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More Bad Math from the Teachers Union

By J. Robert McClure, III

The teachers unions are at it again. Learning that the state's Revenue Estimating Conference believes Florida lawmakers will have an "extra" \$3.2 billion available in 2006, Florida Education Association President Andy Ford didn't pause to credit Governor Bush's limits on spending or his tax-cutting policies.

Those policies kept Florida's economy humming in the wake of the tragedy of 9-11, the recession that followed, high gas prices, and multiple hurricanes that disrupted many Floridians' lives. Indeed, Florida's buoyant economy actually produced more tax revenue while high-tax states' economies were faltering.

Rather than give the Governor his due, Mr. Ford wasted no time in recommending how to spend the money. As he wrote on The Democrat's Op-Ed Page (Nov. 26), "The extra dollars would help pay for increased salaries that would help recruit and retain teachers... the money could also go to help fund the seriously neglected class-size mandates ..."

Surprise! The teachers union suggests spending more money on public education -- particularly for teachers' salaries, a theme echoed four days later in an Op-Ed Page article by teacher Kathy Corder. Never mind that institutions as varied as the Wall Street

Journal and Harvard University have shown clearly that more money in public education does not necessarily equate to better quality. One need only look at public schools in Washington, D.C., where funding has traditionally been the highest in the nation while gains have been perennially at the bottom. Moreover, neither Mr. Ford nor Ms. Corder mentions the possibility of market-based solutions such as differentiated pay scales that reward good teaching not seniority while also addressing shortages in particular subject-matter areas.

To buttress the claim that Florida lags in education spending, Mr. Ford selectively cites a recent LeRoy Collins Institute study, *Tough Choices: Shaping Florida's Future*. Conveniently, however, his column fails to mention the report's warnings that recent revenue windfalls aren't likely to continue, so be careful how you spend them.

Moreover, *Tough Choices* also notes that there are voracious programs competing with education for state dollars. Medicaid, for instance, is projected to grab a disproportionate share of any extra revenue -- unless Gov. Bush's proposed reforms are allowed to work.

Using statistics to deceive is nothing new for the teachers union. The FEA website is fond of noting that Florida

lags in “per capita” spending on education. Of course it does. Per capita spending is total spending divided by total population. In Florida, a much smaller portion of the total population is of school age. Hence, *per capita* school spending lags.

To appreciate the difference, imagine that the Smiths and the Joneses are neighbors. Both families send their kids to a private school whose tuition is \$12,000. Their per-pupil cost is identical. However, the Smiths have two kids, the Joneses four. Result: The Smiths’ education spending *per capita* is \$6,000 while the Joneses’ is \$8,000. So the Joneses are spending 33 percent more *per capita* than the Smiths. Shame on the Smiths!

Comparisons using per pupil spending are less deceptive but not infallible. For one thing, salaries are school budgets’ largest component. Compared to states with a stable or declining school enrollment, a fast-growing state such as Florida will have far more beginning teachers. They’ll be at or near the bottom of a pay scale that – at the union’s insistence – rewards teachers for seniority rather than effectiveness.

State-to-state comparisons also ignore Florida’s lack of a personal income tax. Some states pay teachers more but take back a big chunk of it. Many states also make teachers pay more for health insurance. Those states giveth, but they also taketh away.

These flaws underscore the absurdity of evaluating a system of education by how much it spends. That’s akin to saying that the Oscar for best picture always should go to the film that costs the most to make.

A better system of gauging school quality looks at the results in the classroom. That entails using tools – standardized tests -- that Mr. Ford criticized in his column, which parrots his union’s tired old refrain: Give us more money, and trust us.

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