

Fallacy of the “65% Delusion”

Republican gubernatorial candidate Bob McDonnell has suggested that he can increase Virginia school spending by requiring school divisions to spend a minimum of 65 percent on ‘instruction’. This is not new money, but a re-direction of current funds.

Legislation and ballot initiatives that would establish 65 percent as either a required spending allocation or a goal have been repeatedly rejected, both in legislatures and by ballot initiative.

Why? Because once legislators and voters study the proposal, they understand it for the ruse that it is. When held up to the proverbial light, it becomes readily apparent that it will do nothing to improve education, promote efficiency, or cut bureaucratic waste.

It is a definitional sleight of hand. Many of those who provide today’s important school services --- librarians, speech and language pathologists, social workers --- are not included under ‘instruction,’ yet their work is indispensable to student success. But that’s the duplicitous definitional game at the core of the “65% delusion”.

In 2006, it was beaten in the state legislatures of **Florida, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Utah, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin**. It was also defeated in a 2006 ballot initiative in **Colorado**. Efforts to place it on the ballot 2006 in **Arizona, Oklahoma, Illinois, South Carolina, Tennessee** and **Oregon** were defeated.

Republican gubernatorial candidates in **Illinois, Iowa, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Ohio** used 65 percent proposals in their platforms. All were defeated.

An effort to place 65% on the ballot in Florida in 2008 was defeated.

Only one state appears to have enacted the policy – **Georgia**. Although **Texas** Governor Rick Perry decreed by executive order that schools should spend 65 percent “in the classroom,” he left it up to the state education commissioner to define classroom spending. The commissioner’s rule includes librarians and makes the mandate one of several financial accountability measures. At least one superintendent has dismissed the rule as a “meaningless blob.”

In **Kansas**, the legislature and Democratic governor supported establishing a 65 percent in-the-classroom spending “goal.” This suggestion to schools to increase instructional spending also expanded the definition of instruction to include key student support services.

The **Louisiana** legislature in 2005 supported a resolution asking the state department of education to study how the 65 percent mandate might be implemented. The department returned with the study in 2006, and its report was so negative legislators decided not to pursue implementation.

Standard & Poor's School Evaluation Services conducted an extensive analysis of nine states that were considering instituting a "65 Percent Solution" as of fall 2005. The study found many districts that spend less than 65 percent "in the classroom" do well on state tests, while others that spend more than 65 percent do poorly, and determined that there is no significant positive correlation between the percentage of funds that districts spend on an arbitrary definition of instruction and the percentage of students who score proficient or higher on state reading and math tests. The study found no minimum spending percentage—whether 65 percent or some other figure—that is a silver bullet for improving student achievement. The report concludes that there exists no "empirical evidence for mandating a uniform percentage spending threshold across all districts."ⁱ

The Standard & Poor's study highlights the fallacy of a one-size-fits-all solution to school funding, observing "the percentage allocated to instruction may need to vary from one district to another for legitimate reasons." Some school districts, for example, may need to spend more on nutrition, counseling, transportation, safety, or other services to insure students arrive at school ready to learn.

Florida Forum for Progressive Policy

An analysis by the Florida Forum for Progressive Policy of the version of the 65 percent proposal considered in Florida found no connection between classroom spending percentages and student performance results in Florida's 67 school districts.ⁱⁱ Using Standard & Poor's database and method of deriving classroom spending percentages (dividing instructional expenditures per student by operating expenditures per student), the study found that school districts receiving an "A" grade from the Florida Department of Education spent from 55.0 to 62.7 percent in the classroom; "B" districts from 54.4 to 61.0 percent; and "C" districts from 48.4 to 61.6 percent. The three "D" districts each spent between 50 and 55 percent in the classroom.

The Florida study also looked at districts identified by Standard & Poor's as outstanding. Among those was Lafayette County, a tiny district that outperformed districts with similar demographics in both reading and math for two consecutive years, while spending only 48.5 percent of instructional funds in the classroom. The other districts that outperformed on math and reading spent from 55.6 to 58.3 percent in the classroom. None of the districts with classroom spending above 60 percent earned the S&P "outperforming" label.ⁱⁱⁱ

The originators of the "65% delusion" and subsequent supporters have promoted it purely for political purposes --- in a cynical attempt to appear to be for education without actually advocating for the funds needed to improve it.

ⁱ "The Issues and Implications of the '65 Percent Solution'," School Matters, a service of Standards & Poor's. Retrieved on Sept 21, 2009 from http://mikefalick.blogspot.com/my_blog/files/analysis1105.pdf

ⁱⁱ Stonecipher, Alan, "The 65 Percent Illusion," Florida Forum for Progressive Policy.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Outstanding School Districts in Florida, 2002-03," School Matters, a service of Standard & Poor's.