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Flawed Foundation:

OSD Relies on Standardized Tests, Outdated Federal Law and Ignores Poverty Factors

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Voters go to the polls this November to decide whether the Georgia Constitution should be amended to allow Gov. Nathan Deal's office to create the Opportunity School District (OSD). This state takeover of struggling, high poverty schools uses scores from the College and Career Readiness Performance Index (CCRPI) to justify the power grab. The CCRPI derives its scores primarily from student performance on standardized tests. If you've been paying attention the past couple of years – and especially the past few months – Georgia's experience with standardized testing administration gains low marks for reliability. And, low test scores and "failing" schools more clearly reflect the lack of resources in their communities and the poverty level of students and families than the effort of educators.

The Department of Education waived the use of this spring's Milestones tests in grades 3, 5 and 8 for student promotion and retention decisions by local districts. Districts were also given the flexibility whether to retest students who performed poorly on the tests. Most districts reported they would not take the time or make the effort to retest. Additionally, due to the adoption of Milestones for the 2014-2015 school year and the problems with the 2015-2016 test administration, scores will not be used to produce a Teacher Effectiveness Measure (TEM) or Leader Effectiveness Measure score for educator evaluations under TKES or LKES until at least the 2019-2020 school year. One has to wonder if the scores cannot be used for student promotion and retention decisions or for educator evaluations, then how can they possibly be valid and reliable enough to seize control of schools from a community and locally elected school board.

Decisions founded in results from standardized test scores increasingly are coming under scrutiny. Test scores – long regarded as objective measures – are losing their status as the cornerstone measurement for all things in education. The problems with testing are many. While many consider issues raised by educators or advocacy groups as "whining" to avoid accountability, the groundswell of testing opt-out proponents from students and parents has gained traction. The growing movement is based on the negative effects of high stakes testing on students, their instruction and the educators who teach them. The voices aligned against high stakes testing are myriad and diverse. The outcry during the 2016 legislative session came from

students, parents, the Georgia PTA, educators and every major education organization in Georgia.

Georgia's legislators heard the concerns loud and clear. In unusual bipartisan cooperation the General Assembly unanimously passed SB 364 which significantly reduced the use of standardized tests in educator evaluations and dropped the requirement of using Student Learning Objectives (SLOs) for teachers of non-tested grades and content. Another bill that specifically offered testing opt-out provisions made it to the governor's desk where it was vetoed.

The desire to further diminish the reliance of important decisions for students, schools, educators and districts and the governor's vetoes of bills that advanced that cause will fuel even stronger reaction and advocacy in the 2017 session.

The CCRPI was written as a waiver to allow the state Department of Education and Georgia's schools relief from the overly burdensome and unrealistic expectations of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Congress finally agreed in December to a rewrite of NCLB called the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which provided extensive relief to the most onerous requirements for testing and educator evaluation tied to testing. CCRPI is based on old federal law and the state will either adjust to meet ESSA or be scrapped and new state guidelines will be written specifically for ESSA. Yet, Georgians will be asked to amend the Constitution to allow the state to take over local schools based on a potentially outdated achievement matrix and unreliable test data.

Even if you are willing to accept that the tests are reliable indicators of performance and the CCRPI is the best measure of effectiveness, one still has to question why the state needs yet another method to control local schools. The state Department of Education already possesses the power to force change on under-performing schools that are designated as focus or priority schools. So, if the state already has a lever to effect change in these schools from a constitutionally empowered agency with an elected leader (the Georgia Department of Education), why does another branch of government seek to override it? Why would a governor want to wrest control from local boards of education and communities? It's a motivation as old as mankind: power, control and money.

The governor's office through the OSD superintendent will have the power to take over schools, facilities and resources and will have the ability to redirect those resources to for-profit corporations to operate the schools as charters without all of the overhead and capital costs that the local board must fund. A superintendent appointed by the governor and managing up to 100 schools from an office in Atlanta cannot be expected to do any better in turning these schools around than the experienced educators who are on site and working with teams from the district and school to analyze the issues and determine strategic interventions.

That's especially true if nothing is done to address community issues that leave children and families without the resources or ability to make education a priority. And, contrary to the narrative from OSD proponents, a close examination of the CCRPI data from 2012 to 2014 shows that the OSD-eligible schools as a group showed greater student growth during that three-year period than their "high achieving" counterparts and greater growth than many of the other schools within the state. OSD-eligible schools are almost entirely comprised of poor, minority students: more than 90 percent participate in the free and reduced lunch program and 95 percent

are either black or Hispanic. In contrast, the high achieving schools have less than a third of students on free and reduced lunch and only about 25 percent are black or Hispanic. So, again, as I say to audiences across our state, schools that many consider to be low achieving according to a benchmark are only reflective of the economic and resource challenges of their communities. And, further, educators in these schools are doing incredible work with students who are making significant progress from where they begin but still have far to go. Rather than punish the educators doing the hard work in difficult-to-teach circumstances, our state should do all it can to boost these schools and their communities in partnership with local boards of education instead of through takeover.

The idea of an Opportunity School District only makes sense when viewed from the “opportunities” it provides those who will benefit from wresting power and resources from local communities. It certainly makes no sense for children, communities, educators or local boards of education.

Vote NO on OSD in November.

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