

THE POST-CRESCENT

Walker's K-12 budget proposal is a publicity stunt

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Is Governor Scott Walker's \$648.9 million K-12 budget increase for schools a political stunt or sound policy?

One must ask if the governor is aware that there is no correlation between K-12 spending and educational achievement. In a 2014 Cato Institute study, "State Education Trends: Academic Performance and Spending over the Past 40 Years." Andrew J. Coulson found that since 1970, when the federal government started collecting data, the performance of 17 year olds has been essentially flat despite a near tripling in the inflation adjusted dollars per-pupil spent on public education. According to this study, spending and educational achievement have a 0.075 correlation on a scale from 0 to 1, which is essentially no correlation.

One must wonder if the governor is cognizant of this fact or if he is ignoring it for political reasons. The much ballyhooed K-12 spending increase is a master stroke and a triumph of politics over policy. In this case, apparently, perception is more important than reality. After all, who could argue with the governor's proposal to help school children?

The governor must be commended for restraining K-12 education spending during his first six years in office, given the budget priority that education is. But his decision to inflate spending in the 2017-19 biennium is problematic.

The gap between policy and performance, between program goals and program accomplishments, is stark. Shouldn't the public be disabused of the notion that ever greater funding leads to improved achievement levels? The question must be asked: Does this policy produce tangible benefits or does it only serve the interests of the educational establishment and the politicians seeking to curry favor with the public?

It cannot be disputed on the micro-level that updating textbooks, computers and technology has some value in the classroom and that skillful and adequately compensated educators enhance the educational experience. But, when looked at from a macro perspective, this argument comes up short. Just spending more money does not produce measurable results in the form of higher test scores. In fact, private schools spend more per-pupil than public schools, and when adjusted for student characteristics, do not outperform them.

If tripling the real spending per-pupil in the last 40 years hasn't helped, what would?

Charles Murray and Richard J. Herrnstein in their landmark book, "Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life" have made the case that cognitive ability, even more than socioeconomic status, is predictive of educational attainment. However, the available evidence indicates that there is no known method of raising cognitive ability and hence, improving educational achievement, short of a complete change of environment for a child, i.e. adoption.

The question must be asked: Can early childhood intervention programs such as Head Start make a difference in the academic performance of school-aged children? The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 created the federal agency, the Office of Economic Opportunity, which initiated Project Head Start. The initial results were very promising and the program was expanded, but the long-term effects were marked by an eventual fade-out of test score gains. Cognitive gains that were realized by the first grade of school were generally absent by the third grade.

The hope for improving educational achievement ostensibly does not lie in the expenditure of large sums of taxpayer dollars. Murray and Herrnstein propose that one possibility is research that looks at how cognitive ability is developed, particularly the physiological basis of intelligence.

Another realistic alternative is to strengthen the family, which provides a strong environmental influence on the child. Students must come to class ready to learn with a supportive and nurturing family.