

THE DAILY SENTINEL

Money vs. academic achievement

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I see the letter-writing campaign has begun for passage of two school district funding questions that will be on the ballot this November. I can sum up all of the arguments in an oft-heard phrase, “The children are our future.”

In fact, let’s use a little bit more of that quote: “Teach them well and let them lead the way. Show them all the beauty they possess inside.”

Clearly wisdom from a very sage individual. Of course that individual is Whitney Houston from the song “The Greatest Love of All” in 1985.

I’m not saying it’s not a nice sentiment but let’s not lose our heads. It’s not from the Bible, as someone told me when I was asked where they thought it came from.

The reason I bring it up is that kind of thinking is what some believe to be an argument *coup de grace* when it comes to discussions on educational spending. That of course is silly, because there’s nothing about the future that’s going to be very rosy for anyone if you don’t take care of the present — spending your money wisely for example.

But really the main thing we need to get out of the way is the consistently disproven notion of some sort of relationship between the spending of money in school districts and educational achievement.

There is none. After the common-sense idea that you need to get students out of the rain and not doing their math homework with a stick — the return on investment quickly withers and eventually disappears.

In 2014, CBS News in Washington published a story about a Cato Institute study finding that over the last 40 years we have nationally tripled the per-student spending and doubled the staffing in our schools, while seeing a decline in mathematics and verbal skills.

The study noted that over that same period, productivity in almost every other field had increased while achievement levels in education remained stagnant.

The analysis also found that private schools operated with budgets about 34 percent lower than public institutions yet generally showed higher student achievement.

Interestingly, the study also noted that four states during the period in question had experienced multiyear periods of decreased funding and had not experienced noticeable declines in test scores.

Last year, National Public Radio conducted something they called the “School Money Project” in which they examined the situation in Camden, New Jersey schools where in the late 1990s a federal court ordered substantial increases to their educational budget. However, as the piece points out, that even now spending \$23,000 (2.5 times the national average) per student, there has been little progress.

Part of the argument for increasing our spending measures is that next year’s per student funding for School District 51 at \$7,278, is about \$400 below the state average and \$2,000 below the national.

What you get for academic achievement is somewhat hard to measure and open to interpretation but looking at the rating of high schools across the nation by U.S. News & World Report we see they rate our school district’s high school student’s proficiency in English at 46 percent and mathematics at 25 percent.

To show the effect that money has on educational achievement, let’s look at the Detroit school district. It spends \$18,000 per student in total expenditures or the lower figure of \$13,300 per student in the mysterious “current expenditure” citation used by the district.

With that, they managed to have 7 percent of their students proficient in reading and 4 percent of their students proficient in math.

Draw your own conclusions on more money equals better performance, but if both measures are passed in Mesa County, a \$200,000 homeowner will pay about \$118 per year and a business owner with the same value property will pay \$432 per year and large commercial property owners, like malls and grocery stores, will pay \$2,161 per year per million dollars of property value.

All of these costs will be reflected back to the consumer/taxpayer in addition to their direct payment.

As usual, some good and necessary ideas like repairs and teacher salaries are lost in the fog of unfocused general priorities and vague descriptions that do nothing but put the sensible expenditures at risk.

School district taxpayers aren't tightwads who don't care if students sit in classrooms with leaking ceilings, but they are value-sensitive with their money.

Consistently, public officials do not seem to understand that smaller, narrowly tailored and well explained projects with reasonable timespans will be accepted by the voters.

Spraying a fire hose of money in every direction but the fire just won't work. The fire is student achievement. Ask for a smaller hose that seems to be aimed directly at the fire and taxpayers will buy it for you.