



Funding Education: Debating School Standards Reveals Double Standards

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Saturday, April 3, 2004

Charlottesville. In January of this year the Virginia House of Delegates, with much fanfare, passed a resolution demanding that Congress modify the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) so that its accountability provisions would no longer apply to the Commonwealth. Calling NCLB an unfunded education mandate and an unwarranted intrusion into the Commonwealth's authority to manage its own educational affairs, 99 of the 100 members of the House cried out for relief. Two months later many of those same House members are fighting to win approval of a budget that would leave Virginia's Standards of Learning as intrusive and unfunded a mandate as the federal law they complained about.

According to two years of study by the Joint Legislative and Audit Review Commission, the Commonwealth must provide an additional \$1.2 billion over the next two years just to maintain existing education programs. The House budget proposal provides just over half that amount.

The picture is worse, however, because the Standards of Quality (SOQs), which set out the minimum education services to be provided by school divisions, are themselves seriously outdated. The Board of Education has proposed modest changes to the SOQs that would make them more in line with the performance expectations of the SOLs and current educational practices, but the House budget proposal funds none of these revisions.

THE IMPACT of the House's proposed education budget will be felt most harshly in those localities with high concentrations of poverty, that lack the tax base to adequately supplement the continuing state funding shortfall or meet the educational demands of the SOLs. They cannot afford the best teachers, smaller class sizes, curriculum development, science labs, or quality pre-school programs needed to improve their schools. Under the House proposal, Virginia students who need the most, whether they live in our cities, our mountains, or our farming communities, end up getting the least. The most reliable predictor of school performance on the SOLs remains the number of poor students in a school district.

The mandate that House members complain about - No Child Left Behind - requires, among other things, adults to ensure that at-risk students are able to achieve at an academic level comparable to their peers. The consequences of failure to achieve such parity fall on the administrators and teachers who must develop improvement plans, provide tutors, allow their students to transfer to higher-performing schools, and even replace staff if the performance of these most needy students does not improve. Significantly, NCLB does not punish the students if the adults fail to do their jobs.

The SOLs, on the other hand, place the burden of achievement, and the consequences of failure, squarely on the students. This year, for the first time, high school seniors who do not pass the requisite number of SOL tests, even if they are otherwise eligible to graduate, will not receive high school diplomas. Conversely, the schools they attend will not be held accountable by the Commonwealth until 2007, and then with little consequence. While thousands of seniors are expected not to graduate this spring, more than one in four Virginia high schools still fails to meet

state standards.

IN OTHER words, the House's position on education boils down to this: Unfunded federal educational mandates that hold adults accountable for the achievement of all children are bad; the unfunded SOL mandates that disproportionately punish poor students are good.

In sharp contrast, the Senate's budget fully funds the \$1.2-billion shortfall, funds many of the needed revisions proposed by the Board, and fully supports the Commonwealth's program for at-risk 4-year-olds - a program designed to help overcome the SOL achievement gap between rich and poor.

Giving all students a fair shake is not just the right thing to do, it is what the law demands. The Constitution of Virginia requires the General Assembly to set educational standards, and to devise a system of funding to ensure that educational programs are available to meet those same standards. The standards clearly have been set, but only the Senate's education budget comes close to funding them. Let us hope that both the Governor and the House have the wisdom to follow the Senate's lead.

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