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## How about a smarter idea for Del. budget?

By *H. RAYE JONES AVERY and WILLIAM H. WILLIS*

Facing the state's most serious budget crunch in recent history, Delaware's legislators understand that they'll need to do more than cut spending and find new sources of revenue.

They'll also have to think hard about what our government ought to be doing - and how it should do it. Then, and only then, does it make sense to figure out how to stretch scarce dollars to pay for essential priorities.

As The News Journal observed a couple of weeks ago, ("A Few Tweaks Won't Change Government," May 2), rethinking government on that scale is a valuable thing to do but it also takes time --- time that is running out on the General Assembly, which needs to get the 2009 state budget finalized by June 30. The Joint Finance Committee recently identified \$28.9 million in planned cuts to the education budget, but is still looking for another million.

As The News Journal also noted, ("Education cutbacks stuck to the principle of classroom essentials," May 23) the JFC's decisions focused on spending more sensibly and not eliminating staff or other "classroom essentials."

This was exactly the focus of the Leadership for Educational Achievement in Delaware (LEAD) Committee, which has provided recommendations to where the total \$30 million - and a great deal more - can be trimmed from the education budget. The LEAD Committee, on which we are honored to serve, recommends smarter spending that would not result in the loss of a single teacher's job or anything else that helps our students learn.

With these tools on how to "spend smarter," paired with goals of Vision 2015, the education department has the clear goal of world-class schools for every Delaware student - along with a nationally-recognized plan to help set and implement priority reforms.

It would be nice to say that our committee had a crystal ball forecasting a budget crisis ahead.

In fact, though, when Gov. Minner established LEAD last summer, our charge was to find cost inefficiencies within the current system that would yield enough dollars to fund some key Vision 2015 priorities --- such as early childhood education, more professional development for teachers, and the Vision Network of districts and schools.

Knowing that Delaware ranks 8th nationally in public education spending and just 27th in student performance, we expected to find plenty of dollars in the current budget that weren't being spent effectively.

This turned out to be true. In our report delivered in January, we outlined potential cost savings of nearly \$160 million a year - about 10 percent of the education budget-- in more than a dozen areas that don't directly affect classroom learning.

In approaching our work, we adopted a rigorous methodology, calling on the aid of The Boston Consulting Group (BCG), which also helped with Vision 2015. Supported entirely by private funding

and with the full cooperation of DOE, BCG analyzed Delaware's education spending and benchmarked the results to best practices around the world. We believe the result is an objective and intellectually honest set of recommendations that offer us a chance to put our hard-earned dollars where they matter most for educating our children.

Five months after we submitted our recommendations, they now meet a somewhat different need. It's no longer just about finding the dollars required to support a plan for excellence; it's about making cuts to the state's education spending without doing permanent harm to our schools. The budget crisis is forcing us to develop better long-term solutions.

For this purpose, too, the LEAD recommendations offer a sensible and well-thought-out plan: Look first to those areas where old ways of doing business have become costly and inefficient. Within the Committee's many recommendations, three immediate cost efficiencies could recoup close to \$15 million in the coming year alone.

- **Purchasing:** Delaware could save \$4 million in FY09 by designing a coordinated education purchasing system, while also giving local vendors a fair shake at the competition.
- **Transportation:** Delaware could save more than \$7 million in FY09 by keeping school buses in service a few years longer (remaining well within national safety standards), which the JFC has recommended, and eliminating transportation subsidies to private school students.
- **Energy:** Delaware could save up to \$3.5 million in FY09 alone by following best practice standards for energy management and pooling purchases of natural gas.

By spending smarter in just these three areas, legislators could offset half the mandated cuts required this coming year and, over time, direct these and tens of millions of dollars more to classroom programs that move Delaware closer to realizing Vision 2015.

Naturally, not all the \$160 million in savings identified in our report will be quite so straightforward. Many of the recommendations will require much harder choices, along with a serious commitment to make needed and lasting changes within the system. Still, the LEAD recommendations give lawmakers a detailed guide to potential cost efficiencies, backed up by sound research.

Even more important, the LEAD report ties its recommendations back to the priorities of Vision 2015. This means that DOE -- alone among the state's government agencies -- is in a position to go forward based on a well-thought-out plan, which is precisely the kind of rethinking that lawmakers have said that they need.

Meanwhile, we invite Delaware residents to learn more about the LEAD recommendations.

A summary is available at [www.doe.k12.de.us/info/reports/lead.shtml](http://www.doe.k12.de.us/info/reports/lead.shtml).

We also encourage our lawmakers to follow the spirit as well as the letter of the recommendations and take every opportunity to look for cost savings above and beyond the \$30 million cuts that they can reinvest in Delaware students. It's everyone's job to make sure that keeping our state financially healthy doesn't come at the cost of our children's future.

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