

Earl Jaques Response

5/12/2019

In his May 5, 2019 opinion column, Rep. Earl Jaques, Chairman of the House Education Committee, solicits support for his Bill to permit districts to modestly increase their rates for operating funds without a referendum. While well-intentioned, passage of this Bill assumes that a lack of funding is the source of our public school system's poor performance. Well, it's not and, if successful, this Bill will exacerbate the problem.

In 2013 NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) and the U.S. Department of Education ranked Delaware 10th in per-pupil expenditures. From 1999 to 2017 per-pupil spending was up about twice the inflationary rate. In 1990 it was \$7,255 per pupil. In 2015 it was \$14,244 and if you included capital expenditures it would have been over \$20,000. About 1/3 of the state's budget is spent on education (\$1.5 Billion). And just what has all this money bought us?

Well, NAEP reports that from 1999 to 2017 our 8th grades' progress has been flat with 2/3 functionally illiterate in math and reading. The Alliance for Excellent Education reports that only 34% of high school graduates are college ready. Local colleges recently reported that 53% of entering Delaware freshmen required remediation. Essentially there has been no significant improvement in our education performance in over 30 years. If we don't recognize and address the real problem, this Bill will place us with Alice in Wonderland and we will be pouring our tax money down the rabbit hole.

What did we buy? In 1998 there were approximately 21 students per administrative role and 16 students per teacher. By 2017 we had 13.9 students per administrative staff and 14.7 students per teacher. The rate of administrative staff increase is 3 times the rate of teacher increase. The rate of administrative staff salary increases is nearly twice the rate for teachers. Teaching is a profession but education is a business and the "bottom line" (performance) is important.

We've had other help offered through Visions, Races, Committees, etc. with similar results. For example our Race to the Top money of \$120 million delivered only about \$20 million to the classrooms. The balance was put to good use hiring Data Coaches, Collectors, Analysts, etc. but still the performance needle didn't budge much. We have been hiring well-intentioned, knowledgeable and experienced people but having a limited impact. Why? None of these efforts addressed the underlying problem.

If you hire a talented, knowledgeable and experienced jet pilot to fly your plane faster than the speed of sound but your plane is a tricycle, failure is assured! We have been hiring talented and knowledgeable teachers and administrators and placing them in an untenable position. The problem was identified in 1995 by Governor Carper; State Superintendent, Mike Ferguson;

and a business consortium of six large companies led by the DuPont Company. The culprit was the existing public school system. It was described as a liability to Delaware's economy. A systemic change was proposed but never fully implemented. The system that needed to be changed 30 years ago is the same system in place today. Passage of this Bill will result in people paying more for the same lack of improved performance. Okay, we have identified the existing system as the problem but what is the solution?

At the first "Visions" meeting hosted by Dan Rich, former Provost of the University of Delaware, he ended the meeting by saying that if we wanted to change Delaware's public school system we had to be bold. The Caesar Rodney Institute supports the systemic change plan of 1995 and has named it the BOLD PLAN. This plan initiates systemic change by empowering teachers and administrators with operational decision-making authority that has been shifted from school boards and bureaucrats and placed in the local schools. This empowerment is very similar to the Memorandum of Understanding proposed to Delaware's Priority Schools intended to significantly improve their performance.

Shifting power to the local education professionals is very logical. 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, requested support from schools, and appeals. In support of this reform, Mike Ferguson wrote, "...empower local communities to try new, unique solutions to problems that are facing their own schools." and, "Reliance on bureaucratic decisions would be a thing of the past." Duplication of services will be eliminated at the district and state levels. Parents will enjoy greater control than ever before of their children's schools by dealing directly with local school personnel rather than through district officials.

Adopting BOLD legislation is not the end. With limited responsibilities and excess staffing, facilities, and resources, consider the fact that New York City and Los Angeles have more students than Delaware but only one school district. One is not necessarily the right number for Delaware but 19 is definitely wrong. Change is difficult but as George Bernard Shaw once said, "Progress without change is impossible!"

By Ron Russo
Executive Director
Caesar Rodney Institute