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Places where schools can save money make room for innovations

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Delaware state government spends a third of its money on public education. That's tax money, of course, with even more coming from local district property taxes. So it's become a hard sell to argue that schools need even more resources to do right by students.

Delaware now has an ambitious and insightful overview of where opportunities exist to save money in the school system -- with the equally important premise that funds could be reallocated to instructional improvement from preschool to high school.

The LEAD Committee was organized by Gov. Minner last summer to identify spending efficiencies, and the group has done an impressive job with the Boston Consulting Group. LEAD Chairman Marvin "Skip" Schoenhals, the WSFS Bank president, also heads the Vision 2015 education improvement campaign and is up front about how reallocating saved dollars is the way to pay for new programs.

Realistically, the potential \$86 million to \$158 million that might come out of bus transportation, purchasing and administrative functions, personnel benefits management, energy and construction spending is another kind of wish list. Each aspect challenges constituents invested in keeping things the way they are, from contractors to private-school parents, autonomous school district managers and unionized employees.

The Legislature will hear from everybody with a stake in the status quo. The LEAD group is politically astute enough to know this, and to caution against mandates that add to schools' burdens.

That's where the accumulated data prove persuasive. Some of the easier options are pooled purchasing of natural gas, as is already done for electricity, and better energy management. Coordinated building construction design and purchasing also have precedents locally.

The LEAD suggestions bravely raise two especially controversial expenditures: the prevailing wage requirement on building projects, and school employee benefits. Several states exempt schools from prevailing wages in construction and save significantly. But that would start a dogfight here.

If handled carefully, there could be receptivity to adapting employee benefits from the generous uniformity of the statewide plan to more choices suited to individual preferences and needs. That's common in companies, and satisfies workers while controlling costs. As it is, Delaware spends 40 percent of education salaries on benefits, compared to the national average of 31 percent.

Nationally, teacher unions themselves are finding that a younger generation of recruits responds to professional-style compensation plans rather than lock-step schedules.

The opportunities LEAD found invite discussion. Even a portion of these ideas represents significant money to get beyond saying "no" to making school innovations possible.

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