

OFFICE FOR EDUCATION POLICY

AN INTERVIEW WITH LAWRENCE PICUS

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OEP: What was your general sense of how the General Assembly did in terms of achieving adequacy? Do you think they met the bar they set out to meet?

LP: Yes, I think they did meet the bar they set out to meet. They've worked very hard in Arkansas to develop a level of funding that will provide roughly that level of resources in every school. And I think it definitely deserves to be congratulated for not only doing it in 2003 and 2004, but then reviewing it and carefully looking at it again and making adjustments after they've had some experience in looking at those data. So, I think that they should feel good about what they've done, and it's also addressed over time the difficult issue of finding revenue to make that happen. And, that's often, in the legislative bodies, the hardest problem of all.

OEP: Do you think it's a reasonable role for the state Supreme Court to take the lead in defining adequacy?

LP: Well, I'm not clear that the court took the lead. I see taking a lead as actually saying this is what adequacy is. And I think the Supreme Court in Arkansas wrestles with the problem of whether to get involved in this issue. And the Arkansas court, in a series of rulings, provided some guidance as to

what it would consider acceptable, and that eventually accepted what the legislature offered or what the legislature passed. So, I don't know so much that they took the lead; so much as they maintained oversight of the case until they thought that the opportunity for adequacy had been put in place. It's not my place to tell court what it ought and ought not to do. But, I think Arkansas wrestles a lot with the problem of adjudicating across the important issues versus telling other branches of government what they have to do.

OEP: How well did the effort made by the General Assembly mesh with the recommendations laid out in your 2006 report?

LP: My take is that it comes pretty close. I think the one thing that may be in our 2006 report that wasn't fully funded were some of the recommendations for struggling students. That is, the evidence-based model is for development as sort of a four level approach to struggling students. It starts with teachers as tutors. It also suggests resources for extended day, for summer school, and for some additional pupil support personnel. And, we're pretty clear that you don't necessarily need to do all four all at once, that it might make some sense to provide funding to enable districts to have some combination of some of those and if that doesn't work, then perhaps add on later. I don't believe the funding model covered all four of those areas, but it certainly provided additional resources and, as I recall, they still continue to provide additional, more intensive resources as a percentage of free and reduced price lunch or instance of national school lunch children increases in Arkansas. My view is that they've put in place a very good, strong system, and like anything; it requires continual monitoring and maintenance and evaluation to see how successful it is, and if it's not, finding what the problems are and determine what's the appropriate approach to resolving those problems at the time.

OEP: *What does the state need to do to continually maintain educational adequacy?*

LP: I think the first one is to develop a system of support for strong curriculum so that across the state all children have access to instructional programs designed to meet the state's performance standards. I think we're limited to that and at least as important is to ensure that there are high quality teachers available to teach to that curriculum. And I think that the state needs an accountability, you know you have a testing system, and you need to use these systems of testing and accountability system that's in place to measure students success and understand what, where students are and where students are not succeeding, and try to get some understanding when they're not succeeding, of what the problems are. And then, with those data, you can design, I think, you can come back and put together a funding and management system to resolve any issues that come up. Our sort of thought is that the resources that are there should enable most schools to make substantial improvements in student's performance over the next 3 to 4 to 5 years. That is, we're not going to see everything happen next year. But, I see this as a process of continuous evaluation and measurement of student learning and view a process to provide the resources that'll meet those students' needs. And then you'd continue to look back and look at the model and if they are providing resources they need. If not, then I suspect the first question you need to ask is; What are districts doing with the resources and are there better ways to use the existing resources in words of improving student learning? And then ask the question; Do we have enough money in the system or not? But, at this point, I automatically assume the problem is that there's not enough money. I'd try to understand why. For example, we still don't have the quality of teachers we want to have; whether the teacher's salary is still a concern or not. Teachers in Arkansas are pretty well paid regionally these days. If low income children are not learning, what is it about that? Do they not have access to high quality teachers, are there just not enough resources to provide the small class sizes and the strategies for struggling students that they need? I would think in Arkansas there are, but we weren't asked those questions. What else is going on there that's leading these places where we're not seeing success and think about what's needed to help out there.

OEP: *As you know, there are strident critics of adequacy studies, and one of the points they make is that the choices, with respect to educational spending, are simply political decisions. How do you respond to that?*

LP: I think that choices of educational spending, which are made by legislative bodies, are always in one way, shape, or form going to be political decisions. That's how our system works. That's not a bad thing in itself, if it's an informed political decision. In Arkansas, a series of events converged and the legislature needed to act so it took advice and adapted it to the state's specific conditions or circumstances, and implemented a model, and now I think we'll watch it. I think that what they've done makes Arkansas one of the true leaders of this country. In terms of designing systems that provide resources focused on student learning. And now we need a little bit of time to see if it will actually happen. I read the legislature as having the commitment and desire to work hard to keep this commitment for strong schools and now it's making sure those resources are well used where it's focused on, focusing on student achievement. So, in all, in some regards, it happens in a political environment so it's a political decision. But, it's just like some other decisions we make.

OEP: *How unique was your adequacy study in Arkansas compared to Washington or other states? Is there something intrinsically different about Arkansas or do you find some of the same problems in other places that you've studied that you did in Arkansas?*

LP: There are, by my count, four states in the country right now that have actually implemented school funding plans based on the outcome of an adequacy study. And the four states are one, Arkansas, which I think is the shining example at this point about that. And they used the evidence based model, they implemented a plan, and the court in *Lake View* has said at the present time this meets the constitutional standards. That is a huge, huge step and something that I think everybody in the state of Arkansas needs to be very proud of. The other state that used the evidence based model is Wyoming. We calibrated their model for them two years ago and they've implemented that model

beginning with the 2006-2007 school year. What I do know in Wyoming is that the outer or future for continued litigation by the school district against the state seems to have dramatically declined, there's a very different feeling out there about agreement and working together and finding out what's needed and building and continuing to evaluate the model in a cooperative way so that you essentially have a court ruling on the older model that says it's probably ok in most areas. Now there are two other states that have implemented things based on adequacy studies. One is Maryland, which did a number of studies mostly around special judgment and the legislature, well with the federal lawsuits and actual lawsuits that the whole state implemented; made a commitment, over five years and spent many billions of dollars more and they are entering this year, the fifth year of that commitment that has succeeded in dramatically allocating additional resources for children across that state. And they feel successfully. The fourth state is Kansas, who with a judge who, put a heavy ruling on, at least as a heavy ruling that Arkansas has about how you must fund adequacy, and the legislative post audit committee came up with a number. They implemented it for the 2006-2007 school year, and they have a commitment to continue that for the following school year. Their legislative prior picks feel very different than Arkansas's. And in Arkansas I see a type of cooperation and we're going to move this forward and make this happen and I see less of that in Kansas. So, Arkansas is unique in that it's as much at the forefront in resolving these adequacy issues as any state in the country, and doing it well. That is, the focus isn't on the court suit anymore. The focus is on the school districts educating children which where this always needs to be is on the children.

One of the criticisms of the evidence-based report is that it looks similar across all the states. Because the evidence-based model is based on existing research on what works for the school, it shouldn't surprise anybody that if you read the research and make a series of choices of what studies to look at, that the initial recommendations of what a system ought to look like would be the same. Schools have then adjusted, with any state, to meet the specific educational, political, and historical context of the state, as well as, the state's individual performance standards for students. So, you see some variation,

and of course we're sensitive enough to see the important and professional judgment along the way in these states. But the difference is, in both Wyoming and Arkansas; we work directly with the legislative committee charged with recommending the solution to the problem to the legislature. So it's a very interactive process with a legislative committee charged with making recommendations to the legislature and that's how this process works. We've worked in other states where we're not seeing things implemented quite as quickly. We've typically wound up working with a committee that is a step or two removed from directly being the legislature. For example, in the state of Washington we worked for an advisory committee which was a governor-appointed committee to make recommendations to the legislature on education. So we were two steps removed from the legislature. I think that the recommendations that came out of those findings are very powerful, very strong, but they haven't had quite the same success yet in the environment of Washington and I can't tell you exactly why that is.

OEP: How important are teacher salaries, raising teacher's salaries, in terms of achieving adequacy?

LP: Well, what's important for adequacy is the ability to attract and retain highly qualified teachers. Salaries are obviously an important component of that. I suspect from what I read in the teacher literature it's not the only component, working conditions, class size, children you're working with, those sorts of things also have some impact and the salaries are a large piece of that and insuring that the salaries are competitive is important. Within that context, most of the literature I see suggests that teacher salary markets are pretty regional and so you're really competing with other occupations within the state and therefore in the long run what you're looking for is the ability to have salaries that look perhaps across the south regionally competitive; which I think in Arkansas is good these days. Let's go back to the recommendations that came out of the 2003 adequacy study; we're recommending dramatic increases in teacher's salaries with three components. One was just to bring Arkansas teachers up to a more reasonable level of competing with the regional average. And then there's a recommendation related to that that gives a certain amount of money in harder-to-staff

positions. That would be perhaps math and science, special education, parts of the state where it's hard to attract teachers for whatever reason.

In Arkansas, those other two recommendations haven't particularly been implemented or talked about a great deal, but maintaining an adequate level of salary is important whether the regional adjustments are an essential ingredient in that; I don't know. In Wyoming there are regional adjustments for salaries. Wyoming is much, much larger geographically dispersed than Arkansas, and so that may be more important. I'm thinking of my home state of California where you have so many different kinds of regional labor markets where that kind of value looks very different than the upper east quarter of California so what it takes to attract quality teachers is probably very different. So teacher salaries are a crucial part of it and I think understanding the market for teachers and teacher's salaries is a complex and difficult task that requires consideration of the market place and where in school districts are competing for teachers to find a salary level that enables the districts to recruit the high quality teachers that they need. But, I'd also argue that you probably need some kind of compensation system that focuses on their knowledge and skills as well, but we don't have that kind of policy in our program.

OEP: How do we figure the cost of an adequate education when each school is different, each district is different. How do we get at that?

LP: I think you asked the really crucial heart question of the day. Where I come down on this is that the State needs to provide a set of resources that, if used in that way, research suggests we ought to see improvements in student performance. The difficulty and the findings from our study last year in Arkansas showed that school districts had resources to do a number of things and make very different decisions about how to use the money. For example, one of core findings of our model is a strategy for struggling students which starts with using certified teachers as tutors to help struggling students in very small, one-on-one, one-on-three, maybe one-on-five, groups for short periods of time to get those children back into the class room and the existing curriculum. So we're not taking children out permanently. We're saying "Johnny's

having trouble with his math". He goes and sees this teacher/tutor for a week, gets the help he needs, and gets back to the regular classroom and back up to speed. We did not find very many of those people actually employed by schools systems. And if the school's succeeding and they're successful in the model they're using, I don't think we should question it. If they're not successful, what should we do? There's a thought out there that we need market-based alternatives that you provide the resources and let the schools choose how to do it and all children will succeed. And that may be what we need to do is loosen up the constraints on where children can attend school so that they can go to schools that are successful.

I think the problem with the second half of that argument is that children are pretty limited in where they can go to school. Parents don't have to worry about all the fines to get them to whatever school they think is most successful or they don't do it. And we have enough schools to house the children in Arkansas and we don't have enough capacity in schools that are "successful" today to put all the children in. So we really need to provide support to those schools so they can be successful. Therefore, we need the reforming system to create, if you will, the set of incentives that get the schools to use the resources in ways that work; without telling them how to use it every day of the week. And I don't know that I have the perfect answer to that question yet, but what it suggests is that if I have a model that is funded such that ABC Elementary School has two of these teacher/tutor positions. When I go to that school I'd like to see two of those certified positions whose job it is, in some way, to work with students to provide support when they're struggling. Exactly what is that? Maybe that does need to be something that's up to the principal or the teaching staff that's there and not something that the legislature or the consultants for the legislature tell them how to do it. If the model funds two coaches or facilitators at that school we should see too some way to go to the people whose job it is to help teachers improve their instruction. The research is very clear that those teachers work with teachers on a regular basis to improve instruction can make a real difference in someone's learning. So if you've got money for two people to be coaches, we should see something that look like coaches there and not something else. Those are the structuring systems

that look at that and evaluate that and ask those hard questions is what I think's important. And eventually you could link that, at least at the school level, to measures of improvement in performance over time. And finally, what I think we all have to be is just a little patient. There was some money that went into the system in 04-05, but 05-06 was really the first year of implementation of this. So you've got 05-06 and 06-07, we're kind of entering the third year of this kind of stuff as we start this fiscal year. We should start seeing some successes and some good things happening. But our sense of this is this is a four to seven year strategy to dramatically improve student learning. So hopefully we can start seeing real successes begin to show up more universally in the next year or two in Arkansas.

OEP: How do you respond to critics who suggest that there's no real consistent relationship between spending and educational achievement?

LP: It's very clear from the research that finding a direct link that says put more money in, and out comes better performance isn't as simple and straight-forward as that. There are an immense number of variables that go into the every day teaching of children on any subject—teachers, children, the characteristics from which children come from, the characteristics of teachers themselves, the conditions at the schools. We don't even have enough tools to measure that so that our results are needed to conclude a dramatic relationship, or at least we've come to conclude that ours aren't necessarily anything that should be that surprising. What I think it's important to say is; What do we know about what schools can do that reasonably consistently leads to improved student learning? And there's a lot of research out there that shows ways that this works. And it's all documented in the bibliography to our evidence-based report. This is research we've looked at and we're not trying to specifically exclude anything. We're doing the best we can to find what's out there; because, there's a body of research over time with the Federal Government's emphasis on experimental design and controlled experiments to improve research will over time lead to even better and stronger findings about what works. The key is how do we take those findings and implement those and create systems that enable schools and school

districts to use those research results in implement programs that work. Now we actually think we know that this will happen. And the best example I can give you is in Washington, where we were asked to do, as part of our study of successful districts, as well as the other studies. Now we did what I call a traditional successful district study where we set up a certain criteria and tried to find districts that met the criteria and there weren't very many that did a great, great job of meeting either the criteria they were supposed to be at or what the future criteria was; and not surprisingly, the districts that tended to do the best tended to have the demographics that you'd expect them to have, relatively few minorities and relatively high incomes. But, then we said this isn't telling us what we need to know. What if we went and identified a group of districts and schools that everybody agrees having improved performance over time. That is, this isn't about schools that are doing well; this is about how schools are using resources to improve student performances so eventually they all will do well.

And we identified nine districts, 31 schools, and we went and visited them. In addition to asking how they're using their resources, like we did in Arkansas, we also asked what's your instructional vision, what's your instructional strategy, and essentially who works here and what is their job in terms of meeting that strategy. In a two second summary of the findings of that is; what they were implementing looked very similar to the research based strategies that we're recommending in our evidence based report. But, they didn't have the evidence based report when they did this. They reached these ideas and these conclusions by their own research and their own strategies. But they largely; they implement that they work hard to hire and retain quality teachers that institute a new curriculum across the school that linked, integrated, and articulated from grade to grade, so that everybody is on the same page. They have strategies that help students who are struggling and work with them quickly. And in Washington, we said they're doing it in math and English, but why not other subjects if we have enough money to do it in every subject. Alright, so, that's a research question. They struggled that they could have smaller classes, but that wasn't as important, per say, strong instruction and clear strategy to catch

students and provide them with the services they need. So, what money does is, it buys the things that, if used correctly, will improve student performance. More dollars won't improve student achievement unless there's a clear, researched-based strategy, to use those resources to put the proper educational program in front of every child in school and then to monitor and maintain it, so that it can matter.