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New book challenges school spending claims

May 03, 2009 (Daily Press - McClatchy-Tribune Information Services via COMTEX) -- Despite media stories decrying underfunding of education, new research indicates there is no correlation between increased spending and performance.

A new book "Schoolhouses, Courthouses, and Statehouses: Solving the Funding-Achievement Puzzle in America's Public Schools" demonstrates that money doesn't buy achievement.

Economist Erik Hanushek and lawyer Alfred Lindseth focus on the impact of lawsuits challenging the "adequacy" of state education funding. These education funding lawsuits spread like wildfire starting in the 1970s and have resulted in huge, court-ordered spending increases around the country.

Perhaps the most infamous of these happened to Kansas City, Mo., where in 1986 federal judge Russell Clark ordered nearly unbounded funding for the schools. The resulting spending spree pushed the district's per-pupil expenditures to a level three times greater than the state average and bought extravagances ranging from a planetarium to a robotics lab.

What it didn't purchase was significant academic improvement, according to Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom.

"First and foremost, schools are public monopolies and they do not feel the same pressures to perform that firms in the competitive sectors of the economy face every day," Hanushek and Lindseth write. "Productivity and effectiveness have little to do with a school's survival." Performance-based funding, the authors write, would "focus funding and policy decisions on student outcomes, provide incentives and funding to achieve outcome goals, and evaluate whether what is being done is consistent with improving student outcomes." In other words, it would mimic what a free market in education would do, rewarding success and punishing failure.

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