

THE ANN ARBOR NEWS

Trail leads back to funding

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BY ROBERT B. "BRIT" SATCHWELL

With lean times, school budgets in crisis, and a state budget in gridlock, Ann Arbor News Reporter David Jesse's recent series on teacher pay was timely and appropriate. I'm all for transparency when it comes to how the public's (my) money is spent, and I believe that all conversations about public education ultimately benefit schools in the long run. So I went to The News' education blog (http://blog.mlive.com/study_hall), shared my talking points, and read the other comments. They ran from vitriolic to constructive. Paychecks have a lot of nerve endings!

I marvel at how those outside of the system often fail to fully grasp what it takes to teach, and especially the effect that stagnant funding has had on our classrooms in recent years. But how could they? They don't live it, and we as educators strive to maintain a positive face for our own mental health as much as for PR as loyal employees. Yet our cups of frustration runneth over.

The reactions from the media and community have run from support and thoughtful analysis to simplistic edu-bashing. On the analysis side, I loudly recommend columnist Peter Luke's Sept. 2 overview on state funding ("School year may force lawmakers to get busy"). On the edu-bashing side, I'm particularly tired of the "failing schools" drumbeat that seems to reflect political ideology more than sound pedagogy.

We have no choice but to deal with budget cuts on the local level. But as we run the endless gauntlet of Sophie's Budget Choices, let's not assume that we are truly solving anything. We are merely coping. The real solutions lie upstream while we admirably cope here at home. The question is when will we all have had enough to paddle upstream to those lasting solutions.

I, and many others, have thrown tit-for-tat talking points into the pot, hoping that someone will arrange them into a recipe that most, if not all, will find palatable. Rather than repeat any and turn up their volume, here are a few that may underscore the severity of our current situation while not straying too far from the specific issue of teacher pay.

A description of a "good teacher" depends upon whom you ask. A recent EPIC-MRA parent survey showed that almost 80 percent of Michigan's parents rated their current teachers as very good to excellent, but only 50 percent of other teachers were judged favorably. This is amazing when you consider that students switch teachers from year to year. Those mediocre "other" teachers used to be "their" great teachers. It's as if that special teacher crosses over every June into a dark amorphous vault called "failing schools"... guilt by assimilation.

Thirty-three percent of all new teachers leave within three years, 50 percent within five, according to the National Council on Teacher Quality. Competitive starting pay helps attract them; burnout chases them off despite annual step raises (which are common in the public sector and are not unique to teaching). With a wave of boomer teacher retirements approaching, school pay must continue to hold its own in relation to private sector wages. If you pay them, they will come (and maybe even stay). The trail leads back to funding.

No Child Left Behind legislation and its mandate for a single quantitative benchmark to gauge "achievement" and thereby allocate accountability have failed miserably, as evidenced by our current debate on whether to drastically revamp it or scrap it altogether. The fault was not in the attempt or intention. Accountability is a valuable tool to foster quality when applied accurately and fairly. NCLB's

faults were in plain sight at birth: its reliance on a single, simplistic, inadequate standardized benchmark (MEAP) and its almost sinister schedule of punishments (Title I funding, our neediest children, would be the first to suffer consequences). No single measure of achievement will ever suffice; we can't measure a mile with only one ruler. Let's embrace the fact that child development is as complex as the children we teach. Even if we agreed upon a mix of measurements - including standardized scores - we'd have to fully fund them, something we couldn't manage for NCLB. Is it still worth a try? The trail leads back to funding.

Achievement-based merit pay has no chance of flying until achievement can be measured with reasonable accuracy, regardless of how seductive the idea may seem. And then, as Jesse's second article pointed out, other practical obstacles pop up. Those who insist upon a single measure are completely ignoring assessment experts to the degree that they seem to have another agenda. At the risk of sounding like a conspiracy theorist, their trail also leads back to funding, albeit via a different route.

We don't need any benchmarks to know that we have an edu-demic in many rural and urban districts. Many can't hire enough warm bodies, let alone good teachers, let alone saints. Assignment-based merit incentives are beginning to make a difference and should be expanded. Again, the trail leads back to funding.

Don't assume that I think that money alone will solve these problems. Not so. Wider reforms, both in schools and in the halls of power, are necessary. We solve the money problem as we enact the larger reforms. But first, let's look at some ideas for schools to whet our appetites for change.

Foreign languages in K-12, including Chinese and Arabic. More teacher-moderated student connectivity, like online student learning groups and blogs. More high school/business internships - we are in Ann Arbor amidst 21st century opportunities! More school/community mentoring partnerships for at-risk students (it takes a coordinated village, not merely heroic standalone initiatives). Younger teachers developing older teachers (me) in the latest applications of the hardware we already have (the students are way out ahead). Humanities for the 21st century as a new high school class (globalization, the World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund, the cultures of emerging nations, international supply chains). Funding would grow this list.

So yet again, the trail leads back to funding. Tomorrow, I'll provide some ideas about how we can tackle this challenge.

About the writer: Robert B. "Brit" Satchwell, an Ann Arbor resident, is a math teacher at Forsythe Middle School. This is the first of a two-part essay. On Monday, Satchwell will discuss school funding reform, including changes to the tax structure. To contribute essays to Other Voices, contact Mary Morgan, opinion editor, at 734-994-6605 or mmorgan@annarbornews.com.

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