



*A Union of Professionals*

## **The 65 Percent Mandate: 100 Percent Deception**

Strong public schools are essential to ensuring a strong nation, economy and democracy. And we know from experience that the best public schools rely on all members of the school community—teachers, school support staff, principals, administrators, parents, students, elected officials and others—doing their part. When school community members work hard and *as a team* toward common goals, and when they are supported with the necessary resources, there is no limit to what public schools can accomplish.

Some people, however, would have you believe that schools can be improved with simple, one-size-fits-all “silver bullet” solutions that require minimal thought, work, resources or adaptation to local needs. But when an idea sounds too good to be true, it usually is. This pretty much sums up the so-called “65 percent solution” (or “65-35”), a scheme being promoted nationally by an organization called First Class Education (FCE).

Led by prominent anti-public education activists, the Washington, D.C.-based FCE seeks to enact legislation or pass ballot initiatives in every state mandating that 65 percent of all school district dollars be spent “in the classroom,” as dictated by their narrow and misleading definition of what constitutes “classroom instruction.” FCE claims—falsely—that such a requirement will reduce school “waste” while improving student achievement. The group also claims—falsely—that the measure will increase money for schools without requiring an increase in overall spending or taxes.

Despite its seductive claims, the 65-35 initiative is no solution at all. Rather, it is 100 percent deception, a simplistic and arbitrary gimmick that would actually harm schools and students. (See the full AFT executive council resolution opposing 65-35 at <http://www.aft.org/about/resolutions/2006/65percent.htm>). The following fact sheet was prepared to reveal the myths surrounding 65-35, so that educators, parents, policymakers and others who support public education can better understand 65-35’s detrimental effects and develop real answers, not phony ones, to the challenges facing our public schools.

### **65-35 Myths & Facts**

**Myth:** The 65-35 initiative will eliminate school “waste.”

**Fact:** Most of the so-called “waste” that 65-35 purports to eliminate is anything but. Rather, 65-35 would force cuts in essential school support services that students and teachers rely on, while doing nothing about real school waste.

The explanation for this deception is the 65-35 scheme’s overly narrow, highly restrictive and ultimately misleading definition of what constitutes “classroom spending.” This definition leaves out many essential school services that support and sustain classroom instruction, including libraries, counseling, teacher training, school healthcare, food and nutrition, transportation, custodial work, maintenance and security. As a significant body of research confirms, these outside-the-classroom services are vital to students’ health, safety and

academic achievement. Yet, if a state adopts the rigid 65-35 measure, many school districts would be forced to cut essential services and staff, such as librarians, nurses and student counselors, despite their proven value in helping kids come to class ready to learn.

There is no disagreement that schools have a duty to eliminate real waste, and they should always be encouraged to spend dollars efficiently. But the arbitrary 65-35 gimmick accomplishes neither of these goals, while gutting services central to the successful operation of schools. Communities concerned about waste should use tried, tested and proven solutions, including stricter oversight from locally elected leaders, greater transparency in school spending and a commitment to accountability for results.

**Myth: The 65-35 initiative will improve student achievement.**

**Fact:** There is zero evidence linking “classroom spending” at 65 percent to higher student achievement. School Evaluation Services, the nonpartisan school analysis unit of Standard and Poor’s, recently conducted an extensive analysis of district spending and student achievement in nine states. The report finds that there is no minimum classroom spending allocation—65 percent or otherwise—that is a “silver bullet” for improving student achievement, concluding that there is no “empirical evidence for mandating a uniform percentage spending threshold across all districts.” In fact, the report finds that many districts that spend *less* than 65 percent “in the classroom” do quite well on state tests, while others that exceed 65 percent do poorly.<sup>1</sup>

The report makes clear that its findings do not suggest that “money doesn’t matter” in schools or classrooms, but rather that the “percentage allocated to instruction may need to vary from one district to another for legitimate reasons.” For example, some schools may need to spend a higher percentage of their budget on outside-the-classroom needs (nutrition, counseling, teacher training, transportation, maintenance, etc.) to ensure that students come to class ready to learn. The 65-35 mandate, however, would essentially rob Peter to pay Paul, forcing schools to eliminate essential support services that make it possible for productive classroom learning to take place.

**Myth: The 65-35 initiative preserves local control of schools while offering a necessary check on school spending.**

**Fact:** 65-35 is a top-down mandate that will undermine local control of schools. The local school community—teachers, school support staff, parents, principals and elected school leaders—is best equipped to make educational decisions. Yet, the 65-35 measure strips power from local educators, forcing them to comply with an arbitrary and rigid one-size-fits-all requirement that has no connection to what schools need to improve student learning.

65-35 also adds an unnecessary layer of bureaucracy and “red tape” that decreases school productivity. Under federal and state law, schools are *already* accountable for student performance. Yet, 65-35 impedes the ability of local educators to do their jobs as they see fit. It adds a complex and time-consuming bureaucratic and accounting burden that at best distracts from and at worst undercuts the main objective of schools: student learning.

**Myth: All school districts, regardless of size, location and age of schools, will benefit from 65-35.**

**Fact:** 65-35's one-size-fits-all approach is detrimental to all school districts, but it will especially hurt rural, urban, smaller and older districts, which traditionally have higher out-of-classroom expenses.

America's 16,000 school districts have vastly different populations, needs and out-of-classroom expenses. For example, large, sparsely populated rural districts often have higher transportation costs; small districts that can't benefit from "economies of scale" often have higher administrative costs per pupil; urban districts, which serve large numbers of poor children, often provide more supplemental services such as health, nutrition and family outreach services. And older districts, with deteriorating infrastructure, often have higher maintenance costs. Yet the rigid 65-35 mandate treats all districts the same, holding them to an arbitrary standard that will likely result in cuts to essential school services and staff.

**Myth: The 65-35 initiative will increase school resources without requiring an increase in spending or taxes.**

**Fact:** The 65-35 measure will do nothing to increase school resources, but it could increase taxes. The measure is a shell game: It simply changes the formula by which a finite and generally inadequate amount of education dollars are spent. But 65 percent of inadequate is still inadequate. If this gimmick passes, many children will still likely attend overcrowded classrooms, while losing essential support services.

Further, if 65-35 forces schools to cut essential services, parents and taxpayers will face a choice: **either** go without those services **or** increase overall spending so that the 35 percent of dollars spent "outside the classroom" are sufficient to meet transportation, food, library, nursing, custodial, security and other needs. Such a spending increase would most likely require an increase in local property taxes.

**Myth: Proponents of 65-35 have a track record of supporting public education.**

**Fact:** Proponents of 65-35 have a not-so-hidden agenda. Its chief backers—anti-government advocate Grover Norquist, columnist George Will, political consultant Tim Mooney and Utah entrepreneur Patrick Byrne—have histories of supporting policies, such as private school vouchers, that would drain resources from public schools. Even more revealing, the *Austin American Statesman* (Aug. 30, 2005) uncovered a memo from First Class Education listing the "political benefits" of 65-35. Those "benefits," the memo says, include increased "tensions" between administrators and teachers, as well as the potential to make "targeted segments of voters ... more greatly disposed to supporting voucher and charter school proposals."

---

<sup>1</sup> Standard & Poor's, *The Issues and Implications of the "65 Percent Solution,"* November 2005, available at [http://www.schoolmatters.com/pdf/65\\_paper\\_schoolmatters.pdf](http://www.schoolmatters.com/pdf/65_paper_schoolmatters.pdf)