

## Guest Commentary: A smart answer to K-12 cuts? Hike class sizes

By William Moloney

Posted: 02/20/2011 01:00:00 AM MST [17 comments](#)

As Colorado legislators wrestle with challenges more daunting than any in living memory, a glance at education reveals two raging imperatives that while seemingly in conflict actually offer hope of a dramatic paradigm shift that could rescue our state.

The twin imperatives are reforming our deeply troubled public schools and dealing with a fiscal tsunami that directly threatens education's historic funding regime.

Conventional wisdom says serious education spending cuts will make everything worse and doom reform. The education community endorses this viewpoint, and their preferred strategy is fighting off spending cuts in the legislature while at the same time suing the state for several billion dollars.

This strategy is self-defeating and simply won't work, given the economic calamities afflicting our state and nation. So, what is the alternative strategy that would give us better schools at lower cost?

With K-12 education consuming 45.6 percent of the state's general fund (\$4.4 billion dollars), and with total state and local spending at \$8.9 billion dollars (\$11,133 per pupil), equaling nearly 60 percent of all public expenditure, Colorado is spending more than it can afford on education, *but* it's spending money on the wrong things.

Why is it that the United States, despite spending more than almost every other nation, perpetually trails our world competitors in international education comparisons?

How is it that other nations, some states (Utah), and "no excuses" schools (KIPP) all deliver better results for children at significantly lower costs than the U.S. K-12 average?

The answer to both questions is that all these other systems make their key priority high teacher quality, not low class size.

The evidence is clear: Class Size Reduction (CSR), with its staggering cost, has been the most damaging and counterproductive education "reform" of the past 40 years.

Consider the evidence: Between 1970 and 2008, while student population increased just 8 percent, teachers increased by 61 percent. Given that personnel costs are 80 percent to 85 percent of school budgets, it is not surprising that education spending adjusted for inflation in the same period rose 102 percent.

As pointed out in the groundbreaking "Stretching the School Dollar": "If policymakers had maintained the same overall teacher-to-student ratio since the 1970s, we would need one million fewer teachers, training could be focused on a smaller and more able population, and average teacher pay would be close to \$75,000 per year."

Cost of the extra million teachers? \$60 billion dollars per year. Total cost over the period in question? Two *trillion* dollars.

If CSR is such a bad idea, why do people generally like it? Five reasons: 1. It seems it should improve achievement; 2. Educators, particularly teachers unions, claim it works; 3. People don't see the research that totally discredits CSR; 4. People don't know that the world's top systems have a much higher class size; 5. People don't know what is sacrificed to pay the immense cost of CSR (better teachers, more technology, etc.).

The best example of a CSR disaster is California, which in 1996 legislated a K-3 class-size reduction from 29:1 to a maximum 20:1. The state then undertook a huge school construction program and increased its K-3 teacher workforce from 62,226 to 91,112. The annual cost to the state was \$1.6 billion dollars. The result? A four-year evaluation by the California Department of Education reported that "school-level analysis finds no relationship between CSR exposure and student achievement."

If Colorado's average class size, currently 16.8:1, could match Utah's 23.7:1 total, state and local education spending would be over a billion dollars less. Such transformations do not occur overnight, but they at least point us in a more useful direction than the state's historic spending trajectory.

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