

It's Time To Face the Elephant in the Classroom

Most school boards in Colorado have established the same two goals that we have in Jeffco: Every student will meet state academic standards every year, and will graduate college and career ready.

As taxpayers, we spend an enormous amount of money each year to achieve these goals. For example, based on the most recent CDE data, in 2012/13 total revenue per student in Jeffco was \$10,420, or over \$260,000 for every classroom of 25 students. In aggregate, total revenue in Denver's most affluent suburban school districts (Boulder Valley, Cherry Creek, Douglas County, Jefferson County, and Littleton) was about \$2.5 billion in 2012/13.

Despite this spending, we aren't coming close to reaching our student achievement goals.

Colorado is one of eighteen states that use the national ACT test to measure the college and career readiness of every 11th grade student. This serves two purposes: It expands access to college for students who might otherwise not take the test, and it provides policymakers, parents, and taxpayers with a measure of the cumulative results produced by the billions of dollars we spend each year on our public schools. The results on the ACT are not only very important for college admissions, but are also highly correlated with scores on the ASVAB test that students who want to serve in the military must take, as well as pre-employment screening tests (e.g., Work Keys) that are taken by many students going straight to work after high school.

So how well have our schools performed? In 2014, only 46% of Jeffco students met the "college and career ready" (C&C) standard in reading, only 47% in math, and only 45% in science. Since 2008, over 24,000 Jeffco 11th graders have failed to meet the C&C standard in reading, over 25,000 have failed to meet the math standard, and over 30,000 have failed to meet the science standard. In today's intensely competitive global economy, these students and their families will likely pay a heavy lifetime price for these failures.

The usual excuse one hears for these dismal results is that they are due to poverty. Unfortunately, the truth is more painful. Among Jeffco students eligible for free and reduced lunch (FRL), just 26% met the C&C reading standard, and 23% met the math and science standards. However, only 52% of non-FRL students met the reading standard, 55% met the math standard, and 52% met the science standard. Our achievement problems go beyond poverty.

Let me anticipate one more frequently heard comment: “I’m sure that isn’t the case at OUR high school.” Consider the 2014 ACT results at the 23 most affluent neighborhood (i.e., not charter or option) high schools in Boulder Valley, Cherry Creek, Dougco, Jeffco, and Littleton (each of which had 20% or less FRL eligible students): On the 2014 ACT, just 60% of their non-FRL students met the C&C standard in reading, 61% met it in math, and 58% met it in science. Affluence does not protect our students from serious achievement shortfalls.

Clearly, these are very disturbing and frustrating data that are sure to distress many parents – yet they are mirrored in the past decade of CSAP and TCAP data about the percent of students who have been meeting Colorado’s state academic standards in grades three through ten.

When confronted with these data, I hear many K-12 leaders (both superintendents and union heads) make this argument: We know what we’re doing -- if you want better achievement results you have to give us more money and trust us to use it wisely. Given the billions we already spend, and what we are getting in return, this argument demands very careful examination. Fortunately, state law provides us with excellent material for this purpose. Every year, each school and district must submit to the Colorado Department of Education a Uniform Improvement Plan that includes their own self-diagnosis of the most important root causes of their achievement shortfalls (these UIPs are available to the public on CDE’s excellent School View website).

Very similar root causes keep coming up on different districts’ UIPs. Consider these from 2013/14:

- “Inconsistent instructional practices across classrooms due to misaligned use of instructional strategies and materials, and irregular data monitoring.” (Boulder)
- “Lack of systemic, K-12 articulated curriculum in all content areas that incorporates the knowledge and skills, including high level conceptual thinking and inquiry, necessary to meet or exceed standards and expectations at all grade levels.” (Cherry Creek)
- “Inconsistent implementation of challenging and relevant instruction of world class education targets for all students.” (Dougco)
- “Teaching and learning have not consistently demanded high expectations in every classroom due to superficial coverage of a large number of standards, lack of understanding of grade level mastery, lack of relevance for students, and lack of systematic progress monitoring.” (Jeffco)
- “District and building administrators do not have consistent, research based professional development on how to address persistent achievement gaps.” (Littleton)

When you read the root causes cited in school and district UIPs, you are immediately – and repeatedly – struck by the fact that they describe problems related to the inability or unwillingness of adults to change their behavior, and not any lack of financial resources. This begs the obvious question, which is the real elephant in the classroom: What are the obstacles that for so long have prevented our most affluent suburban districts from successfully inducing these critical changes in teacher behavior?

After four years of exploring this issue in Colorado as a member of school and district Accountability Committees, and six years of previous experience with it in Canada and New England, I have reluctantly concluded that one of the most important of these obstacles is the nature of our current teacher contracts. Removing this obstacle is a necessary, if certainly not sufficient step in the difficult process of substantially improving student achievement results.

I will say up front that I do not dispute the right of teachers to belong to a professional association that provides them with continuing professional education and advocacy services, as, for example, the AMA does for doctors, the ABA does for lawyers, and the AICPA does for accountants. However, these other professional organizations are not a party to their members' employment contracts.

By allowing teachers to make their professional association the bargaining unit for their employment contract with a school district, we have significantly reduced the authority of principals, superintendents and school boards, and created a critical obstacle to the implementation of changes that could improve our children's academic achievement.

The essence of this obstacle is painfully clear to anyone whose child has spent a year with an ineffective teacher: under the current contract structure, it is far too hard to remove these teachers from the classroom. And if we can't do that, is it any surprise that some teachers' behavior has been so resistant to change?

Here's another example: in 2014, the non-partisan National Council on Teacher Quality found that "sixteen percent of all teachers were classified as chronically absent because they missed 18 days or more in the school year. [These teachers] accounted for a third of all teacher absences." (see *"Roll Call: The Importance of Teacher Attendance"*). The contracted school year for teachers is about 187 work days. In the private sector, the rule of thumb is 250 work days. So this is like a private sector employee missing 25 or more work days – five weeks or more – during a single year. Do you think those teacher absences negatively affected student achievement results? And how many of these chronically absent teachers do you think lost their jobs?

To be sure, teachers unions claim that they too are in favor of counseling ineffective educators out of the classroom. Yet in the next breath they insist on two conditions that effectively negate this intent. First, as we have seen with Jeffco's implementation of performance-based teacher pay, the teachers union demands a level of perfection in

performance evaluation (e.g., “statistically valid inter-rater reliability”) that is neither found nor expected in other professions, and which research has shown teachers themselves fail to meet when it comes to grading their own students.

Second, the teachers union demands contractual “due process” rights for ineffective teachers that are so complicated, time consuming, and expensive for a district to meet that it is virtually impossible to remove these teachers from the classroom in all but the gravest of cases.

If we are serious about substantially improving student achievement in Colorado, and getting much more value for the billions we spend each year on K-12 education, then it is time for parents, taxpayers, business and political leaders to face the elephant in the classroom, to stop recognizing teachers unions as bargaining units, and to start contracting with and evaluating our teachers in the same manner as other professionals. And if we aren’t willing to do this, then let’s at least be honest with our children, and admit that we expect them to keep paying the price for our reluctance to take on this challenge.

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