

All show, no dough

During the reform efforts of recent years, one factor has remained constant: a low level of state spending on public schools compared to the rest of the nation.

Meanwhile, Florida almost certainly takes the blue ribbon for its stunning number of unfunded state mandates.

No one in Florida believes education is funded at the level necessary to promote and produce the quality outcomes we desire for our students. Some may argue that current funding is all that is possible given the economic downturn. But Floridians should reject that excuse. The proponents of education accountability do not tolerate any excuses for educational outcomes, and that standard should be applied to the support and funding provided our school districts and the students they serve.

Consider:

- Citing the budget shortfall, lawmakers cut funding for Florida's Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten Program by over \$20 million from last year, a 7 percent decrease in the already low funding for every 4-year-old. Or an average of about \$180 per 4-year-old;
- School districts have laid off teachers and education staff, cut meaningful programs and may be forced to cut even more deeply. The recently passed unfunded programs are equally worrisome. School children are funded at the lowest level since 06-07 – \$6,267 per child, or an 8% reduction from just the previous year;
- State university budgets were slashed by 4%, which adds to the 24 percent drop in state funds to the university system over the last four years. These cuts have a wide impact. Universities will raise their tuition, some by 15 percent, and there will be cuts to merit-based aid, higher fees to out-of-state students, reductions in paid time off, higher student-faculty ratios and the possible elimination of valued programs;
- Local school districts have run out of options. There's nothing left to cut. If the state doesn't step up, local school systems will continue to see layoffs, class sizes will swell, and essential programs and services will be cut. **That's not exactly a good way to leave no child behind ... or to participate in a race to the top;**

- We are not only shortchanging our children, we are putting a significant drag on Florida's economic growth. In places like the Research Triangle in North Carolina, the state's commitment to funding education led the way: the economic growth sprang directly from the state's investment in education.

Among Florida's many unfunded and underfunded programs:

SB 736 - In the policy and education arena time must not be a substitute for money. Eventually the costs for the massive framework required by SB 736 must be paid. These costs include a multipart evaluation system for teachers and administrators, new district-developed student tests, training on new standards, curriculum and evaluation, multiple salary and performance pay processes, and a fully integrated data infrastructure to guide decision-making and improve instruction. The federal Race to the Top grant is woefully insufficient to cover these costs.

The staff analysis states that the total impact now and in the out years are indeterminate, but everyone familiar with this bill understands that the cost will be substantial.

Class size - We need to fully support and fully fund the constitutional language on class size. The recent statutory changes to the definitions used in calculating class size undercut the intent of the constitutional provision in an attempt avoid funding it. This must stop. In the meantime, we must remove the financial penalties for districts that fail to meet these goals as a result of the failure of the legislature to provide the funding.

Transportation - Student transportation costs are not fully funded by the legislature, and school districts, on average, must absorb an additional 30% of the overall costs. The burden of these costs has grown with federal and state unfunded mandates. For example, the legislature has now mandated that transportation be provided for students participating in the expanded Opportunity Scholarship Program. While the costs for this program are expected to double, no additional funding has been provided.

Education Funding & Reform

Technology - Categorical funding for public school technology was discontinued in 2006-2007. Many of the categorical funds – technology, the teacher lead program, transportation, instructional materials – have been moved into the FEFP in recent budgets with the explanation that it “makes the funding more flexible for the school districts.” The reality is that none of these programs were adequately funded to start with and are no more flexible or well funded now...particularly given that the current budget slashed FEFP funding by \$1.3 billion from last year and is down more than \$2 billion since 2007-2008.

Beginning a new state law requires the expansion of virtual instruction program options and requires every student take online coursework for graduation. The new law also requires that statewide tests be administered online.

To meet this unfunded mandate, cash strapped districts will have to spend money on new computers and building infrastructure. More money will also be required to expand capacity and access to technology labs; more is required to hire and train teachers and to fund the required assessments. The legislature requires full implementation within three years, consequently, compliance with this unfunded mandate must begin this school year. The bottom line is the program must be paid for, and school districts expect these costs to rise to over \$1 billion statewide.

Voluntary Prekindergarten - Florida’s Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) program, established in 2005 in response to a 2002 state constitutional amendment, was intended to provide quality preschool programs to all 4-year-olds whose parents want them to attend. There are significant flaws in the funding and support for the program including: no requirement that teachers hold bachelor’s degrees or have training in early education and no funding for the design of appropriate assessments for the children in the program. Other problems include: limited full-time availability, failure to track and measure program providers, and low per-pupil funding. Florida ranked 34th out of 38 states that fund pre-K programs, spending about \$2,300 per child last year.

We must continue to talk about the priorities we believe best help us meet the needs of our students, our education personnel, and our schools. Florida must begin to restore the funding cuts made during poor fiscal years and make an honest effort to avoid further cuts to education funding.

We urge legislators to review each and every current unfunded and underfunded mandate using a simple formula: *Fix it, fund it or forget it.*

Florida Constitution Article 9, Education (portions)

SECTION 1.(a) Public education.—

The education of children is a fundamental value of the people of the State of Florida. It is, therefore, a paramount duty of the state to make adequate provision for the education of all children residing within its borders. Adequate provision shall be made by law for a uniform, efficient, safe, secure, and high quality system of free public schools that allows students to obtain a high quality education and for the establishment, maintenance, and operation of institutions of higher learning and other public education programs that the needs of the people may require.

