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John Yinger

The Maxwell School, Syracuse University, joyinger@syr.edu

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It's Elementary

A Monthly Column by EFAP Director John Yinger
March 2005

A Failing Grade for 13 Governors

On February 28, The New York Times reported that “The governors of 13 states with more than one-third of the nation’s students said Sunday that they were forming a coalition to improve high schools by adopting higher standards, more rigorous courses and tougher examinations.”

Do these governors honestly believe that “higher standards, more rigorous courses and tougher examinations” would, in and of themselves, be sufficient to solve the problem of poor high school performance? If so, they should fire all their education advisers and start looking at some evidence. If not, they should be ashamed of themselves for trying to distract attention from the real problems that confront the nation’s high schools.

Setting reasonable higher standards is not a bad thing to do. Indeed, higher standards, along with more rigorous courses and tougher examinations, should be part of any education reform program. There is no evidence, however, that these steps alone would have a significant impact on high school performance. Moreover, an exclusive focus on these steps makes it appear as if the only problem is that high schools are setting their sights too low. In fact, the problems facing the nation’s high schools run much deeper.

The central problem in high school education is not that the nation’s high schools are failing across the board, but is instead that high schools in poor, urban school districts have unacceptably low test scores and high drop-out rates. The Council of the Great City Schools reports, for example, that in 2001-2002 the share of students passing the state’s 11th grade reading and math assessments in Philadelphia was less than half the share in the rest of Pennsylvania (<http://www.cgcs.org/>).

One of the most important causes of these disparities, a cause apparently ignored by the governors, is that poor, urban school districts face much more challenging educational environments than other districts. In Philadelphia, for example, 71.0 percent of the students are eligible for a free or reduced price lunch, compared to 28.4 percent for Pennsylvania as a whole. As dozens of studies have demonstrated (and as discussed in my January column), a district with a concentration of disadvantaged students must pay considerably more than other districts to achieve the same student performance.

It is ludicrous to think that simply raising standards can wipe away the high costs associated with concentrated poverty. The real issue is that the education finance system in most states does not provide poor, urban schools with the resources they need to cover these extra costs. In 2001-2002, for example, spending per pupil was only \$6,388 in Philadelphia, compared to \$7,772 for the entire state. If the 13 governors really want to boost high school performance, the first thing they should do is reform their

state aid programs to provide more money to school districts with relatively high concentrations of disadvantaged students.

In fact, simply raising standards without reforming education finance is a recipe for failure. School districts with high concentrations of disadvantaged students will not be able to meet the new high standards, no matter what they do, and they will be unfairly blamed. The blame should fall on the governors and legislatures, not on the school districts.

Moreover, requiring poor, urban districts to implement tougher examinations without giving them the extra resources they need will inevitably result in higher drop-out rates in these schools—hardly a move toward better performance.

So what should the governors do to improve high school performance?

First, they should implement a cost-adjusted foundation aid plan to ensure that each district has the funds it needs to meet new, high performance standards.

A foundation plan has two parts. The first part determines the cost of achieving the standards in each district. Once the performance standards are selected, the state should estimate how much it would cost to achieve these standards in a typical district. (This step is discussed in my December 2004 column.) This cost should then be adjusted to account for the extra costs of educating disadvantaged students (as discussed in my January column) and for the extra costs associated with being in a high-wage labor market. The result is a “foundation spending amount” for each district, which is the amount the district must spend to reach the standard.

The second part of a foundation formula determines the “expected local contribution.” The state must select a local property tax rate that it expects each district to impose and then calculate how much each district would raise at that tax rate. With this approach, districts with a larger property tax base per pupil are expected to make a larger contribution.

A district’s foundation aid is the difference between these two parts, that is, aid equals the foundation spending amount minus the expected local contribution. Because school districts may decide to cut back their own contributions in response to an increase in state aid, the only way to ensure that each district spends at least its foundation amount is to require each district to raise at least the expected local contribution that is built into the foundation aid formula.

Second, as discussed in my February column, the governors should hold their state governments accountable for determining what educational programs work and for helping school districts implement effective programs. This new type of accountability system requires a state to conduct and evaluate research on program effectiveness. Even if a state is interested in boosting high school performance, this analysis should not be confined to high school programs. After all, even pre-k programs might boost high school performance when participants reach high school. Thus, the evaluated programs should include pre-k, elementary, and high school programs, programs to improve school management, and programs to attract and retain high-quality teachers. Sanctions should be imposed on a school district only when it has failed to adequately implement the programs the state has helped it to identify.

Overall, I give these 13 governors a failing grade, and I urge them to move beyond political posturing to substantive reform in their states' education finance and accountability programs.