



Putting priorities above the pork in politics

By Jim Waters

VERSAILLES - - Recently, I spoke at a forum here along with specialists who are considered to be among the state's heavyweights on education policy, including Robert Sexton of the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence.

The Kentucky Gazette and Quadrant 2, a Lexington consulting firm, sponsored the event called "Politics, Pork and Priorities."

The organizers of the conference, including Gazette publisher Laura Glasscock and Quadrant 2 president Bob Silvanik did a wonderful job of attempting to provide balanced discussion on state spending.

Unfortunately, attendees to the session I participated in heard a lot about how to produce more, not less, pork.

Before the conference, Gov. Steve Beshear announced that Kentucky's bank account is overdrawn. And yet, Sexton proposed pushing this year's Legislature to spend an addition \$50 million to \$70 million on experimental early childhood education programs.

"It's one of the best investments we can make," Sexton said.

Sound research says otherwise.

In a Reason Foundation report, two San Jose State University economics professors thoroughly discredited an analysis by the Rand Corp claiming that a proposed taxpayer-funded universal preschool program in California would deliver \$2.62 in benefits for every dollar spent. Reason's report showed how the Rand study was based on faulty research, including cherry-picking data and basing claims on "unbelievable assumptions that bias the results."

Using much of Rand's own data and methodology, these professors discovered that after correcting just a few of the report's most glaring errors, California would lose 25 to 30 cents for every dollar spent on universal preschool.

Fortunately, despite an all-out campaign by proponents of big-government spending such as Rob Reiner – who as television's "Meathead" should have paid more attention to Archie Bunker's diatribes about big government and taxes – Californians rejected the proposal. Perhaps the fact that it would have created a \$2.5-billion entitlement program paid for with a huge tax increase had something to do with its defeat.

Another Reason report, "Assessing Proposals for Preschool and Kindergarten," concluded that preschool programs often fail to improve student achievement "over the long term," countering a claim Sexton made at the Quadrant 2/Gazette conference.

Instead, authors Darcy Olsen and Lisa Snell found that while preschool enrollment in the U.S. skyrocketed from 16 percent to 66 percent since 1965, “this massive growth in preschool attendance and time spent in the classroom has not resulted in increased student achievement, with U.S. test scores rising only very slightly since 1970, when standardized national testing of fourth, eighth and 12th graders began.”

Objective research indicates that early childhood education provides little lasting benefits beyond the third grade at the latest.

To be fair, Sexton did offer some good ideas.

He supports changing the way Kentucky’s teachers get paid. Currently, teachers are compensated based on how long they work rather than their performance.

At the conference, Sexton said that “improving the quality of instruction for all children of Kentucky” was important. Doing that, he said, would involve “rethinking the whole process” of how the state trains, hires, evaluates, promotes and compensates teachers. Sexton even criticized Kentucky’s single-salary schedule because it “essentially treats everyone the same, so some individuals are not attracted to the system.”

I almost needed a seatbelt to keep me from jumping up and hugging Sexton – until I heard him say: “It’s not necessary that the Legislature tackle (teacher pay) this time because it’s a complex issue.”

So, he wants lawmakers to immediately get after an experimental, expensive and unproven program that replaces family responsibility with government intrusion for providing a child’s early education. Yet, the need to tackle the urgent issue of getting the best teachers into the classroom can wait.

Doesn’t Sexton know that research – the sound, solid kind – recognizes a teacher’s influence as one the most influential forces in a student’s life?

Perhaps Quadrant 2 could offer Sexton some consulting on what really matters when it comes to public schools.

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