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Today | This Week

# Let's be clear on school spending, achievement

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My Turn

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I am prosecuting two crusades.

The first is to increase student learning, through emphasis on academic rigor and accountability.

The second is to give the Arizona public an accurate picture of how our schools compare to other states. This column is about the second crusade.

The biggest problem is confusion between what we spend on education and what students learn.

Spending statistics are controversial, but *Education Week* has no reason to favor or disfavor Arizona compared to other states, and it ranks Arizona last in spending per pupil.

But on the Terra Nova test, a national test taken by more than 600,000 Arizona students, Arizona performs well above the national average. To be last in resources, and above the national average in test performance, is a tribute to Arizona educators and to our emphasis on academic rigor and accountability.

So, when an obscure company, Morgan Quitno, calls Arizona "dumbest" because of an incompetent study that mixes spending with learning, I can't resist the temptation to say that we are not the dumbest state, but it is the dumbest company.

A recent report by *Education Week*, "Quality Counts 2007," ranked Arizona 14th out of 50 states, well above the national average, in policy measurements, such as establishing high academic standards, the testing of math, language arts, science and social studies and holding schools accountable for academic performance. Similarly, we were ranked 20th out of 50 states, still above the national average, in

"education alignment."

But the headline emphasized the factor where we came in last, "Chances for Success," which measures factors, such as family income, that are not in the control of Arizona schools or the Department of Education.

The report also included data on academic achievement, but used the limited National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) that tests no more than 6,000 students per subject, compared to 600,000 Arizona students taking the Terra Nova. A Rand study controlling for the family characteristics of students taking the NAEP test ranked Arizona 21st out of 50, again well above the national average.

Our students also performed above the national average in the Scholastic Aptitude Test and the ACT college entrance test.

Is "above the national average" a satisfactory goal? Of course not. But if our schools can bring our students to above the national average, even though they are last in resources, I believe we could be in the top 10 nationally if we raised our resources to the national average.

Some say I should seize on the accusation that our schools are "last" as a motivator for our Legislature to increase funding.

But we are more likely to root for a team that is above average and has a shot at the championship, than a team whose best prospect is to get out of the cellar.

Ultimately what matters is truth. Let's get this straight: In spending, we are 50th. But in what our students learn, our schools are doing a good job, and our students perform above the national average.

And if we can get our resources to the national average and continue our academic rigor and accountability, we have a shot at being champions.

**The writer is state superintendent of public instruction.**

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