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What's wrong with the '65 Percent Solution'

It sounds like a sensible way to improve schools, but it doesn't deliver

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Increasingly in our society, education is destiny. Students who complete high school with the skills to succeed are more likely to go to college, obtain a degree and earn an income that allows for self-sufficiency.

So, to ensure that Colorado public schools are doing everything they can to increase student achievement and help our kids succeed, why not require all school districts to spend 65 percent of their funds on classroom instruction?

That's a question we in Colorado will likely be asked to decide in November. Our answer could have profound effects on how students are served by our schools, both inside and outside the classroom.

Before answering the question, however, it's important to know the facts. And the facts may surprise you.

Currently, Colorado's public schools spend an average of 57 percent of their funds on classroom instruction, although actual percentages vary by school district. The national average is 61 percent.

The "65 Percent Solution," as it was dubbed by columnist George Will, is being promoted by First Class Education, a Washington, D.C.-based organization whose goal is to have the plan instituted in all 50 states and the District of Columbia by the end of 2008.

First Class Education states on its Web site, "Classroom education is the only activity that can possibly increase test scores and benefit our students."

It also states that the 65 Percent plan would mean most states would add hundreds of millions of dollars each year to the classroom without a tax increase.

So what could be wrong with this idea?

First, there's no hard evidence that spending at least 65 percent on instruction actually improves student achievement.

And second, depending on how spending for instruction is defined, many important school services and activities that support student achievement could be left out of the equation.

Problem No. 1: The Evidence

In terms of any evidence that the 65 Percent Solution actually works, the bond rating agency Standard & Poor's, which has a School Evaluation Services group, recently analyzed data from nine



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states that may consider the 65 percent mandate, including Colorado.

The S&P researchers found that "student performance does not noticeably or consistently increase at 65 percent, or any other percentage spent on instruction."

Their analysis also determined that some of the highest-performing districts spend less than 65 percent, while some of the lowest-performing districts spend more than 65 percent, on instruction.

The S&P analysis concluded "there is presently a lack of empirical evidence for mandating a uniform percentage spending threshold across all districts to raise student achievement." In fact, they said there might be legitimate reasons to vary the percentage from one district to another.

Problem No. 2: The Definition

Supporters of the 65 percent plan rely on the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) for definitions of instruction and other spending. The NCES "Instruction" category, the closest to "classroom instruction," includes teacher and instructional aide salaries, instruction supplies, athletics, music and the arts.

However, it does not include many important activities and services that support student achievement and a productive learning environment inside and outside the classroom. Among these are teacher training, instruction and curriculum development, library and media services, guidance counselors, nurses, social workers, food services and transportation. Requiring districts to put more of their money toward classroom instruction could cut into these other services, which for many students—especially low-income and minority kids already caught in the state's academic achievement gap—are critical to success.

How to Spend vs. How Much

Does all this mean that spending more on instruction is a bad idea? Of course not. Getting more money into classrooms is an important goal in helping to increase the achievement levels of all our young people. But the 65 Percent Solution isn't the answer. As Standard & Poor's notes, how money is spent in the classroom is just as important as what percentage is spent on instruction.

In fact, some of the most effective spending can be for teacher training, curriculum development, guidance counselors and student support services that, under a narrow definition of "instruction," might be left behind.

As it stands, the "65 Percent Solution" is like one of those letters you get in the mail that says you may have already won a million dollars, and all you have to do is sign up for something to find out. It sounds too good to be true and, unfortunately, it is.