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THE STEELE COMMISSION REPORT: A LOST OPPORTUNITY TO DEBATE VOUCHERS IN MARYLAND

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On September 14, 2005, the Governor's Commission on Quality Education in Maryland, dubbed the "Steele Commission" because of its chairman, Lt. Gov. Michael S. Steele, released its final report—the culmination of a year-long investigation of Maryland's K–12 public schools. While there are a number of both positive and troubling recommendations, the report fails to even mention school vouchers as a way to improve the educational prospects of children trapped in too many failing Maryland schools. This gross oversight represents a lost opportunity to have a broad-based voucher debate in the state, at a time when similar debates are taking place around the nation and successful voucher programs are in place.

Nevertheless, the report does have a number of positive recommendations. Specifically, the Steele Commission recommends the following policy changes be enacted:

- **Charter School Reform**
Maryland's charter school law, widely cited as one of the worst in America, should be reformed to allow for more chartering authorities and fewer regulations of the schools themselves.
- **Flexible Teacher Pay**
Districts should have flexibility outside of the standard compensation 'grid' to pay teachers in hard-to-fill specialties, such as math, science, and special education. Additionally, teachers

should be eligible for merit pay bonuses for high performance, like many top school administrators are eligible to receive.

- **Simplified Alternative Certification**
Another way to place more good teachers into classrooms, especially in hard-to-fill specialties, is to have streamlined paths to certification.
- **A Renewed Focus on Helping Students Who Fall Behind**
Schools should take additional steps to aid students who are not learning the most basic subjects, such as math and reading.
- **Value-Added Testing**
Maryland's testing system should focus on how well the individual student is performing in core subjects, not on how well the school building is performing. To that end, value-added testing is a way to identify which students are falling behind, allowing teachers to formulate individualized plans to remediate such deficiencies quickly.

There are also some recommendations that are questionable:

- **Schools as Comprehensive Social Service Providers**
Maryland's educational system should focus on its 'core competency' of educating the public, rather than increase the number of broader social services.

- **Increased Bureaucracy for Early Childhood Education**

The proposed accountability system for early child education and/or child care providers would likely increase the cost of such programs to parents and decrease the number of children enrolled. Such an action might be a prelude to mandatory, taxpayer-funded pre-kindergarten.

- **College Awareness**

The state should focus resources on making sure that every high school graduate has the necessary skills to perform well in business, vocational training, or higher education, rather than promote college via public service announcements.

BACKGROUND

On September 27, 2004, Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich, Jr. signed an executive order establishing the Governor's Commission on Quality Education in Maryland. The Commission, chaired by Lt. Gov. Michael S. Steele, had a number of areas of education that the commission members were charged to review. These included: "teacher quality, principal preparation, special education, community involvement, business partnerships, school choice, curriculum models, school readiness for children, literacy, and preparation for postsecondary education and careers."¹

Over the course of nearly a year, the 30-member Steele Commission traveled the state and held public hearings on these major education topics. On September 14, 2005, the final report, which included 30 recommendations to the governor, was released in Annapolis. Some of these recommendations involve reforming different aspects of the educational system, such as the charter school law, teacher pensions, or teacher/administrator preparation programs. Others suggest a need for more time to study particular segments of the state's education system, such as math, science, and technology.

Because the report will be used in education policy discussions over forthcoming years, Gov. Ehrlich and Lt. Gov. Steele should be commended for establishing the Commission and discussing the various controversial issues in education today.

A LOST OPPORTUNITY ON SCHOOL VOUCHERS

While the education topics discussed by the Steele Commission's final report are varied and representative of the many challenges facing education in Maryland today, there is a single issue that was given short shrift: school vouchers. Although the express purpose of the Commission was to review school choice (among others, as noted above), early on, the governor indicated to the media that school vouchers would not be a topic of interest, deeming it "too divisive" for the state at this time.²

This position is unfortunate and probably untrue. As a matter of public policy in many areas in the United States, school vouchers have entered the mainstream as a viable education reform option. School voucher programs are now in existence, in one form or another, in six states and, most recent, in Washington, D.C. via the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program. These programs all provide additional educational opportunities for local youth who would not otherwise have such school choice options. Also, in various other states, such as Arizona, voucher bills have been debated in the recent past.

More locally, though, the Maryland state legislature appears to be willing to engage in more of a debate over school choice options, if the recent past is a good indicator. In 2003, the governor signed the first charter school bill. Last session, Del. Joseph C. Boeteler III (R-Baltimore County) and a bipartisan group of legislators sponsored a family education tax credit bill (HB 998). These recent developments show willingness to debate school choice issues generally in Maryland.

Because the voucher idea was off the table before the Steele Commission even began its work, an opportunity was lost to discuss and debate the merits of all of the viable school reform options available to the state. Even if the Steele Commission held hearings on vouchers and based on those hearings and public debates the Commission decided against recommending vouchers to the governor, there should have at least been a discussion of why in the final report.

1. A copy of Gov. Ehrlich's executive order (#01.01.2004.52) may be found in the Steele Commission's final report, p. 44-46, available at www.gov.state.md.us/GCQE/GCQE-FINAL-LO.pdf (accessed September 23, 2005).
2. "Ehrlich Administration Not Pushing for School Vouchers," Associated Press, September 28, 2004, available at www.news8.net/news/stories/0904/176262.html (accessed September 23, 2005).

School vouchers are important to the overall school reform agenda because of the wide body of evidence indicating their effectiveness. Children who are awarded vouchers are more likely to perform better in school over time and usually for a lower cost than if they were in traditional public schools.³ Additionally, research indicates that the “competitive effect” of vouchers tends to improve student achievement for the children who remain in the traditional public schools.⁴

Previously, Dan Lips of the Maryland Public Policy Institute released a detailed report of how a school voucher system would work for Baltimore, including such important aspects as funding, estimated participation, and program evaluation.⁵ This report shows that vouchers can work in Baltimore City, and a similar plan could be established for the state more generally.

Therefore, there is little reason for the Steele Commission to ignore vouchers as it did, and in doing so, the state lost a unique opportunity to engage this subject in an overall reform strategy in the state.

PROMISING RECOMMENDATIONS IN THE STEELE COMMISSION REPORT

Although the voucher issue remains a gross oversight of the Steele Commission, there are a variety of recommendations that show significant promise, and should be pursued either administratively or legislatively. Chief among them are the following:

Recommendation 1: “Develop a new compensation system for teachers and principals.”

Currently, most teachers are paid via a standard salary ‘grid’ that compensates all teachers based on seniority and education, without regard to how well they teach or the relative demand for each subject. Therefore, a successful high school physics teacher (in a relatively hard-to-fill position) generally earns the same as a third grade elementary teacher (in an easier-to-fill position) in a given school district.

Compensation should instead focus on merit pay and competitive/flexible salary mechanisms that would compensate high-demand/high-shortage teachers more than low-demand teachers. Generally speaking, this practice is seen in some areas of education already, just not among public school (K–12) teachers and principals. For example, public school superintendents enjoy competitive salaries that are based on the marketplace. Also, school superintendents may be eligible for merit pay bonuses, based on performance measures. For example, Baltimore City Superintendent Bonnie S. Copeland’s current contract will yield her an additional \$10,000 for increases in student achievement, a bonus that rank-and-file teachers do not have the opportunity to earn.⁶

Some school districts, such as Anne Arundel county schools, have made some strides in flexible compensation arrangements, which were noted by Robert Kemmery, the Steele Commission’s executive director.⁷

Flexibility in salary decisions is already largely present at Maryland’s colleges and universities. The official policy of the University of Maryland, for example, allows for competitive pay when there is

3. These benefits of vouchers are described in Kirk A. Johnson, Ph.D., “Top Five Myths Of School Vouchers And Why They Should Not Impede Education Reform In Maryland,” *Maryland Policy Report* No. 2005-03, available at www.mdpolicy.org/research/education/policyreport2005-3.pdf.
4. Caroline Hoxby, “Rising Tide,” *Education Next*, Winter 2001, available at www.educationnext.org/20014/68.html (accessed September 23, 2005).
5. Dan Lips, “A School Voucher Program for Baltimore City,” Maryland Public Policy Institute and the Milton and Rose Friedman Foundation, 2005, available at www.mdpolicy.org/research/education/BaltimoreVoucherStudy.pdf.
6. Sara Neufeld, “With Bonus, Copeland Could Earn \$300,000,” *Baltimore Sun*, August 18, 2005, available at www.baltimore-sun.com/news/education/bal-te.md.copeland18aug18,1,1313319.story?coll=bal-local-headlines (accessed September 23, 2005).
7. Daniel de Vise, “Lt. Governor Releases Guidelines for Md. Schools,” *Washington Post*, September 15, 2005, available at www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/14/AR2005091402573_pf.html (accessed September 23, 2005).

“a demonstrated and documented inability to attract a pool of qualified candidates.”⁸ Not surprisingly, according to Salary.com, an associate professor of economics in Maryland (in a relatively high-demand occupation) is paid about 20 percent more than an associate professor of sociology (in a lower-demand occupation).

Recommendation 7: “Strengthen Maryland’s Public Charter School Law and State Board of Education regulations.”

The most important form of school choice currently established in Maryland today is embodied in charter schools. Charter schools are public schools that are allowed to provide innovative educational opportunities, free of some of the regulations typically found in the traditional public schools.

Recently, the charter school law has been found deficient in a number of areas, and the Steele Commission has rightly determined that the charter law is sorely in need of reform. Currently, potential charter school operators must apply to local school boards for their charter, which is a lengthy and cumbersome process. Additionally, Maryland’s charter law is weak and puts heavy regulations on charter operators relative to other states, which, as the Steele Commission correctly noted, “constrict operation, impose administrative burdens, and stifle creativity.”⁹

The Steele Commission is correct that the charter schools law should be changed to allow multiple chartering authorizers, not just school districts, and to decrease the regulations on charter schools so that they do not need to apply for a waiver for the flexibility and autonomy that they should have in the first place. At no time, however, should charter schools be released from the audit or student testing requirements. Additionally, charter schools

should be required to abide by non-discrimination laws and health/safety regulations.

Recommendation 11: “Increase the pool of qualified candidates by expanding the process of certification for teachers and principals.”

If Maryland wants to adequately staff classrooms as the current cohort of baby boomer teachers retires, the state will have to establish better mechanisms to get qualified individuals into the classroom. Many of these individuals will be mid-career professionals or others who have not taken the standard university education school pedagogy classes. Maryland needs an improved way to assure that quality teachers get into the classroom via alternative routes. These alternative routes should focus on mentoring, which places a priority in getting these new teachers practical, on-the-job experience teaching children.

Recommendation 25: “Focus on value-added measurement.”

Value-added testing is key in assessing if our children are really getting a year’s worth of education in a year’s time. Maryland’s accountability system should be focused on student achievement, not on school building achievement. This shift in focus will allow an easier realization of other recommendations, such as Recommendation 9—dealing with literacy/mathematics recovery for those children who have fallen behind. Such a system will be able to better identify these students who need extra help. Such testing should focus on a fall/spring schedule, wherein individual students can be tracked, even if they move from one part of the state to the other.¹⁰ Additionally, implementation of this recommendation is a central part of the data collection system envisioned by Recommendation 24, on utilizing best practices.

8. For more on this policy see 233.0 VII-9.30, “Policy on Salary Upon Entry into UMS Service,” available at www.usmh.usmd.edu/Leadership/BoardOfRegents/Bylaws/SectionVII/VII930.html (accessed September 23, 2005).

9. Steele Commission Report, p. 23.

10. Naturally, state accountability systems cannot adequately track students who move out-of-state, but centralized state testing requirements and advances in student database management now allow for such individualized tracking both cheaply and easily.

Recommendation 16: “Empower principals.”

In the book *Getting Results*, Megan Farnsworth notes how strong principals can organize their local resources at a school site level, and effectively marshal them to their highest levels of performance,¹¹ while school districts (correctly) exercise their statutory authority over broad school policy issues, including budgets, compensation, and other personnel policies. Effective principals that lead a teaching team that is effective at raising student achievement should be given additional flexibility in terms of their authority to manage the day-to-day aspects of their schools.

QUESTIONABLE RECOMMENDATIONS IN THE STEELE COMMISSION REPORT**Recommendation 8: “Create a seamless continuum of early childhood education services.”**

Maryland’s schools should be focused on educating young children in reading, writing, math, science, and other core subjects. They should not attempt all manner of other social services, such as child care, home visits, and health care, as this recommendation suggests. In business parlance, the public schools should focus on their ‘core competencies’ of educating the next generation of Marylanders.

Additionally, this recommendation could be construed as advocating for mandatory pre-kindergarten programs, which are unnecessary and duplicative of other policies. For example, low-income parents typically have access to federal head start funds for preschool education, and most middle- and upper-class parents send their children to some form of preschool. The state mandated all-day Kindergarten during the 2002 session.¹² Since there have already been mandates placed on early childhood education, the state does not need further mandates.

Recommendation 19: “Challenge business, education, parent, community, and faith-based organizations to support statewide initiatives that improve college awareness.”

Rather than funding public service announcements on why high schoolers should think about college, our schools should be better preparing graduates for success in college. Too many of Maryland’s high school graduates are unprepared for the rigors of college life once they reach college, as evidenced by the state’s generally lackluster high school test scores. A high school diploma should mean that a student has the necessary skills to succeed in either the job market or college. While it is encouraging that certain other recommendations seek to increase achievement in this way, this particular recommendation does little to forward that.

In short, this recommendation is little more than a gimmick designed to do the job that school-based guidance counselors have done in past years.

CONCLUSION

The Governor’s Commission on Quality Education in Maryland has forwarded a broad range of recommendations designed to improve education for future generations of Marylanders. On balance, most of these recommendations take the state into the right direction in terms of educational policy. Maryland can and should conduct major reforms of its teacher/principal compensation system, charter school law, and student assessment system, among others. The state, however, should resist the temptation to assign more social services responsibilities to the schools. The schools should focus on educating children in the classroom.

That said, the lack of a debate within the Steele Commission on the topic of school vouchers is deeply troubling. The state can and should have a spirited debate on this important issue, which has been used to provide more children, particularly poor and minority children, with education opportunities that they would not have had otherwise.

If nothing else, the Steele Commission should be applauded for resisting the temptation to recommend increasing money for schools. The governor

11. Megan Farnsworth, *Getting Results: High-Performing, Low-Income Schools in Maryland* (Germantown, MD: Maryland Public Policy Institute, 2004).

12. “State Statutes Regarding Kindergarten,” Education Commission of the States, June 2004, available at www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/49/99/4999.htm (accessed October 3, 2005).

himself said it best: “The philosophical debate in Maryland concerning funding is over...This commission is not about if we’re going to spend the dollars, but how are the dollars going to be spent.”¹³ In this, Gov. Ehrlich correctly recognizes that increasing dollars going to education will not result in better outcomes, but reorganizing education budget spending will.

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13. Daniel de Vise, “Lt. Governor Releases Guidelines for Md. Schools,” *Washington Post*, September 15, 2005, available at www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/14/AR2005091402573_pf.html (accessed September 29, 2005).