

With long stagnant scores, enough is enough with same state ed policy

Recent National Association of Educational Progress (NAEP) test results for Colorado confirm what has been obvious for years: our state's students have tested about the same year after year, grade by grade, despite "reform" efforts in place since the first charter school legislation in 1993 and educator accountability in 2010.

The Colorado Department of Education has noted that NAEP test results mirror the state's self-administered CMAS (Colorado Measures of Academic Success) tests. These dry test stats tell the same tale: our children have not made up the difference in losses pre to post COVID or improved significantly since No Child Left Behind or Race to the Top in the 2000s.

To summarize. Colorado - since Governor Roy Romer's administration in the 90s and through Gov. Bill Owens' administration, Gov. Bill Ritter's administration, Gov. John Hickenlooper's administration, and now Governor Jared Polis' administration, as well as through numerous combinations of State Boards of Education, and finally through several leaders of the Colorado Department of Education – has not moved the k-12 achievement needle.

Every year we hear the tut tuts over these achievement scores from pundits. Recently on Colorado Inside Out on public television, a commentator suggested that we need more "school choice." Another said money isn't a solution, but well-compensated teachers are a must. Teachers would welcome some professional compensation. Only money solves that.

Let's survey the changes that have not changed our testing results over the many years. First up is the charter reform movement that promised better schools in every way than traditional district schools. The earliest charters in Colorado were founded in 1994. Stargate Academy in Thornton is an example of what charters are supposed to offer. It's a k-12 Gifted and Talented (GT) school organized when Adams 12, in financial straits, had to cut back its budget for GT students. Stargate's initial funding did not come from state tax dollars.

Now, like all other charters in the state, Stargate receives most of its dollars from taxpayer funds and can add on dollars from other donors. Stargate's student body doesn't represent Adams 12 district population. Its Colorado Measures of Academic Success (CMAS) scores reflect its elite status at 85.5 percent of students meeting/exceeding achievement standards.

Hulstrum k-8, an Adams 12 GT district school, shows similarly high achievement scores at 80.7 percent of students meeting/exceeding standards. Head a little south to Polaris

Elementary, a district run GT school in Denver, and the achievement scores rise to 97.8 percent. Stargate and the district schools run equally great GT programs.

But Stargate's \$17 million in state taxpayer dollars and roughly \$3 million in local dollars invested in a school not operated by the district is a lot of money unavailable to the district to do good things for all its students who, as a whole, hit 56.7 percent achievement levels. The elite choice for some affects education quality for others.

Recently the DPS board voted to close low-income, district-run schools when several adjacent charter schools had no better test results and some had fewer students. The bottom line is that charters, especially Charter School Institute schools, divert money from public schools without sufficient value in achievement results. Current "reforms" have gifted financial protection to charters and reduced flexibility and choice for school districts.

Governors and legislators enjoy dipping into education "reforms." That's the second area where various changes haven't proven their worth. The state's school accountability statute was supposed to weed out bad teachers and super-compensate great teachers. Its effect has been to create a teacher shortage as too many teachers tire of never-ending testing, enforced curricula, insufficient pay, and worry over school safety. Anyone who wants to work in a place where regular shooting drills are the norm raise your hand.

Governor Hickenlooper put his public education legacy into the state's READ Act. It requires schools to identify students with reading deficiencies in first, second, or third grade. Parent-teacher conferences must occur for children with reading deficiencies. Interventions must be based on "scientific evidence." The bill requires programs that, at a minimum, address "phonemic awareness, phonics, and vocabulary development."

Phonics is not how reading is taught at Polaris, the state's highest performing school. Polaris uses "Genre Study" inquiry where students are introduced to literary genres to learn to "think, listen, make claims, and support those claims." This approach allows students "to love reading more and more!" Stargate uses Adroit Learning in elementary school. It's based on learning as "fun, exploring, failing, listening, and speaking and writing intentionally." Phonemic literacy is not highlighted as a reading strategy.

Finally, the state's CMAS tests are a function of education reform. Year after year, CMAS tests take up weeks of teaching time, administration effort, and money – lots of it - that goes into the pockets of private company test makers. Every year, the results are pretty much the same, maybe a quarter inch up or down but never substantially different.

With so much evidence of stasis based on policies set by non-educators for educators, someone in the policy-making arena might say enough is enough. We're waiting.

