

This written testimony is presented on behalf of the Ohio Education Association to respond to the call for information regarding weighted-pupil funding systems. We are requesting that this written testimony become part of the public record for the hearing taking place on August 22, 2012.

When Money Follows the Child – the Rest Are Left Behind

Educational reforms seem to cycle through American society. Companies and foundations seem to want to improve schools by advocating the adoption of business models to operate our educational systems. Schools are not factories and children are not widgets. Fund the Child (Fordham Foundation, June, 2006) and other similar reports rely on “sound bites” and references to market forces and competition as the way to improve public education. It’s hard to imagine how a system could be dramatically improved while so many people are actively advocating for “solutions” that would either replace or eliminate it entirely over time.

Aside from the practical problems of funding a system where money “literally” follows the child such as 1) districts and schools do not have an accounting or financial system that could implement such an idea or 2) that district level services such as counseling, health care, food services, transportation and building maintenance would be endangered due to the potential flow of students and resources in and out of districts, there is the basic question of constitutional responsibility. Ohio has a constitutional responsibility to provide a thorough and efficient state system of public education. It does not have a constitutional responsibility to provide resources to individual children or students.

That kind of reasoning would suggest that Ohio and the federal government could collect gasoline taxes and other state revenues and divide the money up among its citizens so that they could pay for local streets and roadways that they have to use regularly. There would cease to be a state or national highway system. Public education is a public good or service. The consumption of a public good is not decided by the individual consumer but by the society as a whole, and which is financed by taxation. A public good or service may be consumed without reducing the amount available for others, and cannot be withheld from those who do not pay for it. Public goods and services are things for the use and benefit of all. Because most people do not have the personal resources to purchase an alternative to public education for their children and it is so fundamental to the operation of our democracy, it is provided to everyone by government.

Letting the money follow the child and the parents make the “choice” as to where to send their children does not fit with the provision of the public good – public education. Any system that grants “choices” to some individuals and thereby diminishes choices for many other individuals is decidedly unfair. Although it would be fair, in some sense, to allow for educational choice inside the statewide public school system.

The “money follows the child” proposal is really about advocating for Weighted Student Funding (WSF). Proponents offer this as THE solution to the problems that schools face, and it would actually be harmful if implemented. Without a host of other reforms, WSF alone cannot create equity for public school students.

Focusing on WSF as a cure-all for school funding inequities is wrong for three major reasons. First, this proposal for Weighted Student Funding ignores the biggest funding problem facing public schools—adequate funding.

By ignoring the need to ensure adequate funding in their reform agenda, the authors have invalidated the “equity” basis of their position. While schools with more at-risk students should indeed be provided more funding to create programs for success, these changes must come in the context of determining the actual cost of implementing needed programs, rather than merely changing the distribution of an arbitrary and insufficient amount of education funding. By rejecting attempts to assess the actual cost of educating students and providing funding on that level, the authors of this manifesto have rendered their proposal irrelevant. No policy solution will achieve an equitable education for at-risk students, and other students, unless the amount of funding for their schools is sufficient to help them learn.

Second, the proponents do not acknowledge the difficulty of calculating realistic weightings that would become the basis of WSF. Almost all of the current weightings for at risk students, students with disabilities, and English Language Learners have resulted from political compromises hammered out on the basis of the availability of funds in a particular state at a particular time, rather than on any systematic analysis of these students’ needs.

Developing accurate weightings would be essential before WSF could become an important mechanism for school funding. Methodologies for developing fair and accurate weightings are still in a developmental stage.

Third, accountability measures cannot ignore inputs, programs, and activities that helps schools build the capacity to educate all students. Simply assuming that by giving funding to local school building ignores the very complex realities of school improvement. School improvement depends upon a variety of programs, strategic planning, professional development, parental involvement, curriculum development, alignment with state standards, and other educational actions, some of which are more efficiently handled at the district or regional level. Although in many situations, more discretion over funding should be delegated to individual school leaders, such delegation should occur through a well-conceived and properly implemented educational reform planning process. While accountability measures that tabulate results can be useful for informing a school’s strategic planning and targeted programs, the focus of efforts to ensure equity must be building school and district capacity to truly educate all students, including those at-risk.

WSF cannot stand on its own. Although it might prove helpful in specific circumstances within some large districts, without adequate funding, a more accurate understanding of appropriate weightings for at-risk students, and a focus on the many factors necessary to create the capacity of schools to truly address student needs, the proposal cannot be the solution that its proponents claim. On the contrary, it may well undermine many of the efforts that are currently advancing public education in Ohio.