allocation to the Pittsburgh School District. Why? According to the report, Pittsburgh schools spent \$15,078 per student in 2005-2006. At the same time, they say that it should require only \$12,560 to have every Pittsburgh student testing at the proficient or higher level. With the enrollment currently standing at 28,000, the state could save at least \$70 million by lowering its funding to the District by the \$2,500 per pupil the report says the District is overspending. Of course, some fancy footwork will be needed to show Pittsburgh how it can move from less than 20 percent of students scoring at the proficiency level in some schools to the 100 percent level with substantially fewer dollars to spend.

On the other hand, by freeing up \$70 million, the state could boost funding of many schools that have been deemed to be short of the "necessary" amounts. Or just return the money to taxpayers, an even better option. Clearly, it is reasonable to believe this latest report will be relegated to the dusty shelf crammed with other such studies before the state cuts Pittsburgh's allocation by \$70 million.

The "Costing Out" report is premised on the notion that a recasting of curricula, teaching techniques and strategies, etc., can be customized for the thousands of individual schools across the state. If the state were to adopt this idea as the way forward, the cost of the consulting work necessary to formulate and implement all those plans would dwarf the \$650,000 spent on the "costing out" study.

Why doesn't the state simply look at the savings that could be achieved if it created a voucher system that grants each parent \$8,000 per child per year to be used at the school, whether private, parochial, or charter of their choice? For many parents and students who truly care about education in failing school districts that would be a far better option than yet another expensive program to shore up schools that heretofore have flung back every attempt at improvement.

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