

Education funding: the "affordability" challenge

A recent "Seven Days" article highlighted Vermont Secretary of Administration Susanne Young's January 18, 2018 memo to Legislators on reforming education funding. She listed eighteen ideas the Governor proposes for cost containment, funding reformation, and what she terms "Five-Year Initiatives." No doubt, several of those "ideas" are worth exploring. As she wrote, "It is our view that Vermonters want us to work together and be willing to think outside the box that has constrained education financing discussions for many years."

In fact, both the Governor's eighteen ideas and the House Ways and Means Committee's Working Proposal reflect creative thinking "outside the box" and offer a stimulating set of considerations for how to fund our schools. This how-to-fund box challenge is foremost on everyone's mind these days, for good reason. Any solution calls for taxpayers to fork over cash to pay for our schools. That gets people's attention!

However, the reality is that there is another "box" out there, one which bears equal attention if we are to solve this affordability problem. The other box we need to think outside of is the one constraining how we deliver education in Vermont schools. It seems that just as there is sound agreement that Vermont can no longer afford the \$18,000 + per pupil cost we now bear, so, too, is there agreement that we cannot afford poor quality schools. Just as we need clever thinking to sort out how to pay, we also need to stimulate strategic changes in our schools towards more cost-effective practices. Simply telling school boards to level-fund, or shifting the burden from one type of tax to another is short-sighted, and may very well serve to both diminish the quality of our schools and create more contention among taxpayers.

Let's look at that other box more closely. Cost-effectiveness in schools does not imply lowering the quality. In my 40 years as an educator, the last 25 of which as a superintendent, I have witnessed explosive growth in innovations that improve learning, many of which were less costly than what we do now. Innovations being practiced around the country, the world, and yes, in some of our schools in Vermont, are achieving high levels of learning at lower cost than many conventional models. For instance, blended learning, flipped classrooms, independent study, and virtual school initiatives are freeing up teacher time while empowering young learners. Integrated curricula, competency-based education, and personalized learning create a more focused, efficient body of skills and knowledge for our students. Structured volunteerism, mentorships, work-study programs, and internships capitalize on community resources not measured in dollars. And, professional networks and action research strengthen our teachers, enabling them to be more effective and efficient.

We are not alone in the quest for affordable education. Columbia University's Center for Benefit-Cost Studies of Education is all about identifying and promoting a strategic approach to the notion of affordability. The internet is replete with articles about cost-effectiveness (e.g. *For Cost Effective School Reform, Go to the Principal's Office; The Cost-Effectiveness of Comprehensive School Reform and Rapid Assessment; Rethinking the finance system for improved student achievement*). All we have to do is mobilize our educators, universities, and communities to really "think out of the box" and we can find ways to make our schools affordable again.

What we need now is leadership in a movement to make our schools better - better for students, better for teachers and administrators, and better for taxpayers. Shifting the discussion from how to reduce costs to how to make our education system more cost-effective would spark renewed interest in exploring the many alternatives out there. The Legislature and the Governor's office are

uniquely positioned to raise this issue, focus the "affordability" conversation on cost-effective practices, and mobilize the channels of innovation in our state.

Start with convening a forum on affordability; issue a challenge to the universities and various associations (VSBA, VSA, VPA, VTNEA) to come together to forge a new direction in how we can make our schools more cost-effective and maintain quality. "Market" the shift with press conferences, recognitions, and celebrations of cost-effective practices.

Absent leadership from Montpelier, this collaborative effort will not happen. Individual schools and school boards are not capable of effecting such a change comprehensively. We need to work together.

Making public education in Vermont schools affordable again demands that we look outside of both boxes. By shifting our attention to how to deliver quality in our schools in a more cost-effective way, and pausing in our frenzy to determine how it should be paid for, we may find answers to both challenges, and forge agreement on what we can afford.

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