

Unintended Consequences

One thing the Arizona Legislature is famous for is making legislation before asking the experts. What happens every time? Unintended consequences. Look no further than the latest "60%" rule headed to the ballot this November. The premise is simple: more money spent directly on instruction is good for kids. The problem is the context. Arizona has ranked 49th in the nation for K-12 funding for the past 20 years. With limited resources, districts already stretch every dollar, and Arizona's administrative costs are the lowest in the nation.

So why 60%? No one can explain where the number came from or what research supports it. Most districts aren't currently at 52%, and the Legislature relies on the Auditor General's narrow definition of "instructional spending," which excludes thousands of employees who support student learning every day. The current definition includes teachers, aides, substitute teachers, instructional supplies, field trips, athletics, cocurricular activities, and tuition. Ironically, some of these items, like athletics, have only a limited connection to classroom instruction.

Meanwhile, many professionals who directly impact student success are excluded. Counselors, nurses, social workers, speech pathologists, audiologists, librarians, literacy coaches, curriculum specialists, technology staff, and special education administrators don't count toward the 60%. Neither do principals, superintendents, business managers, payroll staff, custodians, maintenance workers, security personnel, or the people who keep buildings safe and operational. Remove these supports, and classroom learning suffers. This proposal is a textbook example of unintended consequences. Whenever someone proposes an arbitrary target, I ask, "Compared to what?" Arizona schools currently average about 52% of their budgets on instructional spending for good reasons.

First, Arizona has failed to adequately fund school facilities, leaving districts to divert scarce dollars toward aging buildings. Second, student needs have changed dramatically. Anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges have increased, requiring more counselors, nurses, and social workers to support students. Third, local school boards - not legislators - understand the unique needs of their communities and are best positioned to allocate resources accordingly.

Instead of addressing Arizona's chronic underfunding, the Legislature has created a solution in search of a problem. Worse yet, districts that fail to reach the arbitrary 60% threshold could lose even more funding. The consequences are predictable. Students would receive fewer academic and social supports, including counseling, reading specialists, special education services, and technology assistance. The measure applies only to traditional public schools - not charter or private schools that also receive public funding. If this policy is truly about accountability, it should apply equally to every school receiving taxpayer dollars. Rural districts, already operating with limited staff while meeting the same state and federal requirements, would be especially hard hit.

The 60% instructional spending measure is a Trojan horse. It is presented as a way to increase teacher pay, but it does nothing to solve Arizona's real problem: decades of inadequate school funding. The solution is straightforward. Arizona must stop ranking near the bottom nationally in education funding. Until that changes, arbitrary mandates like this will create unintended consequences that students, schools, and communities will feel for generations.

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