

States Hurting for Education Aid

By Jessica Tate

“If there ever was a cause, if ever there can be a cause, worthy to be upheld by all of toil or sacrifice that the human hand or heart can endure, it is the cause of education.” – Horace Mann

Horace Mann, known as the father of public education, envisioned public schools as the great equalizer in the United States. Access to education would give all children the tools needed to be successful in our society. For many children, given education and their own hard work, Mann’s theory proves true. However, unfettered access to high quality education does not exist throughout our society. At this point in time, education lacks the funding necessary to ensure high quality education for all students.

The majority of education funding comes from states and local governments. The federal government only provides about 7% of funds necessary for public education.ⁱ Although local funding of education ensures that states and local governments determine the best education plan for their areas, states and local governments currently face huge budget shortfalls, which severely hinder their ability to adequately fund education. According to *Education Week*, 38 states have cut or frozen their current-year budgets. Many of these were able to shield K-12 education from direct cuts; however, with projected budget shortfalls for the coming year many states may not be able to continue to protect education.ⁱⁱ

State budget crises come at a particularly difficult time for education because the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, an education reform law, carries with it new requirements for schools and uncertain costs.ⁱⁱⁱ The law’s mandates include putting in place new state testing programs, systems to track test data, increasing teacher salaries, maintaining teacher quality through professional development and technology training, educating students with disabilities, and repairing school buildings.^{iv} Despite this mandate, the proposed federal government budget for 2004 does not adequately address the monetary needs of the states as they comply with these reforms. The downturn in the US economy in conjunction with additional education requirements in the No Child Left Behind Act leaves states in grave need of financial assistance by the federal government.^v

Although President Bush’s budget proposal for fiscal year 2004 increases Department of Education discretionary funding, the numbers do not go far enough in combating the states budget crisis. For example, the Pell Grant program, which increases access to higher education, especially for low-income students, receives additional funds but will still experience a deficit and the average Pell Grant awarded will decline. In addition, forty-six federal education programs such as Arts Education, Elementary and Secondary School Counseling, and Rural Education will be zeroed out.^{vi} Teacher

Quality State Grants will remain frozen for a second year and Title I Grant spending will increase but remain \$6 billion below what Congress has authorized as necessary funding.^{vii}

A national mentoring initiative, reading programs, Head Start, and parent choice in education receive significant funding under Bush's proposed 2004 budget.^{viii} Parental choice receives the most new funding in the form of a Choice Incentive Fund, refund tax credits for private school tuition, a Voluntary Public School Choice Program, charter school grants, and magnet school assistance.^{ix} In allowing for money to follow parent choice, it is important to ensure that the overall benefit for public education does not decline.

Under Bush's proposed 2004 federal budget states continue to bear the burden of most education funding. This system will not continue to work while the states experience such financial hardship.

Recognizing the importance of education in the well-being of our children and the future of our society, the Presbyterian Church USA General Assembly has spoken on education many times. The church encourages both high quality education for all children and appropriate funding to ensure the quality. In 1987 Presbyterians expressed "long-held convictions" in regards to education including,

-- that an education of high quality for all children is an obligation of society and indispensable to the political and economic health of our democracy;

-- that a responsible stewardship of God's gifts to all persons requires the provision of concern, attention, skills, and talents as well as material resources necessary to education of high quality for children and youth in our society;

-- that God's concern is for all peoples of the world, and that public education must educate for global awareness and prepare students to work to remove barriers and live in a world marked by growing interdependence; and

-- that clarity and consensus about goals of contemporary education are necessary prerequisites for school renewal.

Furthermore, the General Assembly calls Presbyterians to "work to gain public acceptance and legislative action on funding policies that provide a tax support of public schools which utilizes the range of local, state, and federal sources necessary to ensure that funds for equal educational opportunities are available to all students without reference to resources in their place of residence."

These convictions were reaffirmed in the 207th General Assembly in 1995.

Hearing this call and understanding the importance of education in the future of our country and our children, we must speak out to ensure that as budget decisions are

made on the federal, state, and local levels, especially in this time of economic slowdown, education remains and priority and is funded as such.

ⁱ Toppo, Greg. "Most States Lag far Behind 'No Child Left Behind Law,'" *USA Today*. 28 January 2003. Online: http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2003-01-28-education-cover-usat_x.htm

ⁱⁱ Richard, Alan & Joetta Sack. "States Brace for Tough New Year," *Education Week*. 8 January 2003. Online: http://edweek.org/ew/ew_printstory.cfm?slug=16crunch.h22

ⁱⁱⁱ Richard, Alan & Joetta Sack.

^{iv} Sack, Joetta. "No Child Law Vies for Scarce State Resources," *Education Week*. 8 January 2003. Online: http://www.edweek.org/...printstory.cfm?slug=16crunch-sl_h22

"Education Funding Shortfalls Misses Opportunity to Truly 'Leave No Child Behind'," National Education Association. Online: <http://www.nea.org/nr/nr020226.html>

^v "Education Funding Shortfalls Misses Opportunity to Truly 'Leave No Child Behind' Weaver, Reg. "The Zero-Percent Solution," National Education Association. Online: <http://www.nea.org/columns/rw030126.html>

Toppo, Greg.

^{vi} Weaver, Reg.

^{vii} Robelen, Erik. "Congress Faces Lengthy Education Agenda," *Education Week*. 15 January 2003. Online: http://www.edweek.org/ew/ew_printstory.cfm?slug=18agenda.h22

^{viii} Robelen, Erik.

"President Bush's 2004 Budget Will Include an Estimated \$756 Million to Expand Options for Parents, Paige Says," US Department of Education. 29 January 2003.

^{ix} Ibid.