



“True education reform can only work when all stakeholders have a seat at the table.”

There are numerous recommendations stemming from Governor Tomblin’s “Education Efficiency Audit of WV’s Primary and Secondary Education System.” Today, I will share AFT-WV’s perspective regarding the audit findings, and recommendations made by the audit report as well as the WV Board of Education.

AFT-WV agrees with many recommendations in the audit report. Our organization supports increasing the enrollment of secondary students in career and technical programs through implementing a middle school pipeline. We believe that this will increase student achievement and improve attendance and dropout rates as well as develop a well- prepared, highly-skilled workforce for our state.

AFT-WV also agrees with the recommendation to streamline the delivery of professional development for principals and teachers. Research shows that meaningful professional development is a critical component in providing a high-quality education for students. The WV BOE suggests expanding the role of RESAs for these services in their report. RESAs will be the first of several main topics I will address today.

RESAs

We have no doubt that, initially, RESAs were established to try to move away from 55 county boards to a regional system. I think everyone recognizes that some counties are too small. Clearly, there is no political will to combine county boards of education. Yet, we continue to fund RESAs which have resulted in another bureaucracy which takes money out of the classroom. We are not saying that RESAs don’t have some value, like technology assistance and support . But over the years, it seems RESAs have continually searched for things to justify their existence.

RESAs have become, among other things, a retirement enhancement for retired county superintendents. This salary enhancement brings more than a six figure salary for many administrators. If we are to be efficient with taxpayer dollars, we need to rid our state of unneeded bureaucracy in education. One of the reasons “found” for RESAs existence was to provide professional development. According to our members, the professional development they provide is antiquated and ineffective, and contributes nothing to improving the effectiveness of teachers.

On the other hand, there is the CPD, the Center for Professional Development, which provides high quality professional development. All of the money RESA uses for professional development should be re-appropriated to the CPD. Let’s fund CPD to conduct the on-site, embedded professional development programs that are research-driven to improve the practice for teachers.

Looking at the big picture....Is there really anything RESA does that could not be done by cooperation between and among county boards of education?

If we believe that some county boards should consolidate and collaborate to provide a better education for students, then the legislature and the Governor must provide incentives for the smaller counties to do the right things.

MENTORING

AFT-WV agrees with the audit recommendation for improved mentoring programs for new teachers into the profession. Clearly all the research tells us that a highly qualified teacher is the most important element relating to academic achievement. The state board of education response says we need to prepare, recruit and train the best. Yet what do we do when a new teacher comes into a school? Often they have limited instructional resources, minimal and often irrelevant professional development or limited mentoring from a retiree or classroom teacher with no embedded support. Medical professionals do not ask a doctor fresh out of medical school to perform surgery. The Governor, the Legislature, teachers and administrators must work collaboratively to stop this practice that causes one-half of our teachers to leave the profession in the first five (5) years. This practice costs the state millions of dollars to hire, train and acclimate the replacements. We need to provide appropriate mentoring, training and support to new teachers that give them a chance to be successful and ultimately provide a high quality education for WV’s students.

PRINCIPALS

The State BOE response, as well as the audit itself, spends a lot of time giving reasons why we should empower principals more, even to the point of hiring and firing.

While AFT believes that we need to empower those at the school site, let me explain why that needs to be more than just empowering principals.

Many people talk about the inability to “get rid of” bad teachers. The code and state board policy currently have the ability to place teachers on a plan of improvement and if the teacher doesn’t improve, they can fire that teacher. The current process is not a hard one to follow. The breakdown in the process is with the implementation of the process at the school level. Many principals feel it is just too cumbersome and time consuming. Now it is suggested that we further empower principals to hire and fire, and move away from our current practice, which allows for termination of an employee if they do not correct their job deficiencies within a specific window of time. One needs to look no further than the recent news involving the State Board of Education to realize that a clear and objective process should be followed when terminating an employee. We would recommend a collaborative approach between teachers and administrators.

SENIORITY

The audit and the state board report have identified seniority as a barrier to hiring the most qualified candidate, and have misled the public into thinking seniority is the sole factor in hiring decisions. WV Code 18A-4-7a defines seven equally weighted hiring criteria. Of these seven components, four address qualifications and effectiveness of teachers. In the matrix for filling a position where no teacher currently employed in the county qualifies, all items address qualifications and effectiveness. It’s not an anomaly for the person with the most qualifications to also have the most experience; teachers are life-long learners who continue their education to improve their instruction.

Seniority is not the problem. There are countless unfilled teaching positions all across West Virginia. New teachers are not beating down the doors to teach in West Virginia, only to be deterred by our hiring criteria. Let’s face the facts... 47 other states offer them a higher salary and better benefits package. Why are we even discussing seniority when we have thousands of students sitting in

classrooms without a content area certified teacher, much less an experienced one?

EVALUATION/TEM

The state BOE has identified a desire to develop Teacher Effectiveness Measures. The WVDE has spent three years developing high-quality standards of teaching and a comprehensive, equitable evaluation system that clearly articulates, measures, rewards, and develops effective educators. The Department of Ed brought all the stakeholders to the table and created a research-based system that objectively measures the effectiveness of teachers, school leaders and counselors. Re-inventing the wheel is certainly not an efficient way to spend our taxpayers' money. This system is currently in code and the Department is aligning policy 5310 to address changes. Starting over at this point is a huge waste of time and money.

SALARIES

AFT-WV agrees with the Board's statement that "We must do more than say we value teachers. We must take the actions and provide the resources that demonstrate we value them."

Our union has advocated for competitive teacher salaries for many years. Sadly, the gains resulting from the 1990 strike and the vision of then-Governor Caperton to elevate teacher salaries have not been sustained; subsequently our salaries have fallen back into the abyss.

The audit itself clearly identifies that teacher salaries are an issue in WV. It says, and I quote, "Although it hardly would be surprising to observe that West Virginia cannot hope to attract and retain the highest-quality teachers when it pays them at almost the lowest levels in the nation". It goes on to state that, "it would be fair to say that, if what they are paid is an indication, then teachers are the least valued part of the state's education structure. That runs counter to the objectives identified in the report."

However, in that same paragraph, the audit states "The proper level of teacher salaries for the state is a matter of policy beyond the scope of this efficiency review."

We would like to know why Public Works believes this is "outside the scope" of this report. Is it because that if they added the dollars needed to make

teacher salaries more attractive in this report, Public Works would not be able to show savings as a result of implementing the other findings in the audit? We think so.

After the strike in 1990, teacher salaries moved from 49th in the nation to 32nd over a 5 year period. The profession was more attractive and teacher moral improved. But policymakers quickly reverted back into old habits, limiting pay increases to one every few years, dropping WV teacher salaries back to 48th in the nation.

Adding insult to injury, teachers have faced benefit reductions, particularly in health care. Teachers are asked to shoulder increased health care costs on a diminishing salary each year. For any county trying to recruit new teachers to their district, the final nail in the coffin was hammered by the PEIA Finance Board in 2009, when they voted to eliminate the retiree subsidy for all teachers hired after July 1, 2010. This created a system where two teachers -working side by side, essentially performing the same service- receive drastically different levels of benefits. One of those teachers will receive health insurance benefits upon retirement and the other will not. It has created a tiered system that treats new hires as 2nd class citizens. What message does this send to any new teacher considering coming to WV? This action must be reversed.

Every study that we have read suggests that, within the education system, classroom teachers are the most important employees in the education system when it comes to academic achievement. Ironically, in WV's system, the further you get away from the classroom, the more money you make.

Consider this structure, which is typical in many county school systems: You have the classroom teacher, then the assistant principal, principal, coordinator, director, then other positions some boards create and have special names for, assistant superintendent, then superintendent. We've listed those from the bottom to the top in terms of what some would call "climbing the ladder".. There is substantially more money each step of the way. This current salary ladder is completely backwards if you look at it with the research in mind. Therefore, AFT-WV proposes that the legislature and the Governor make a serious commitment to teacher salaries by flipping this "ladder" upside down and making teachers the highest paid employees in the system. Like the research shows, they are the most important factor in student achievement.

A major disappointment of the audit report was Public Works failure to address the top heaviness in staffing and salaries that exists in some WV school districts. County board office administrators and their salaries have grown to epic proportions in many counties, while resources to classrooms and students are stagnant or even dwindling.

For example, in Monongalia County, there are 5 county level administrators making over \$100K annually. There are 26 Monongalia County administrators earning \$80-99K per year. That's 31 administrators over \$80K, with the superintendent coming in at a whopping \$152K a year. Not one of these highly paid individuals work with students daily as part of their duties. Shockingly, 23% of all professional positions in Monongalia County Schools are NOT classroom teachers. That's right...almost 1 in 4. And who pays the real price of these inflated salaries?? Mon County students....as they have the 2nd highest class size in the state. Unbelievable! The failure of the audit report to cite and discuss administrative top heaviness at the local level is a glaring and suspicious omission, given all the other issues they have thrown on the table.

SCHOOL NURSES

The response from the WVBOE to modify Code to allow flexibility for counties to use appropriate health care professionals shows a grave lack of understanding of the role of the certified school nurse in West Virginia's schools. School nurses function as a bridge between the education and health systems for students and their families. They require additional education to obtain school nurse certification which helps them understand the education system and the integral role of school health. School nurses are a vital component of the professional education team and provide information on health issues and their impact on learning and student attendance.

It is not just a matter of having someone with a health background available. There is a dramatic increase in serious physical and mental health issues for students in West Virginia's schools. The assessment skills of the school nurse are essential in identifying these problems and providing care and continuity so the students are able to attend school and learn to their fullest potential. The professional staffs in these community agencies provide a valuable clinical role for these students but should not and cannot replace the certified school nurse.

Even though the WV Code allows for school systems to contract for “equivalent school nurse services,” it no longer occurs because health departments have found that they simply cannot afford to provide the comprehensive services required by today’s students. West Virginia’s school nurses provide the most cost effective, comprehensive and quality health care for the students in our schools. The methods of providing school health services that are suggested in the WVBOE response would not, in the long term, save money, but would significantly compromise the safety and well being of students, as well as their ability to attend school and learn.

Contracting other agencies to provide health services within the school system has proven to be inefficient and ineffective. The state and the local counties who lack funding to hire qualified school nurses need to work towards a solution that provides sufficient funding to hire an adequate number of certified school nurses. Collaboration with other community health agencies should continue, as it benefits the health and well being of the students, but it cannot effectively replace the certified school nurse.

Having a School Based Health Centers in the school facilities or near the school facilities has been positive in that medical care provided by an advanced licensed provider is much more accessible to the students, staff and parents. School nurses have collaborated with the SBHC in referring students for acute care, and other health needs such as mental and dental health issues. It has been for the most part, a win, win situation for the school system and the SBHC. An amendment that would require these health centers to perform the duties of a school nurse would not only cause enmity between the school nurses and the SBHC but would instigate a decline in the school health arena. It is vital that the laws of West Virginia protect our children, our school nurses, and our School Based Health Centers as the future of our state depends on our healthy children.

Every child deserves to be healthy and successful. The school nurse is in a unique, specialized position within the educational system to promote health. They are acquainted with the students, parents and the staff in the school community. They work as the liaison between the school, students, parents and the School Based Health Center.

COMMITMENT OF TEACHERS

Teachers in the state of West Virginia are truly committed to education; they want every child to succeed and become productive citizens of their communities. Classroom teachers are expected to educate ALL students regardless of their abilities, home-life, nutrition or behavior. The state initiatives and unfunded mandates are endless in public education. Teachers are micro-managed to death. But in the face of it all, they persevere by working hours beyond the school day, every day. It's disheartening when teachers realize their efforts are not appreciated and often not even acknowledged in the current atmosphere of "teacher bashing." Rarely is such dedication found in other professions, yet teachers are not treated as professionals. We all know that the teacher is the single most important influence in a child's academic success. The state BOE wants to give more local control; we agree as long as that control is given to the person who has the most impact on student achievement, and that person is the teacher.

In a previous interim presentation, Senator Tucker asked the state Board president, "When are we going to allow teachers to teach?" WV teachers wait for this answer every time a new initiative or mandate is added to their plate.

The state BOE says it wants to head in a new direction. AFT-WV has identified specific solutions to address education reform in West Virginia. We have proposed solutions in this report that we believe will be the most beneficial for the future of education in our state. These solutions include:

- Streamlining professional development through the CPD
- Fostering cooperation and collaboration in staffing and services between county boards, therefore eliminating the need for RESAs
- Improving mentoring programs for new teachers
- Hiring and firing employees based on multiple measures and utilizing a fair and objective procedure
- Implementing a peer review process to allow for more local decision making
- Increasing WV teacher salaries to a level that attracts highly qualified certified teachers, makes WV salaries and benefits competitive with other states and pays the highest salaries to those who have the most direct impact on students (i.e. flipping the ladder.)

- Examining the full scope of administrative top heaviness in county school systems and its impact on the quality of education provided to students such as resources and class size; and
- Treating educators as professionals and giving them the time, tools and resources to be successful.

The Governor asked a group of accountants to tell us what they think we need to do. We asked the people who know what we need to do; the teachers. Bringing those perspectives together is the way to truly improve education. Real reform works when everyone has a seat at the table. We are willing to work with the Board, the Department, the Legislature and the Governor to ensure the absolute best education for our children and the future of West Virginia.
