

The Real Cost of School Mandates

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Michael P. McKeon

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Connecticut residents generally have a well-founded regard for their local and regional public school systems. Many of these schools hew to the highest academic standards, and graduates of the state's public high schools regularly matriculate to the country's most competitive colleges and universities. It was, therefore, an unhappy surprise to see how Connecticut's public schools fared in a recent federal report contrasting the educational experiences of students across the country.

On March 21, 2014, the United States Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, or "OCR," released the results of its Civil Rights Data Collection, or "CRDC," for the 2011-2012 school year. The CRDC is comprised of data that OCR collects biennially from every public school and every public school district in the United States, and OCR is already planning the 2013-2014 and 2015-2016 surveys, each of which will include additional areas of inquiry.

OCR distills the data it collects into a number of categories, including "College and Career Readiness" and "Early Learning." In the former category, the CRDC employs various metrics, such as the percentage of high schools in each state that offered the following Math and Science courses during the 2011-2012 school year: Algebra I, Geometry, Algebra II, Calculus, Biology, Chemistry and Physics. While many in Connecticut would naturally assume that the state had been among the leaders in offering these courses, they would be wrong.

Out of the 50 states, Connecticut ranked as follows: Algebra I – 37th (tied with Nevada, Texas and West Virginia); Geometry – 30th (tied with Arizona, Michigan, South Carolina and South Dakota); Algebra II – 33rd (tied with Alabama and Nevada); Calculus – 10th (tied with Ohio); Biology – 30th (tied with Alabama, Louisiana, Maryland and Michigan); Chemistry – 33rd (tied with Colorado, Illinois, Mississippi and New Mexico); Physics – 20th (tied with Illinois). In a smaller, more geographically proximate comparison, Connecticut ranked last among the six New England states in every course offering.

Similarly dismaying was Connecticut's standing in terms of states with the highest percentage of students enrolled in Gifted and Talented, or "GATE," programs. During the 2011-2012 school year, only 2 percent of Connecticut students were enrolled in GATE programs, which was well below the national average of 7%. In fact, Connecticut ranked 38th in the nation, knotted in a seven-way tie with Delaware, Michigan, Nevada, New York, South Dakota and West Virginia, and it was surpassed by states as diverse as Alabama, which boasted 9% enrollment, Arkansas with 10%, Georgia 11%, Indiana 13%, Maryland 16%, Mississippi 7%, Oklahoma 14%, and Nebraska 12%.

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Connecticut's early education numbers were more variable. According to the CRDC results, 82% of Connecticut's public schools offered preschool programs during the 2011-2012 school year, far above the national average of 60%, and tied with Colorado for 14th in the nation. In terms of districts that offered only full-time preschool programs, however, just 14% of Connecticut schools qualified, below the 30% national average and leaving Connecticut 32nd out of 50 states.

A common reaction to numbers like this is to call for increased funding. There is, however, little evidence of a direct correlation between revenues and results. According to reports prepared by the country's largest teachers' union, the National Education Association, during the 2011-2012 school year, Connecticut ranked 6th in the nation in per-pupil expenditures and 6th in starting teacher salaries. In contrast, Arkansas -- which ranked first to fourth in the nation in terms of percentage of public schools that offered Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Geometry and Algebra II, and had five times the amount of students in GATE programs -- was 32nd in average per-pupil expenditure and 37th in starting teacher salaries during the same school year.

The solution, then, might not be so much the amount that is given to school districts, but the manner in which both the federal and state governments require them to allocate it. Despite some perceptions to the contrary, a public school district's budget is not limitless, but rather its parameters are finite. These allocations are governed not only by the escalating costs of salaries and benefits, but also in large part by the ever-increasing mandates imposed on the nation's school districts by the federal government and, perhaps more inexorably, on Connecticut schools by state legislators that fail to understand that a school day is like a suitcase -- only so much can be put into it until the inclusion of additional items requires the removal of others.

The extent to which Connecticut schools excel despite the strictures placed upon them is nothing short of remarkable. As the CRDC results make abundantly clear, however, the cost of these obligations has a real and quantifiable effect upon the educational resources and opportunities that are available to the state's children.

Michael P. McKeon (mmckeon@pullcom.com) is a partner in the School Law practice at Pullman & Comley, LLC and a contributing author to "Education Law Notes," the firm's blog covering federal and Connecticut developments in school law. For more information on the CRDC and other issues related to school law, visit schoollaw.pullcomblog.com. Reprinted with permission from the April 21, 2014 issue of the Fairfield County Business Journal.

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Michael P. McKeon

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