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Brat: U.S. school spending up 375 percent over 30 years but test score remain flat

By Warren Fiske

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U.S. Rep. Dave Brat wants to rein in federal funding for public education.

Brat, R-7th, backs the Student Success Act, a GOP bill that would scale back Uncle Sam's role in overseeing public schools and consolidate dozens of federal education programs.

On Feb. 11, he introduced a successful amendment in the House Education and Workforce Committee that would require the U.S. Department of Education to issue annual reports recommending ways to save on school spending. Brat, a former college professor, expressed his thoughts in classical terms:

"The greatest thinkers of Western Civ. were not products of education policy," he said. "Socrates trained Plato on a rock and then Plato trained Aristotle, roughly speaking, on a rock. So huge education funding is not necessary to achieve the greatest minds and the greatest intellects in history."

Five days later, Brat took to Facebook and posted his view in modern terms. "Our own government statistics show that over 30 years, federal spending on education has grown by 375%, but test scores have remained flat," he wrote. "That proves that just throwing more money at education is not the solution."

We wondered whether Brat's Facebook post is accurate, both in terms of the 30-year growth percentage for federal education funding and his characterization of test scores as "flat."

Brian Gottstein, a spokesman for Bratt, said the congressman's statement was based on July 2012 testimony by Neal McCluskey before a U.S. Senate education subcommittee. McCluskey, is director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank. He said that federal education cuts mandated under sequestration -- Congress's 2011 agreement

to chop domestic and defense spending in return for raising the nation's borrowing limit -- "are both necessary and overdue." McCluskey argued that increasing school funding has not improved student performance.

Let's take a closer look.

Funding levels

A reading of McCluskey's testimony instantly turns up an inaccuracy in Brat's statement. McCluskey said the 375 percent increase, adjusted for inflation, occurred over a 40-year period from 1970 to 2010. Brat posted that the increase occurred over 30 years and didn't offer dates.

McCluskey cited White House figures showing federal outlays for elementary, secondary and vocational education were $2.9 billion in 1970 and rose to $73.3 billion in 2010. When adjusted for inflation, that comes to about a 375 percent increase.

But there's an issue with using 2010 as the end date for measuring the growth. U.S. education spending hit a record high in 2010, bolstered by more than $30 billion in special stimulus money Washington sent states in the wake of the Great Recession to help pay for schools.

The stimulus program has stopped and during the last budget year -- ending Sept. 30, 2014 -- the U.S. spent $40.8 billion on education. Going back 30 years, as Brat did, puts us in 1984 when federal spending on schools was $6.5 billion. Adjusted for inflation, that's a 176 percent increase -- less than half of the congressman's figure.

Now, let's throw in another factor: the number of students in publicly-funded schools across the nation increased from 39.2 million in 1984 to a projected 50 million in 2014. Federal spending per student rose from $165 in 1984 to about $816 in 2014. Adjusted for inflation, that's a 117 percent increase -- less than one-third of Brat's figure.

We should note that when we queried Brat's office about the Feb. 16 Facebook post, spokesman Gottstein sent us a Feb. 11 news release in which the congressmen correctly said that the 375 increase in education spending took place over 40 years -- from 1970 to 2010. The public, however, doesn't have access to this detail. Brat's congressional website doesn't contain a copy of the release, but it does link to his Facebook post, which says "over 30 years, federal spending on education has grown by 375 percent..."

We just used an ellipsis. So let's look at the second part of Brat's statement.

Test scores

Brat's claim that test scores "have been flat" again comes from McCluskey's 2012 Senate testimony. McCluskey said that between 1970 and 2010, math and reading scores on National Assessment of Educational Progress tests, "have been almost stagnant for 17-year-olds, the final product of our elementary and secondary system."

The NAEP, frequently called "The Nation's Report Card," refers to a variety of tests given every four years to fourth, eighth and twelfth graders in a sampling of states. McCluskey focused on

the "long-term trend" test for 17-year-olds, which since the early 1970s has measured achievement on an unchanged set of math and reading skills.

On the first NAEP reading test, in 1971, 17-year-olds had an average score of 285 on a scale of 500. On the most recent test, in 2012, the average was 287.

On the first math test, in 1973, the average was 304 and that inched to 306 in 2012.

The scores don't change much if you measure them over the 30 years Brat mentions on Facebook. The average math score in 1982 was 298 and rose by eight points over the next three decades. The average reading score in 1984 -- the reading test wasn't given in 1982 -- was 289 and fell by two points in 2012.

Brat is hardly the first to call the results for 17-year-olds "flat." Education Week, a nationally-circulated periodical, used the same term in a 2009 headline to describe the history of NAEP scores for the age group. The chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee that year -- Rep. George Miller, D-Calif. -- called it "deeply troubling" that high schoolers were not making "meaningful gains" on the tests. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said in 2014 that NAEP results underscore a need to "reject educational stagnation in our high schools."
Many educators say the focus on average test results for all 17-year-olds overlooks significant gains by other groups and subgroups taking the NAEP. For example, from 1982-2012:

- Average math scores of 17-year-old blacks rose 16 points
- Average math scores of 17-year-old Hispanics rose 17 points
- Average math scores of all nine-year-olds rose 25 points
- Average math scores for all 13-year-olds rose 16 points.

Our ruling

Brat says that "over 30 years, federal spending on education has grown by 375 percent, but test scores remain flat."

The inflation-adjusted figure Brat uses to describe what he sees as runaway federal spending on education over 30 years is overblown. You can only get near a 375 percent increase if you start in 1970 and end in 2010, when U.S. school funding was nearly doubled with stimulus money and stood at an all-time high of $73.3 billion.

Uncle Sam spent $40.8 billion on public schools last year. When you divide that by enrollment, it comes to $816 a student. Adjusted for inflation, that's a 117 percent increase in federal spending per student over 30 years ago.

That said, the increase in per-student spending is still significant and Brat has valid point on the test results. Average NAEP scores for 17-year-olds have barely budged during the last 30 years of testing.

So we rate the totality of Brat's statement Mostly True.