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State funding for education down \$198 million since 2009, lawmakers are told

BY BARBARA HOBEROCK World Capitol Bureau
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OKLAHOMA CITY - State appropriations to common education have been reduced by nearly \$200 million since fiscal year 2009, lawmakers were told Wednesday.

As a result, educators are frustrated and feel common education is not a priority for lawmakers, said Jeff Mills, Oklahoma State School Boards Association executive director. He spoke before the Senate Education Committee, which is conducting an interim study on common education funding.

The study was requested by Republican Sens. John Ford of Bartlesville and Jim Halligan of Stillwater.

Mills said the looming education cuts amount to nearly \$122 million - including revenue lost if two state questions on the November ballot are approved, potential federal reductions and unfunded mandates.

State Question 766 would ban the taxation of intangible personal property. It would result in \$42 million in lost revenue for CareerTech and common education, Mills said.

State Question 758 would lower the cap on fair cash valuation increases on homestead and agricultural property to 3 percent from 5 percent. If passed, it jeopardizes growth revenue for schools and career technology centers, Mills said. He put the impact at \$5.6 million.

Nearly 76 percent of the cuts made to the state appropriations budget since 2009 have hit common education, said Steven Crawford, executive director of Cooperative Council for Oklahoma School Administration. And while legislative funding to education is on the decline, lawmakers are passing more mandates and not funding them, he said.

"Reforms are not free, and it is very frustrating," Mills said.

It would take about \$198 million to return to fiscal year 2009 state-funding levels, Crawford said.

From fiscal year 2009 until fiscal year 2013, the state saw an increase of 22,000 students, Mills said.

Ford said other funding hasn't dropped.

"They are talking about just the state formula dollars," Ford said. "They are not talking about the local dollars or the federal dollars that help fund education."

Local funding and federal stimulus dollars to common education has increased, he said.

Daniel G. Thatcher, a policy specialist with the National Conference of State Legislatures, said various studies manipulate numbers on school spending to achieve certain outcomes.

He said based on fiscal year 2010 U.S. Census Bureau data, per pupil spending nationally was \$10,615. Oklahoma ranked 48th out of 51 states, spending \$7,896, he said.

But when the figure was adjusted for comparable wages, the state fared better, spending \$9,390 and ranking 41st out of 51.

When the figure included comparable wages and money the state spends on prekindergarten, Oklahoma ranked 29th out of 51 states, spending \$10,950, Thatcher said.

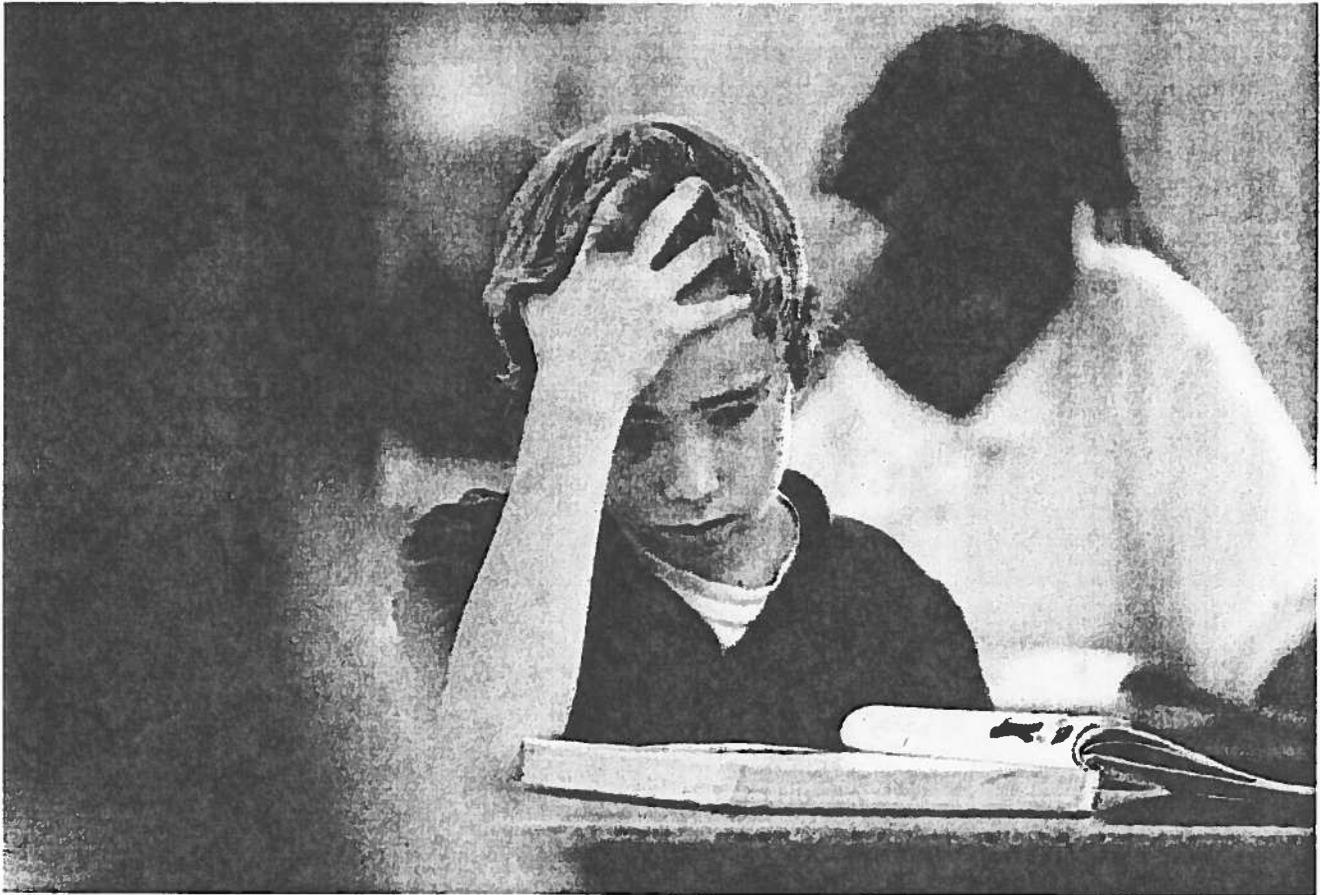
Ford said various studies are all over the map on how much the state spends per pupil.

"We are a state with limited resources and unlimited demands on those resources," Ford said. "Through the legislative process, we have to balance the funds we have available and all the needs for requests for those funds."

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Associated Images:



Sixth-grader Kyler Newberry (center) scratches his head during science class at Remington Elementary School at the beginning of this school year. CORY YOUNG/Tulsa World

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In Oklahoma education debate, funding and reform must be included

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DUE to the recession, state education spending has taken a hit and there are legitimate arguments for increasing appropriations in the coming year. Unfortunately, many of those urging greater funding are the same people who oppose sensible reforms that benefit students, thus hurting their cause.

When it comes to education, some think that only money talks. We believe another metric is more appropriate. Oklahoma's education success should be based not just on the amount of money spent on public schools, *but on improved student outcomes*.

This is why we've supported significant education reforms in recent years, including graduation standards, a grading system for schools, third-grade reading standards and scholarships for students with special needs.

Funding isn't irrelevant, but money alone is not the answer. Cultural change, most importantly fostering an across-the-board atmosphere of high expectations, is crucial. Those who would increase state spending while gutting accountability measures would drag our state backward. We would spend more to do less. The children would suffer.

Consider the dramatic success of Oklahoma's Achieving Classroom Excellence law. First passed in 2005 and taking effect this year, it requires high school seniors to pass four of seven end-of-instruction tests to receive a diploma. Critics derided the law as "unfair" to students who pass classes but not state tests. In reality, the testing requirement ensured grade inflation didn't rob students of a true education. A diploma now reflects learning, not mere attendance.

In November, about 6,400 students were at risk of not graduating because of the standards. Today only 550 — less than 2 percent of seniors — are expected to fall short. And even those 550 still have alternative routes for a diploma.

So, nearly 5,000 students who previously would have been sent unprepared into the adult world were instead challenged to learn and achieve. They succeeded! Those students, *and especially their teachers*, proved that high expectations matter even in tough budget times. Those youth will reap the benefit of their education for the rest of their lives.

Typically, failure is an orphan and success has a thousand fathers, yet there are few school administrators touting the immense success of their teachers and students under the new graduation standards.

Instead, many administrators complain about having legitimate graduation standards at all. Many of those same administrators complain that the new A-F grading system for schools is “complicated” and unfair. Others have sued the parents of children with special needs for using state-funded scholarships.

If those critics succeed, at-risk students will lose educational opportunity, and there’s no guarantee extra money will even go to the classroom. A recent report by The Friedman Foundation notes that non-teachers represented nearly 49 percent of national education jobs in 2007. Just because you’re spending more money on schools doesn’t mean you’re spending more money on student learning.

The education debate must focus on funding *and* reform. The point of a public school system is to offer *every* child educational opportunity. Those who argue Oklahoma schools shouldn’t be expected to produce educated graduates, as critics of graduation tests and other reforms suggest, effectively argue against having a public education system at all.

Those critics are pro-education funding but anti-education results. That’s a recipe for expensive failure, one that Oklahoma policymakers must soundly reject.

Those who argue Oklahoma schools shouldn’t be expected to produce educated graduates, as critics of graduation tests and other reforms suggest, effectively argue against having a public education system at all.

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Educators Take Slam At Schools

Stinging Indictment Is
Brought Against State
Teaching System

World Capital Bureau.

OKLAHOMA CITY, June 5.—A stinging indictment of the state public school system by deans and officials of the University of Oklahoma was brought to light here today by Maj. Eugene Kerr, Muskogee, member of the university's board of regents, who said a survey made by the board revealed that 25 per cent of the high school graduates were not equipped for university work.

The board of regents received this startling information during a recent meeting at the university when deans of the various schools were called in to make suggestions to the board as to how standards at the university might be improved, Major Kerr revealed.

"It was interesting to note," Major Kerr said in discussing the situation, "that the school leaders had but two suggestions to make for improvement of the university. One suggestion was that more money be spent and the other was that students received as freshmen be better equipped."

IN FACE of the legislative action in voting \$12,600,000 for school aid, the principal part of which will be spent each of the next two years for salaries for teachers, the revelation that 25 per cent of the students entering the university can't carry on, means that the common schools of the state will have to greatly improve teaching standards and methods.

"We were told," Major Kerr said, "that 25 per cent of the students couldn't read a common paragraph intelligently. They have no basic foundation in knowledge of fractions. Now what good, for instance, is calculus going to do those people? If they don't know fractions and can't understand what they read, why should the state spend money giving them a higher education?"

Major Kerr said that there were two routes open to the board of regents whereby the so-called "zero load" might be lightened — the regents could refuse to admit this type student as freshmen and provide, instead, a year of elementary work, during which time any lack of proper foundation might be overcome or they could adopt an entrance examination system whereby this class would be eliminated entirely. Both plans are under consideration.

MAJOR KERR is a consistent supporter of a plan whereby the university would become an university by raising standards and at the same time restricting enrollment only to those qualified to successfully pursue a higher education.

He thinks the large number of scholastic failures at the university reflects on the common school system of the state and believes that no student should be forced to attend classes. It is Major Kerr's opinion that those seeking a higher education should be willing to get it.

The fact that the estimate of "zero class" students at the university came from the deans and President W. B. Dizzell, leaves little room for argument that the appropriations for the school could be cut by 25 per cent, due to a decrease in facilities, if this group could be eliminated.

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