

Thinking outside the bus

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Predictions for 2009 funding for public education range from disastrous to catastrophic. Budget deficits are threatening the entire K-12 system, with superintendents wringing their hands in search of programs and people to cut.



Sally Butzin

My View

But suppose we looked upon this funding crisis as an opportunity for systemic reform. Today's K-12 system is producing ill-prepared students, with nearly half dropping out before they graduate. Our children deserve better, and our country's future demands better.

The three big-ticket items in a school system's operating budget are transportation, textbooks and personnel. I propose some innovative steps to make major cuts in these areas while improving student outcomes.

Looking at transportation, Leon County spends nearly \$11 million to run its bus fleet five days a week, guzzling gasoline and spewing carbon into the air. Schools are operating five days a week, with students attending for six hours and parents scrambling to find after-school babysitting.

Imagine schools operating four days per week with a full eight-hour school day. Schools would be open the fifth day for

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teacher collaborative curriculum meetings, lesson planning, evaluating student work and staff development. Students would use the fifth day for enrichment activities and projects at school. Community groups such as the Boy Scouts, Girls Scouts, theater troupes, sports teams, civic clubs and those involved with music and the arts would provide services at the school sites on a pay-as-you go basis.

The fifth day would be staggered among schools to spread resources. Sports teams, bands and choirs would have a full day to practice — like summer camps throughout the year. Older students could work on community volunteer projects on the fifth day, as well as internships at local businesses.

School buses would run for the four school days, with students walking on the fifth day from designated drop-off locations to the school activity centers. This “Walking School Bus” program has been initiated in Pennsyl-

vania and Missouri with considerable savings on fuel costs, as well as the added benefit of helping reduce childhood obesity.

A longer school day four days a week will require major re-thinking in how instruction is delivered, or students will get tapped out. Students will benefit from more active hands-on approaches that incorporate technology and project-based learning. Our organization’s Project CHILD and Project TEAMS programs have demonstrated considerable success for elementary- and middle-school students using this type of active learning.

Now you’re asking, “Won’t the teacher unions demand additional pay for teachers to work the fifth day?” Probably they will, but if the money isn’t there it may be preferable to make sacrifices rather than losing jobs altogether.

My hunch is that most teachers will treasure the time to plan and grade papers, which they already do on their own time. And teachers complain now that they never have time for collaborating with their peers during the typical school day.

The second budget-buster is even easier to solve, if you can imagine a school without textbooks. All the information a student needs to know is accessible electronically, without the expense and environmental destruction created by printing and storing books in warehouses, and transporting them across the country.

I own an Amazon Kindle to which I can download almost any book within seconds at \$9.99 (compared with \$20 to \$25 for the printed book), and the Kindle enables me to instantly look up words, change the font size for my aging eyes, and take notes. I can imagine students carrying a single such device that holds all their textbooks, which can be updated quickly.

Finally, major personnel costs can be saved by re-thinking class size. Do smaller class sizes really produce better results, especially in light of the major costs of building more classrooms and hiring more teachers? In a word, no.

There is little research that supports the effectiveness of smaller class sizes, except perhaps in the very early grades.

Our organization took part in a four-year research study conducted by Florida TaxWatch that showed definitively it’s not how many you teach, but how you teach that makes the difference.

The students in our Project CHILD program in grades K-5 outperformed their peers in the standard classrooms despite having 30 in a class, compared with 20 in the standard classrooms. The CHILD teachers took on more students, but they also gained a trained assistant for half a day. Similar staffing on a wide scale would result in major cost savings in salaries and facilities.

I envision the ideal proportion would be classrooms for 35 to 40 students staffed by a master teacher, a trained assistant and a teacher-in-training. This staffing pattern also eliminates the need for substitutes if the teacher is absent. Substitutes are a drag on instructional time, as well as another cost burden for a school district.

The 2009 financial crisis could be a blessing in disguise if bold leaders would have the courage to improve education through innovation.