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Shifting Money into the Classroom

Jeff Abbott, *Indiana University - Purdue University Fort Wayne*



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Shifting Money into the Classroom

_For release noon () and thereafter (598 words)___
by JEFF ABBOTT, J.D., Ph.D.

Recently the Indiana Policy Review Foundation released the results of an 18 month research study of the administrative central office and school board costs of all 29 public school districts in the Third Congressional District in Indiana. The Third Congressional District includes Allen, DeKalb, Elkhart, Kosciusko, Noble, Lagrange, Stueben, and Whitley counties. The study was funded by a consortium of three foundations.

The study first calculated the central office administrative and school board costs of the school districts in the Third Congressional District for fiscal year 2007. The study then compared those actual costs to the predicted fiscal year 2007 costs for central office administrative staff and school boards using a new form of public school governance — the Freedom School model of public school governance.

The Freedom School model of public school governance calls for a substantially deregulated and de-politicized system of public school governance. It gives parents a choice of schools and the state funds follow the child to the school. The new governance model empowers principals and teachers to run local schools under five-year competitive contracts, and holds them fully accountable for results at the end of the five year period. It provides for consolidation of school districts into countywide school districts but does not call for consolidation of individual schools. It encourages small and rural schools and provides school principals and teachers with the freedom to be creative and innovative without bureaucratic or political interference, but yet holds them accountable for results.

The major finding of the research study was that, in terms of 2007 dollars, the general estimated cost of the current public school system design for all 29 school districts is approximately \$28,993,193 more than the cost of the new proposed freedom model of school governance. These savings would arise only from the deregulation and de-politicization of public schools, and the consolidation of school districts – not individual schools.

This writer is convinced that all, or nearly all, of the current central office staff in these districts is likely needed to administer the highly regulated and highly politicized system of school governance that exists in Indiana now. We have what at times seems to be a school district and a school board in nearly every neighborhood. If the current system continues, even more and more central office administrators will be needed to comply with and implement the ever-increasing number of laws, regulations, and bureaucratic mandates.

Considering this study results in nearly 29 million dollars of potential savings for just one congressional district, if these savings hold for all 10 congressional districts, Indiana taxpayers are perhaps paying about 290 million dollars per year in unnecessary central office administrative and school board costs. This is money that could go to the classroom or go to relief for taxpayers, or a combination of both.

The governor and many legislative leaders have publicly stated that they would like to increase the amount of school funding that goes to teachers and the classroom. Many educational policymakers throughout the country have called for at least 65 percent of school funds to go to the classroom. Here is a real opportunity for Indiana educational policy makers to achieve this goal without requiring consolidation of any individual school. It is time

for politicians to quite trying to control the classroom. The research proves it just doesn't work. It is past time to give the people who work closest to the children (teachers and principals) the full authority to get the job done right — so Indiana's children will be well prepared to live and work in a highly competitive world economy.

Jeff Abbott, J.D., Ph.D., an adjunct scholar of the Indiana Policy Review Foundation, is professor of education at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne. A former superintendent of the East Allen County School District, Dr. Abbott was selected by Indiana Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Bennett to serve on his transition team. He is the author of numerous articles and papers on education reform.

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Media Contact:

[1]Joe Gulouf
260/417-4094

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