

Slashing spending bad for Vermont kids

By NICOLE L. MACE - Published: April 2, 2010

We know that today's children are our future – our future taxpayers, workers, voters, and parents. Our schools represent a large part of our collective effort to prepare our young people for that future – by teaching them the knowledge and skills they need to become successful and productive members of society.

Local citizens recognize the importance of maintaining our schools. Vermont's school boards and teachers, with the support of local voters, have been effectively managing school costs while keeping the state's public schools among the best in the nation. On the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), our students rank 2nd or better in reading, and 3rd or better in math. When we compare our math results with all other demographically similar states, Vermont's students outperform all but one. Clearly, we are doing something right.

Yet, despite this successful track record, Vermont's education system is under attack. In the name of efficiency and fiscal restraint, our policymakers have used the controversial "Challenges for Change" legislation to slash state funding for education by \$40 million over the next two years. With the premise that education spending is excessive and unsustainable, the Challenges bill requires the Department of Education to present a proposal outlining how it will redesign our education system to improve outcomes for all students while spending \$40 million less.

The Challenges for Change education "challenge" is based upon two false premises. The first is that education outcomes can be improved while spending less money. The second is that education costs are too high for the public to continue to support.

As to the first false premise, there is no evidence that we can decrease education spending and at the same time improve outcomes for all students, including increase high school graduation rates and help more students get through college. Rather, slashing state support for local budgets will be bad for our students.

Research shows that spending more on education in Vermont is linked to better student performance. A recent study of the relationship between per-pupil investment and Vermont student performance conducted by Michelle Mathias found a statistically significant relationship between student outcomes and the amount invested over time.

The Mathias study also found that students are very aware of the resources available in

their schools – and make the connection between that spending and the value placed on education by their communities. By cutting education funding by \$40 million in two years, what kind of message will we be sending to our children about how we Vermonters value education?

That brings me to the second false premise – that the public will no longer continue to support our relatively high education spending. This recession has meant that state revenues are down and Vermonters are all feeling the pinch. But school districts have responded by working hard to keep spending down as much as possible. Over 94 percent of school budgets passed this year. Clearly, most Vermonters do not think that education spending is too high — they want to support their schools.

Policymakers warn that this public support will not continue. But the fact is that these same policymakers are the ones straining the system to the breaking point. By failing to maintain the state's contribution to education, they are putting a greater burden on the property tax and causing education taxes to increase at a greater rate than school budgets.

The challenge of educating our children does not go away just because we are in difficult times. We have another way out of this mess that will maintain our excellent system and show our youth how much we value and support their education. We can maintain the state's contribution to the Education Fund – and raise some revenue to do so.

We can pretend that we can slash education budgets and not hurt students. Or we can have an open and honest conversation – a public conversation – about what it is we want from our public schools, how much we are willing to pay for them, and whether it is appropriate to ask those of us with more resources to step up to the plate and help us get through this economic downturn without shortchanging our children's education.

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