



VIEWPOINT

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Getting It Wrong for Ohio's Future

By: Matthew Carr

Summary

A new proposed amendment to the Ohio Constitution, placing the State Board of Education in charge of determining K-12 school funding, is a blank check for Ohio's public schools. The proposal rests on a fallacy that Ohio's schools are under-funded, and that more dollars would lead to inherently better schools. Very little evidence supports this assertion.

Main text word count: 620

Representatives from all across Ohio's traditional public education establishment (teacher unions, school boards, administrators, and assorted fellow travelers) have banded together in an effort to "solve" the state's education funding dilemma once and for all.

The solution these groups have tendered for the public's consideration is an amendment to the Ohio Constitution that would place the State Board of Education in charge of determining K-12 school funding. Though billed as a guarantee that every student will receive a "high quality education" the proposal is in fact a guaranteed blank check for Ohio's public schools.

If passed, the amendment would allow the state board of education, which is composed of 11 elected and nine governor-appointed members, to dictate the state's K-12 education budget to the state legislature. There, the board's decision could only be overruled by a three-fifths supermajority, and even if successful the legislature's decision would require approval by the Ohio Supreme Court.

Unburdened by competing budget priorities, or even the need to justify how they arrived at their funding demands, the state board would have every incentive to dictate large increases in funding for the traditional public schools. The real burden would then fall to the legislature, with members facing two options for meeting the requirement of a balanced budget: cuts to other programs or tax increases. In time, both would be unavoidable.

Aware of the opposition that other state funded agencies will have to being left out of this giveaway, the amendment also provides that the funding levels for institutions of higher education and the Local Government Fund must be "increased annually by not less than the same percentage by which the state's personal income has increased..."

Combined, these three funding categories represent over 48 percent of the current state general revenue fund budget. Close to half of the state's annual budget would be encompassed by this amendment, and much more in the years after it went into effect.



Giving the State Board of Education the power to determine K-12 school funding will be a blank check for Ohio's public schools

Beyond issues of democratic control and accountability for tax dollars, however, is the faulty premise behind these so-called ‘school funding adequacy’ proposals, whether brought by lawsuit or through ballot initiative.

These proposals rest on the fallacy that our schools are under-funded, and that more dollars will inherently lead to a better education system. This is a faulty assumption which rests on rhetoric rather than evidence. According to the US Census Bureau, in 2004 Ohio had the 15th highest level of per pupil funding in the nation. Over the course of the last 20 years, Ohio has doubled its spending on K-12 education (inflation adjusted), but has seen little return on this large investment.

Attempts to mandate ever increasing funding for Ohio’s public schools, including this one, all utilize the same misdirection. The preponderance of the evidence on the relationship between school spending and student achievement has reached the same conclusion. More money does not equal better schools. The issue is no longer how much money is spent on schools, but how schools use the funding.

Legacy funding systems, such as the one currently used in Ohio, place the needs of institutions and financial stakeholders (adults) ahead of the needs of students. The result is inefficiency and aversion to change. Pouring more money into such a system does nothing to change the incentives against improvement. Indeed, it only serves to make those incentives stronger.

If Ohio’s policymakers are serious about meaningful reform in the way education is funded the best place to start is by funding students rather than buildings and political boundaries. Placing education funds with the student, introducing competition where little has ever existed, would do more to break down the myriad barriers to better schools than any other reform policy tried or even considered in this state.

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