

Forum: Education task force should focus on funding

By Eric A. Houck and Cathy C. Sielke | | Story updated at 6:13 PM on Saturday, February 9, 2008

The Governor's Education Finance Task Force has recently released recommendations that propose an accountability structure linking performance with reduced state oversight for school districts. These recommendations have drawn positive reviews from pundits across the state who say the proposals represent the type of fundamental change that public education in Georgia needs.

They are half-right. However useful the task force's current proposals may be, they focus on how Georgia schools should be operated, neglecting how those schools should be funded.

To be clear: Contracting, devolution of authority and increased local accountability are all good ideas that may indeed have a positive impact on the performance of Georgia's schools. School districts in other states (e.g., Michigan) function well in a far less regulated environment than do Georgia schools. Indeed, greater local authority, control and accountability lie at the heart of the standards-based reform movement of the 1990s, which promoted the idea of "top-down support for bottom-up reform."

However, school governance and school finance are distinct issues. Governance focuses on how schools operate; finance focuses on how schools are funded. Reform of school governance and operations is a necessary but insufficient part of reforming Georgia schools. Furthermore, it is not what the governor's task force was charged to do.

The current funding formula uses student counts to determine teacher allocation. It provides additional funding for pupils in exceptional categories. Recently, the formula also has incorporated austerity reductions and equalization grants. Emerging research indicates that, for many districts, equalization money is being used to offset austerity cuts, thereby dampening the effect of equalization funding across the state. A discussion of the Georgia funding structure must examine whether these streams of funding are pegged to appropriate levels, and further ask if there are additional categories that should be added or extraneous categories that should be removed.

Luckily, resources exist to aid in answering these questions. Nationally, a great deal of academic and policy work has been done on determining the cost of an "adequate" education for students of differing background and abilities. Proposals abound, from the right and the left, on how to develop a funding system that is portable, transparent and directly links funding and accountability policies.

These options - from states, think tanks and the academic literature - link funding and governance in the very way the governor's task force seems to wish to do. To this point, unfortunately, the task force has not publicly considered these options, and there is little evidence they have availed themselves of these perspectives in their work.

Now is a critical time for the task force to answer its charge. It is worth considering that proposals will come before the state legislature to reduce or eliminate state income from property taxes and that a consortium of school districts have sustained a legal challenge to the state funding system far longer than many observers thought possible. In states where plaintiffs have won school finance cases, legislatures have had to invest millions of additional dollars into statewide education systems, often without necessary time for research and reflection.

It is therefore critical that the Governor's Education Finance Task Force recommit itself to a technical examination of the methods by which money is raised and allocated to districts across the state. Only within this context will the task force's suggestions regarding changes in governance have any resonance.

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