

How state can help education

I've had the tremendous professional experience of getting to work at practically every level in the education profession. I've been a public school teacher and taught at the university level in Kentucky. I proudly served at two state education agencies (Colorado and Iowa), worked on the national policy front in Ohio and Tennessee, and now have the tremendous job of working as the superintendent for Eagle County Schools.

From every one of these perspectives, I've seen focused reform efforts aimed at the very noble goal of improving the quality of education. But I've also seen that there is a fundamental disconnect between the education reform choices made at the state level and what actually works to improve schools at the classroom level.



Jason E. Glass
Valley Voices

GOOD INTENTIONS

Every spring, state legislatures across the country convene. Education budgets represent the lion's share of any state government's spending, so it is appropriate that significant attention is paid to policies that impact schools.

The path of education policy legislation is paved with good intentions. We know our legislators and the governor in their hearts want better schools and outcomes for students. But the policies that are passed struggle to raise performance at schools to high levels. Using my experience as a lens, I see at least two reasons for this.

First, the process of making genuine improvement to education involves improving the quality of instruction and ultimately learning. The relationship among the teacher, the student and the content being studied represents the holy trinity of learning. To improve instruction, you have to make deep and meaningful improvements to all these areas and consider their relationship at an instructional level.

From the state level, the instructional relationship among teacher, student and content remains a mystery. It is difficult for legislators to even imagine the intricacy and nuances of this relationship and how it might be improved.

Second, because state education policy is driven by political or ideological agendas, the state tends to choose flashy gimmicks and quick fixes to problems instead of genuine and sustainable approaches.

In efforts to achieve a political victory and create the illusion of progress, the state enacts disconnected, incoherent education policies that have little evidence of effectiveness. These state laws and policies don't lead to system-wide growth. Many are distractions and disruptions to genuine school improvement.

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NATURAL TENDENCIES

State decision-makers have a natural tendency to create large-scale “audit, rank, punish” schemes. While these approaches certainly create a level of accountability, they do very little that actually supports or improves instruction. In the wake of these accountability schemes, educators are left with a message of “try harder and do better ... or else.”

The tendency to favor gimmicks and quick fixes creates an incoherent and chaotic set of hoops and hurdles to navigate that makes genuine school improvement more difficult and illusive. More often than not, it is not a lack of effort or care for students that hampers low-performing schools. It is the distraction, inefficiency and chaos of one disconnected and misdirected reform effort layered on top of another.

ACCOUNTABLE TO PEOPLE

The good news is that those who make these policies (legislators and

the governor) work for the people of the state of Colorado and, ultimately, we get to hold them accountable for the laws they pass. We should insist that state education policies actually work, champion equity and serve to mitigate the deleterious effects of poverty.

There are a limited amount of resources (in time, energy, people and money) in any school, and voters must insist that our state policies are cautious about piling on changes and requirements unless there is a clear and present need to do so.

In a democracy, all citizens have a responsibility to be participants in the choices our government makes for society. Keeping our state policies (and policy-makers) focused on those things that the schoolhouse needs to succeed is a sure way to give our state's schools the supports they need to be the high-performing system for our kids that we all want.

REACH OUT TO LEGISLATORS

Currently, legislators are sitting on a \$1 billion Education Fund, with state revenue projections running

\$450 million ahead of forecasts, yet they are only considering a \$1.2 million increase in funding to your district. They are also maintaining an \$8 million “subtraction” from the funding Amendment 23 prescribes to the district. In other words, we'll still be \$6.8 million short of funding set forth by the current state Constitution.

The bad news is state legislators have a hard time hearing the expectations of their constituency because of competing agendas among the voters themselves. Our voice becomes fractured and weak instead of uniform and strong.

For your schools to improve, we need you to set aside partisan differences and reach out to legislators, especially those on the Education Committee and express your expectations, which we humbly suggest should simply be: no unproven reforms, no unfunded mandates, more local control and adequate funding.

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