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ARMSTRONGS: Prop. 103 would hurt working families, kill jobs

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They're ba-a-ck, and they want to raise your taxes, again. They always do. Yes, it's "for the children." It usually is.

But Proposition 103, the tax hike brought to this fall's ballot by Boulder Democrat Rollie Heath and the teachers' unions, is really about taking more money out of the pockets of working families to enrich those unions. Throwing more tax dollars at government-run schools hardly would improve the quality of education.

If you really want to help "the children" (and everyone else), you will vote no on the job killer Prop. 103. Taking even more money out of the voluntary economy would only make it harder for working families to put food on the table and afford other necessities.

Perhaps you've noticed that the economy remains weak, with unemployment nationally hovering at around 9 percent and Colorado not far behind. The mortgage bust and the bipartisan political bungling that followed hit Grand Junction especially hard. Politicians have already burdened the economy with myriad taxes and reams of controls — how much more can it take?

Taking more money from working families for taxes would dry up private-sector jobs. While the cost of the tax hike would depend on the state of the economy, Legislative Council estimates the measure would suck around \$2.9 billion out of the voluntary economy by raising sales and income taxes for five years. Think about how many salaries that represents.

Prop. 103 devotes the money to "public education" from preschool through college, taking the 2011-12 budget as the base level. Legislative Council estimates that base at about \$4.3 billion (which includes only state funding, not local and federal). Thus, the added taxes would raise state spending by around 12 to 15 percent per year. Of course,

how the legislature would adjust education spending absent the tax hike remains anybody's guess.

Even those who want to raise taxes may question a hike specifically for education. If you think state government should spend relatively more on roads and criminal investigations instead, you may not like Prop. 103 so much. On the other hand, those with particular ideas about how the state should fund education may not see the measure as specific enough.

We think state legislators should prioritize better, cut spending, and lower tax rates so people can keep more of the money they earn. Then people could spend their own money on what they find most important, whether education, a new business, health care, or whatever.

Would spending more tax dollars on education even improve the quality of education? We think not. The Joint Budget Committee notes total Colorado spending on education has jumped from just over \$5 billion in 2004-05 to \$7.2 billion in 2011-12, a 44 percent increase, while student enrollment has climbed 10 percent. Has education gotten proportionately better over that period? Hardly.

Taking a longer view, Ben DeGrow of the Independence Institute notes, "Since 1970 per-pupil spending in Colorado and the U.S. have more than doubled after counting inflationary changes -- even given the real modest freezes and cuts many Colorado K-12 schools have experienced over the past two years." (Note: Ari has written for the Institute, in one case on a contract basis.)

Coloradans already spend tons of money on education. The NEA recently estimated per-pupil spending here at over \$9,500. Education spending already consumes around 37 percent of the state's total operating budget of \$19.6 billion, dwarfing spending for corrections and transportation combined.

What do we get for all that spending? "Adding more tax dollars to K-12 systems on a large scale has no connection to improving academic results," DeGrow summarizes. As Andrew Coulson reviews for the Cato Institute, as U.S. per-pupil funding has skyrocketed over the last few decades, reading, math, and science scores have virtually flatlined.

Rather than throw more tax dollars at the teachers' unions and the political cronies they finance, we need to instead find better value for our education dollars. Schools need greater ability to fire dud teachers without incurring union lawsuits. Most districts can get by with fewer administrative paper-shufflers. Schools should stop following the latest expensive fads and get back to teaching the basics.

Over the longer term, we should look at ways to reduce political involvement in education, not expand it. We are heartened by the success of various charter schools throughout the state. Ultimately, we'd like to see real choice in education. We prefer

universal tax credits over vouchers. Eventually, we'd like to see truly free markets emerge in education, with parents, educators, and voluntary charities assuming the basic responsibility for organizing and financing education. Get politicians and bureaucrats out of it.

This fall, though, we face an immediate choice. Should we divert even more money from the hard-pressed voluntary economy to the teachers' unions, or should we demand greater accountability and better prioritization for the tax dollars we already turn over? Only the latter option comports with economic sanity and your liberty to spend your money as you choose.

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