

Education's Sinking Ship

We have hit an iceberg, and our ship is sinking.

Our ship – our public education system – is not going to get us to our port, and all hands will be lost if we don't do something quickly.

By any national standard, our public education system is not preparing students to face the future that the world is presenting them. We are at the bottom of every national ranking – test results, educational standards, graduation rates, and funding. Fundamentally, we are not providing our children the tools they will need to succeed in a world that requires critical thinking, technical skills and competence in math and science.

Our local economy is dependent on a workforce that has these skills. Without these skills, our workforce cannot do the job, our businesses cannot compete and our economic well-being is at great risk. There is increasing acknowledgment at the local and state levels that major changes are required for our education system to meet these challenges. We must continue to focus on the need for these major changes, and not be distracted by efforts to tweak the existing system.

Most of the discussion today is about how the Better Education Program (BEP) allocates funding among various school districts. The BEP was developed by the State legislature in response to a lawsuit filed by the 66 rural school districts challenging the State's existing system of funding education. The intent was to standardize education practices by evening out funding inequities in the system that had left poorer school systems behind. Two more lawsuits followed.

Over time, the funding formula has been adjusted by the State legislature, with some changes based on the equal protection doctrine, and others based on the squeaking wheel doctrine. We now see that the inequities the BEP attempted to resolve have simply been rearranged. Urban school districts like Knox County and Hamilton County receive some of the lowest funding in the state while facing a higher density of at-risk and special needs students who need extra attention and require additional funding. These urban systems are now clamoring for changes to the formula that would allocate these funds in a different way. Just as the rural systems raised a valid point ten years ago, the urban systems have a valid argument today. The funding formula is flawed. But in the end, reallocating funds under the existing system is like rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic. We may get a better seat, but we're still going down with the ship.

All this discussion about the BEP formula is a red herring. Instead of focusing on how the money is divvied up, we need to be focusing on the bigger question of whether the State is spending enough money on education. And we need only turn to the Education Clause of the Tennessee State Constitution for guidance:

The State of Tennessee recognizes the inherent value of education and encourages its support. The General Assembly shall provide for the maintenance, support and eligibility standards of a system of free public schools.

With these words, the Constitution has established the requirement that Tennessee citizens be provided a free public education. But what does that mean? Does our current system meet that requirement?

Consider this: when the Tennessee Supreme Court decided the case that led to the establishment of our current BEP funding formula, the Justices ruled that the General Assembly had a constitutional mandate under the Education Clause to “maintain and support a system of free public schools that provides, at least, the opportunity to acquire general knowledge, develop the powers of reasoning and judgment, and generally prepare students intellectually for a mature life.” With this statement, the Court recognized that the State Constitution includes an enforceable standard for assessing educational opportunities provided by the State.

The standard is not specific. It does not mandate any particular program. It does not require compliance with a set of testing standards. It does, however, require the State to provide adequate money, not just some money, which sets the stage for an important discussion. How will we know that we have “prepared students intellectually for a mature life?” How do we define “adequacy?” And, more importantly, how will we enforce that standard, if the State continues not to meet it?

Does adequate mean every system has the same student-teacher ratio? Or does it mean every student graduates ready to enter the workforce? Does it mean that rural school districts have the same buildings as urban school districts? Or does it mean they have the same graduation rates? Does adequacy mean that our students are all making adequate yearly progress? Or does it mean that they can compete with their peers throughout the U.S. and the world on standard tests?

There is a significant discussion going on at the state level today about what adequacy means and how it can be assured, as the State’s Constitution requires. Although the Courts have not yet defined “adequacy,” I have a fair idea it is a standard that is not being met today.

Thirty-eight percent of today’s ninth-grade Tennessee students won’t graduate from high school and of those who do, a large percentage will require remedial instruction when they enter the workforce or college. In 2005, 39.9% of freshmen enrolled in Tennessee Board of Regents four-year universities required remedial courses, as did 73.9% of freshmen enrolled in two-year community colleges. This tells us that our high school diplomas are not evidence that students are ready for college. And we know that the skills to enter college are the same skills that are needed to hold down a job and support a family. We are not providing enough technical skills to allow our graduates to compete. Can you name a job today that doesn’t require computer or technical skills? They are few and far between in most sectors of the economy. And yet our schools are generally not equipped to provide basic technology training as an integral part of the curriculum. Surely this cannot be considered “adequate.”

We spend a great deal of time talking about the processes of public education: student-teacher ratios, school facilities, testing methods and accountability. All of those things are important. But until we decide on a goal – on an outcome – the processes will not get us the kinds of improvements we need. As the saying goes, if you don’t know where you’re going,

any road will do. We must set a goal – we must define adequacy – and chart a course to get there.

It won't be easy to define what adequacy means. But that is where the discussion should be. We should be focusing on the size of the ship, not on moving the deck chairs.

Once we define adequacy – once we chart our course – we can turn our discussion to how to fund it. This will require that we question our basic assumptions. Should funding come solely from the State, or do counties play a role? Do we continue to offer courses like driver's education or divert those resources to more academically focused offerings? Can we utilize distance or electronic learning techniques to make the most of our highly skilled instructors – reaching students across the state instead of only in one classroom? How do we ensure that our teachers have the technology they need to teach our students – and the knowledge to apply it? How do we raise the standards for the education profession to ensure that we are attracting the people and skills we need, and that we can pay them accordingly? Can we afford the administrative overhead of 136 separate school systems? There are things we must do that will cost more money. There are also things we can do to spend our existing funding more wisely.

I'm sending out an SOS to everyone in this state who cares about the future of not only our children, but our economy: get involved. Governor Bredesen has called education Tennessee's number one priority. We must all help him to ensure that it stays that way. Demand adequate funding, not just a bigger slice of a shrinking pie. Demand a public education system that will prepare our children for the future. We cannot sustain our economy without a qualified workforce. That workforce is in jeopardy today. But if the right course is charted, and we get a better and stronger ship – a new, improved and adequately funded public education system – we can face the rough seas ahead.

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