

How will measure help?

POINT OF VIEW: SQ 744 BOOSTERS NEED TO EXPLAIN

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"There's a tradition in education," former New York City school chancellor Frank Macchiarola once observed, "that if you spend a dollar and it doesn't work, you should spend two dollars; and not only that, you should give those two dollars to the same person who couldn't do the job with only one."

That tradition is alive and well in Oklahoma, and indeed is the animating spirit of the teacher unions' push for State Question 744, the so-called HOPE initiative, a proposed constitutional amendment that would require the Legislature to increase per-pupil spending to the regional average.

Granted, the education system needs money. You're going to need money — lots of it — when you pay above-market prices for everything from skillets to schoolteachers. News9 recently reported that one Oklahoma school district spent \$10,600 for a skillet. Oklahoma's state auditor reported that another district paid \$540 for three mop heads valued at \$13.50. And of course public school teachers on average are paid more than the market-determined teacher salaries in the private sector (both nationwide and in central Oklahoma, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics).

What SQ 744's boosters need to explain to weary and wary taxpayers is this: How, exactly, is more money going to help? That's not an unreasonable question, especially in light of the nearby chart.

Cato Institute scholar Andrew J. Coulson recently investigated the relationship between spending and student achievement in our state. Coulson used ACT scores as a measurement because the National Assessment of Educational Progress scores for high school students aren't broken down by state. "Oklahoma's participation rate in the ACT is high (between the mid 60s and low 70s), hasn't fluctuated wildly over time, and is not significantly correlated with its actual scores (I ran a regression to find out), so it's a reasonable measure," he explains. "I've only carried it back to 1990 because the ACT was redesigned in that year, making the scores discontinuous."

As you can see, since 1990 — which, incidentally, is the year House Bill 1017 was signed into law — spending has risen dramatically while performance has remained essentially flat. When reality is this sobering, I guess you can't blame folks for clinging to HOPE.

I suppose we could pass SQ 744 and, magically, things could be different this time. Perhaps, for once, pouring more money into a heavily unionized, government-owned-

and-operated monopoly would prove to be a wise use of resources. Sort of like pouring more gasoline into a truck with a blown transmission.

For all I know, Lucy van Pelt might actually hold the football long enough for Charlie Brown to kick it next time. We can always HOPE.

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