

Study: Spend more on schools

16-31 percent increase urged, up to \$4.8 billion more

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For years, state officials have been talking about the need to give each child in Ohio a world-class education, and finally a price tag has been attached to the idea: \$2.4 billion to \$4.8 billion in new money.

The group that developed the plan is not the coalition that has successfully sued the state four times in the past decade, but a team of researchers at the University of Washington, funded in part by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which has been sponsoring education research around the country.

The study suggests that Ohio should spend as much as 31 percent more on public education for such changes as longer school years, lower pupil-teacher ratios and significant improvements in early education.

A working draft of the study, called Education Policy and Finance Project for Ohio: Investments to Improve Student Performance, done by researchers at the Human Services Policy Center at the University of Washington, was obtained by the Beacon Journal through a public records request.

Last week, the Ohio Department of Education used the paper to brief Gov. Ted Strickland's administration, legislative leaders and a policy committee within the agency.

Researchers generated recommendations for a variety of school settings by talking to education officials who were part of state- and school district-level teams.

Poor urban districts preferred policies to lengthen the school year and meet the needs of the poor; rural districts preferred increasing teacher pay, reducing class size and extending the school year. Wealthy suburban districts were mostly satisfied with funding.

The costs of eight scenarios were calculated. Total spending would increase 16 percent to 31 percent, depending on the policy chosen, and the average spending for each Ohio child would increase from the current \$9,300 to a range of \$10,722 to \$12,128 per pupil.

In addition to longer school years, the study addresses early learning, more money and training for teachers, especially math and science instructors, and an effort to drive more dollars toward reducing teacher-student ratios in poor and rural districts.

Although the price tag is high, the report notes ``the state team moderated the investments to bring the costs toward a more feasible range.'

10th anniversary

On March 24, the state will mark the 10th anniversary of the initial Ohio Supreme Court ruling that ordered lawmakers and the governor to fix the unconstitutional school funding formula for 1.8 million children.

Strickland pledged in campaigning to bring groups together to address school funding. The coalition of school districts that won the landmark battle is gathering signatures to ask voters this November to amend the Ohio Constitution after the Supreme Court refused to enforce its four previous orders.

Keith Dailey, Strickland's spokesman, said the governor's education policy advisers are reviewing the study and holding comment until the final report is issued in several months.

``We're taking this very seriously, just as we have taken the other education studies recently released seriously,' Dailey said.

Maggie Ostrowski, an Ohio Senate spokeswoman, said Senate President Bill Harris, R-Ashland, and Education Committee Chairwoman Joy Padgett, R-Coshocton, were unable to attend the briefing last week and were waiting to review the study before commenting.

Karen Tabor, spokeswoman for House Speaker Jon Husted, R-Kettering, said her caucus members are also still looking at the study.

Paolo DeMaria, an education department analyst, said the study is more a blueprint for finding ways to link academic outcomes to funding than it is determination of the cost of adequate school funding, but he

acknowledged that often the discussion ends when costs are pinpointed.

He said the University of Washington group has been looking at Ohio for about two years, and the final report will be combined with information from other studies to help guide state education policy and funding.

``You're beginning to see states wrestle with the notion of how do you go down these parallel paths,' DeMaria said.

William Phillis, executive director for the Coalition for Equity & Adequacy in School Funding, said the study's methodology examined the needs of children and determined more money was necessary.

Phillis said that for years, state lawmakers have relied on residual budgeting for schools, meaning they set aside an amount of money based on available funds rather than determining what is needed.

``The discussion now should be which of these modes, needs or residual budgeting, are we going to follow,' Phillis said.

Jim Betts, a spokesman for the Campaign for Ohio's Future, which is gathering signatures for the proposed constitutional amendment, said he has not seen the report.

``We welcome the kind of work this University of Washington study has done and believe this is the type of discussion that is needed in the state,' he said.

Year-round instruction?

The eight scenarios range from keeping the current 168 days of classroom instruction, but extending the school year to 188 total days, to year-round schooling divided into three semesters, with 185 classroom days and 205 total days.

The researchers tried to estimate the cost of each scenario, noting the most expensive approach would be year-round schooling, with the state ensuring a specified amount of extra funding for each child in poverty.

Critics of teachers and their pay will find unwelcome news in the study, which found teachers are underpaid in Ohio and said that the starting salary should be increased to \$30,000, with 4 percent pay raises annually.

The pay for teachers in high-demand areas like math and science should be 25 percent higher on average, the study said.

At the same time, there should be more teachers.

The study calls for two or three fewer students per classroom in poor districts.

This means that in poor districts, the teacher-student ratios should be 15-1 in elementary schools, 20-1 in middle schools and 22-1 in high schools.

Recommendations include five to 10 days for teacher development, coaching and mentoring new teachers, but the report also notes that classroom instruction days should not be sacrificed for teacher development, student assessment, parental meetings or administrative tasks.

Strickland has emphasized the need to focus on preschool children and the report appears to echo his sentiments by recommending creation of a State Board of Early Learning, funding all-day kindergarten and creating an Early Learning Initiative for children living in families making up to 250 percent of the federal poverty level.

The early learning initiative would fund 6,000 preschoolers and 2,000 infants and toddlers.

Researchers acknowledge throughout that they lacked the information and expertise to make recommendations for special-education students, so in most cases, the report indicates current practices and spending policies were followed.

A number of commonly held beliefs were challenged.

For example, the study contends there is no evidence that student aides improve results, especially as children grow older, so the report recommends placing assistants only in kindergarten classes.

Also, the report notes that private tutors should not be used, but instead staff, volunteers and peers should be enlisted to help students with lighter caseloads in poor districts.

The federal No Child Left Behind Act moved tutoring toward private for-profit firms that provide services to students outside the school district.

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