

state performance standards. Consequently, we have begun to question the value of providing complete local discretion as part of a state's education reform program.

Four Key Aspects of Funding Reform

From these studies, we have concluded that there are four key aspects of school finance adequacy that we would recommend for future state action:

- **Identify what it takes to dramatically improve student performance.** We believe educators have sufficient information to be specific about this, with our evidence-based model a good summary of that evidence.
- **Cost out those strategies.** The evidence-based model offers a solid place to start, providing states with what currently is the most reasonable adequacy cost estimate. States would be smart to start with this level of resources and make sure this amount is used effectively before adding more resources.
- **Surround any school finance reform based on an adequacy study with a sharp**

About the Authors

Allan Odden is a professor of educational leadership and policy analysis at the University of Wisconsin-Madison school of education. Lawrence O. Picus is a professor of education finance and policy at the University of Southern California's Rossier School of Education, in Los Angeles. They are partners in Lawrence O. Picus and Associates, a firm specializing in school finance analyses. Copies of past state studies are available at www.lpicus.com

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accountability system. This would hold students, teachers, schools and districts appropriately accountable for results, so that there is at least some pressure, other than local discretion, to use resources for the most effective strategies.

▪ **Establish some constraints to ensure that schools use key resources as part of a strategy to double student performance.** These resources can include instructional coaches, tutors and formative assessments for data-based decision making.

We are convinced that applying these strategies, in combination with the growing body of evidence about what works in schools to improve student learning, would enable Ohio's schools and districts to dramatically improve student performance over time.

This article is adapted from a commentary that appeared in Education Week on August 15, 2007. ■

To read the article by Odden and Picus on the cost of the evidence-based model, go to www.schoolfinanceredesign.org/publpdf/wp2_odden.pdf.

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 KnowledgeWorks
Foundation

Empowering Communities to Improve Education

One West Fourth Street
Suite 200
Cincinnati, Ohio 45202

Telephone (513) 929-4777
Toll Free (877) 852-3863
Fax (513) 929-1122

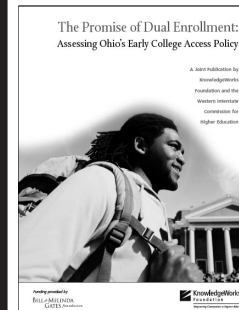
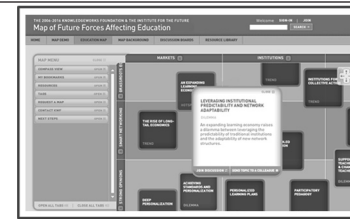
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A KnowledgeWorks Foundation Publication
March 2008 Volume 3, Number 3

Editor's Note: School levies on the Ohio primary ballot this month failed at a higher rate than in the past, with fewer than 47 percent of the local levies passing. This historically low passage rate is blamed on a bad economy and a dysfunctional state school funding system that forces schools to turn to the ballot just to keep even with rising costs. Ten years ago, the state tried and ultimately failed to create a school funding system that would meet the mandates of the Ohio Constitution. Today, state leaders recognize the system is not working and are looking for ways to fix it. We asked two of the leading school funding experts in the nation to offer some new ideas on how Ohio might finally have a school funding system that works.

Research into Best Practices Can Drive School Funding

By Allan Odden and Lawrence O. Picus
Lawrence O. Picus and Associates

For more than a decade, Ohio has wrestled with the question of how much to spend on the education of its school children. With Gov. Ted Strickland's renewed focus on education, this is an ideal time to consider how the state might determine the level of commitment it needs to make in order to see dramatic improvements in student performance over the next few years. In this article, we describe our evidence-based approach to estimating what that amount might be.

In the 1990s, "school finance adequacy" began to dominate discussions about school funding, and seemed like a promising

idea. This straightforward way of approaching the subject called for states, as they began to develop curriculum content and student-performance standards, to also identify the financial resources needed to get students to meet those standards. Dozens of adequacy studies were conducted across the country. They produced encouraging results and showed potential for moving practice forward. The studies so far have had limited impact on state policy – Ohio's experience with the "successful schools" model is a case in point. The limited impact of this work is in part because the debate over how to measure and fund an

adequate education has grown increasingly intense.

One group — which we call adequacy advocates, and which includes those using the “professional judgment” approach to school finance adequacy — argues that adequately funding schools will cost billions more, even in states like Connecticut and New York that currently spend far above the national average. Yet, when states hike school funding, these adequacy advocates return immediately to court, seeking more money.

A second group — which we label adequacy critics — argues that school funding issues have no place in the nation’s courts, and that there is little science to support the findings from school-finance-adequacy analyses.

“Doubling” Student Performance

So what can Ohio do as it scrutinizes its education spending in the months to come? We would suggest an approach somewhere between the two camps. Rather than cost out what it would take to educate all students to Ohio’s proficiency standards, a task beyond the realm of science, our approach focuses on resources to “double” the performance of Ohio’s students over the next 4-6 years. This goal is still ambitious, though more achievable than the rhetorical goal of educating all students to high standards embedded in Ohio’s reforms and most adequacy studies.

We have used this approach with success in other states, and it consists of two components: First, we review

the evidence from research and best practice on what programs work in education, i.e., produce student learning gains. Second, we study schools and districts that have dramatically increased — what we rhetorically call doubling — the level of student performance over a four- to six-year period.

Funding Strategies That Work

Our review of the evidence has uncovered individual educational strategies that work, as well as what happens when all the strategies are used in a school- or district-wide effort to improve performance. This review has informed an evidence-based funding model that we advocate. These strategies include:

- a rigorous curriculum program
- intensive professional development including school-based instructional coaches
- strategies to help struggling students, including as the first intervention individual and small-group tutoring, and followed-up with academically focused extended-day and summer school programs for some students
- class sizes of 15 in grades K-3
- other successful practices

These research findings represent the core of our evidence-based model which is described in more depth in the fourth edition of our school finance textbook, *School Finance: A Policy Perspective* (McGraw-Hill, 2008).

Our studies of schools and districts in four states — Arkansas, Washington, Wisconsin and Wyoming — offer examples of what can be accomplished when schools

SIMPLY PROVIDING ENOUGH MONEY TO ADEQUATELY FUND OHIO’S SCHOOLS WILL NOT SOLVE THE SCHOOL FINANCE PROBLEM.

and districts put it all together, and in many cases literally double student performance on state tests. Simply providing enough money to adequately fund Ohio’s schools will not solve the school finance problem. Schools need to use the resources in ways that produce large gains in student academic achievement.

In addition to deploying resources effectively, schools that doubled performance engaged in a number of additional activities including:

- data-based decision making — making use of both state-level tests and more curriculum-focused, formative assessments
- engaging teachers in collaborative work centered on the instructional program
- establishing a professional school culture
- having district, school and teacher leaders orchestrate all efforts to improve the academic achievement of every student

Our school level studies in four states indicate that the types of resources outlined in the evidence-based funding model we propose are very similar to the resources used by these successful schools and districts.

Based on these analyses, we have concluded that we already know a great deal about how to dramatically improve schools. Although Ohio and the rest of the country need more evidence on how to educate

all students to high levels — even more than doubling of current student performance — the existing knowledge base provides a sound foundation for starting today to move toward that lofty goal.

The Evidence-Based Model

In a recently published paper, completed for the School Finance Redesign Project and to be published soon in the journal *Education Finance and Policy*, we used national demographic data and national average prices to cost out our evidence-based model. The total cost of the model is close to the national average expenditure per pupil. This means that, today, the nation’s investment in K-12 education is almost enough to adequately fund an education program that can double student performance, although states spending below the average would likely need additional money for their schools, while those spending above probably would not.

We are currently working on a second report identifying the cost of this model for each of the 50 states. Preliminary findings suggest that Ohio may be very close to providing the level of funding generated by this model. The final cost of an evidence-based model for Ohio would depend on the kinds of state-specific adjustments policymakers

and educators believe are needed to meet the Buckeye state’s educational goals.

Simply finding enough money to adequately fund a state’s schools does not solve the school finance problem. An equally difficult challenge is structuring a school finance system to support these evidence-based resource allocation strategies. Today, many state legislators prefer to rely on “block grants” that defer decisions on how best to use educational resources to the professionalism of local educators. Lawmakers still want to know how the money they appropriate is used at the school level, however. Unfortunately, current state and local fiscal-reporting systems do not provide that information. Consequently, legislatures in

based instructional-improvement strategies that work. They rarely employ school-based instructional coaches — the resource that is key to making professional development work. Nor do they use the funds for certificated tutors to help struggling students, the most effective early-intervention program.

Instead, they use resources to expand the number of elective classes, particularly in middle and high schools (and at a time when student performance in core subjects such as mathematics, science, reading and writing is both the highest policy goal and the focus of most state testing). They also hire large numbers of instructional aides, even though the same research that finds class sizes of 15 work in grades K-3 also shows that a large class

AN EQUALLY DIFFICULT CHALLENGE IS STRUCTURING A SCHOOL FINANCE SYSTEM TO SUPPORT EVIDENCE-BASED RESOURCE ALLOCATION STRATEGIES.

Arkansas and Wyoming, two states that have enacted school finance reforms based on our evidence-based model, sought our help to determine how schools use the education dollar. Our findings were somewhat discouraging.

Shortcomings of Local Discretion

When school districts receive revenues through a block grant, local education systems often do not use the funds to implement school-

with an instructional aide does not raise student performance.

In one state that targeted money to provide additional services to students struggling to meet performance standards, we found that educators argued for more local discretion — seeking to use those resources to increase teacher salaries, lower class sizes or establish preschool programs. All of these are potentially effective uses of school resources, but none of them provides the *extra help* struggling students need to meet