

VIEWPOINT

It's not classrooms that need fixing, it's state bureaucracy



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Guest Columnist

Many worthwhile improvements have been made to increase the educational performance of Delaware's students. We have experienced Visions, Races,

increased resources, more administrators and support staff. The dilemma is that despite these worthwhile efforts there has been no significant education improvement in over 30 years!

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) shows that from 1999 to 2017 our eighth-graders' progress has been flat with two-thirds functionally illiterate in math and reading. The Alliance for Excellent Education reports only 34% are college-ready. Recently local colleges reported 53% of entering Delaware freshmen required remediation.

Money isn't the issue. In 2013 NAEP and the U.S. Dept. of Education ranked Delaware 10th in per-pupil expenditures. From 1999 to 2017, per-pupil spending was up about twice the inflationary rate. In 1998 it was \$7,255 per pupil and in 2015 it was \$14,244 per pupil. If capital expenditures were included it would have

been over \$20,000. In 1998 there were 21 students per administrator. In 2017 there were 13.9 students per administrative staff member. That's a lower ratio than students per teacher (14.7)!

The dilemma was recognized, and a solution was proposed in 1995 when Gov. Carper, State Superintendent Mike Ferguson and a business consortium led by the DuPont Co. realized that the source of the problem was also a liability to the state's economy. Anyone living or working in Delaware was being adversely affected by fewer jobs, lower property values, higher taxes and crime rates, etc. People were living across the state line to avoid our schools. Previous efforts focused on what teachers were doing in the schools when, in fact, the real problem was the bureaucratic system that controlled the education process or how teachers got the job done. A systemic change was the solution. Bill Manning, former president of the Red Clay School Board, once described the existing bureaucratic education system as the "blob" that needed to be pitched.

The systemic solution (suggested by the Brookings Institution) was to have operational decision-making moved from school boards and district bureaucracies and placed in the individual schools led by principals professionally prepared to be the schools' CEOs (Chief Education

Officers) working with their teachers. Steve Jobs once said, "It doesn't make sense to hire smart people and then tell them what to do; we hire smart people so they can tell us what to do." Board responsibilities would be reduced to oversight (accountability), requested support from schools, and appeals of local decisions. Boards would become much less directive and more supportive of schools. Operating surpluses would be retained by the individual school encouraging financial efficiency.

Such a shift would make the reduction of the number of school districts, district and state personnel, and related expenses a logical next step. This would provide the financial resources to improve teacher salaries making retention of good teachers and the attraction of highly qualified teachers easier. Teachers are a critical factor in providing quality education to students and yet, in Delaware, annual inflation has averaged 2.3% over the last 20 years while teacher salaries have increased an average of 1.6%. Teachers are making less today than they were 20 years ago.

Mike Ferguson, co-author of the Charter School Law, noted that if a system were in place to "empower local communities to try new, unique solutions to problems that are facing their own schools," then "reliance on bureaucratic

decisions would be a thing of the past."

In business, local control provides better "buy-in" by personnel and produces better results. The business of education deserves nothing less.

Charter schools were to model, hone and share innovative ideas including local control and its implementation with traditional schools. It never happened. All the original supporters are gone (governor, superintendent, business leaders) and the system that was to be changed took control of the change agent (charters).

We need to begin by passing BOLD legislation to empower qualified school personnel to do the jobs they were hired to do. This will put parents in closer contact with the decision-makers of their children's schools. Once schools are improved, districts reduced, oversight in place, we'll work on real parental choice. Are these changes really necessary? It was George Bernard Shaw who said, "Progress without change is impossible." ■

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