

THE JEFFERSON JOURNAL

...a commentary from

THE THOMAS JEFFERSON INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

Two Reforms to Help Virginia's Students

By Chris Braunlich

1/21/2011 – Ask Virginians if they support financially rewarding teachers whose students make more academic progress than similar students taught by other teachers, and more than 60 percent say “Yes.”

Ask those same Virginians if they support giving businesses tax credits to provide nonpublic school scholarships to low-income students, and 65 percent say “Yes.”

But until now, little progress has been made in either area.

That may be about to change.

Governor Bob McDonnell has stepped up to support two new education initiatives that could have far-reaching effects for the student population at which they're aimed: Disadvantaged children in hard-to-staff schools.

While Virginia ranks 4th in *Education Week's* annual “Quality Counts” Report Card, the fact remains that some students are still falling behind. For example, 12 percent of Virginia 4th graders still cannot read on grade level and 25 percent of 7th graders cannot do math on grade level. Those two subjects in those two grades alone represent nearly 35,000 students struggling in at least one subject area ... and failing.

Changing that equation is going to demand taking education in some new directions that targets a challenged student population.

First up is McDonnell's proposal to create a \$3 million competitive grant program for school divisions that want to pilot performance pay models in one of 190 hard-to-staff schools. These schools may have high percentages of special education students, Limited English Proficient students, teachers with provisional licenses or inexperienced teachers. For one reason or another, they lack experienced teachers in one or more critical educational areas.

But currently, there is little incentive for teachers to work in challenging areas or challenging schools. When teachers in a school division are typically paid only on the basis of years of service and educational attainment (BA, MA, etc.), great teachers and poor teachers are paid the same -- and there's little financial incentive for improvement. Nor is there an incentive for a teacher to take up a hard to teach subject (i.e., physics) if they'll receive the same salary as someone teaching an easier subject.

Nationwide studies have demonstrated that experienced teachers tend to gravitate to schools with fewer at-risk students. After all, if you're paid the same, there are no incentives to take on the harder task for many years and "burn-out" is endemic. The result is more resources (teachers with higher salaries and more experience) to wealthier schools and fewer resources for at-risk students at low-income schools.

The McDonnell proposal might begin to change that.

More importantly, the Governor has weighed in in support of a bill sponsored by Delegates Jimmie Massie (R-Henrico) and Algie Howell (D-Norfolk), creating a new tax credit program to improve educational opportunities for low-income children. Under the measure, corporations will be able to contribute to scholarship foundations and receive a 70 percent state tax credit. In turn, those scholarship foundations must spend 90 percent or more on scholarships so that low-income students can choose a school that better suits their needs.

The legislation is heavily based on Florida's successful 10-year-old scholarship program. Similar bills have been introduced in the past, and have frequently been attacked by members of the Legislative Black Caucus who fear a re-segregation of Virginia's schools.

But re-segregation is unlikely to be the case. To be eligible a student has to be receiving free and reduced meals subsidies. For a family of four, that means an income of less than \$41,000 a year. And the experience in Florida has been clear. Students participating in that program are 40 percent black, 24 percent Hispanic, 23 percent white and the rest Asian or other. These are hardly the hallmarks of a program of segregation.

Nor is it every day that such a far-reaching program that will save taxpayers money: For every million dollars donated to a scholarship organization, the state will lose \$700,000 in revenue – but will also lose \$900,000 in state education costs when students head off to a nonpublic school. Net gain to the state: \$200,000.

The reality is that most students will stay in their public schools – the results in Florida suggest that only about 2.5 percent of eligible students actually make the decision to move to nonpublic schools. But the program appears to create sufficient competition to make a difference for public schools, as well. A recent study by Northwestern University professors Cassandra Hart and David Figlio found noticeable gains in school performance due to the competitive pressure the scholarship program places on public schools.

For the most part Virginia has been, and remains, at the top of its game in K-12 education. But for those students who haven't been successful, these two proposals offer a vital opportunity that gives them a chance to get the education they deserve and need.

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