

Remarks before the Education Policy Review and Reform Task Force

June 1st, 2015

Good Afternoon Chairwoman Allison and members of the Task Force,

My name is Mike Burgess and I am a teacher and basketball coach finishing my 20th year in public education. Currently, I teach AP United States History and coach basketball at River Bluff High School in Lexington, South Carolina. Today, I would like to take a few minutes of your time to share an idea, that if adopted, would improve teacher effectiveness, increase funding to our classrooms, and streamline educational spending.

The key to accomplishing these three essential tasks rests in an overlooked, oft ignored, portion of the state code that addresses the definition of spending for instruction and instructional support. Since 2010, school districts have been required to spend at least 70% of their general budget on instruction and instructional support. However, under the current definition of spending for instruction and instructional support, the broad, generalized, and vague wording allows for money to be spent on things that are not

remotely close to being “in the classroom”. When one examines what “things” are being classified as “instruction”, most, if not all of our school districts, are falling short of the promise we have made the people of South Carolina with regard to money spent on true instruction and instructional support.

Throughout my 20 years of experience, one of the many lessons I have learned is that for every perceived problem in education there is a program, and for every program there are tens, if not hundreds, of planners, organizers, bean counters, box checkers, and pseudo-intellectual consultants usurping funding that the public believes, and you believe, is going to the classroom or for extracurricular activities. As a result, teachers today are less empowered than ever to make the decisions, with the tools required, needed to educate our children. This “flexible” approach to instructional spending negatively impacts all of our schools, regardless of zip code, and prevents true reform from taking place.

However, if the current definition for instructional spending were narrowed to include only those things, which are directly linked to the classroom or to

extracurricular activities, then more actual dollars, would reach the classroom, thus empowering teachers and leading to a more efficient use of allocated funds through increased academic innovation and achievement. Representative Todd Atwater and I believe that each school district should reorganize their spending into 5 major categories- instruction, instructional support, operations, other commitments, and leadership. At the most basic level, instruction would be confined to expenditures tied to face-to-face teaching. And instructional support connected to school based expenditures that serve as support for students and teachers. The Leadership category would encompass salaries for district wide leadership, other district office staff, research and program evaluators, and expenditures tied to consultants or other special projects. Over a period of years, all school districts would have to adopt a more efficient allocation of state funding to be in compliance with the state code.

The ultimate effect of writing a more focused, detailed definition of instructional spending would be to increase the amount of funding to all schools across our state. By increasing the amount of funding that

makes it to the classroom, we do the one big thing needed to improve teacher effectiveness, which is to empower the classroom teacher. Through increasing the amount of true funding that reaches the classroom we can: reduce class sizes, update textbooks, facilitate improved individualized teacher training and support, raise teacher pay, and reduce the amount of bureaucratic mandates and initiatives that limit teacher autonomy and effectiveness.

When our teachers have the power, tools, and training, the lives and futures of all of the children of our state are dramatically improved through a high quality education. In the final analysis, the job of “raising up our schools” will be in the hands of teachers, not the planners and organizers. If given the funding, autonomy, and support established by redefining instructional spending in our state code, our teachers can create a better day and a brighter future for the children of our state. Thank you.

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