

Elmore's and Randleman's "New Direction": Good for Wilkes County?

Wilkes County's principal representatives in Raleigh recently shared their views on what the legislative session has done for education in Wilkes County. They commented "... on the large scale of change and said they support legislative efforts to shift decisions on education spending to local school officials". They noted that "... they sympathized with concerns of teachers about some of the changes".¹

The positions taken by both Randleman and Elmore promote radical change in Wilkes education both immediately and in the long term. For example, both Randleman and Elmore appear willing, even anxious to shift the responsibility for funding the education of our children to the local level.

Randleman said the 2013-14 state budget allows school officials at the local level greater flexibility in determining how state funds are spent means local school officials can shift state funds to provide pay for teacher assistants and other state level cuts. Elmore said shifting school funding and curriculum decisions to the local level allows for greater accountability and differing needs across the state.

Shifting responsibility to the local level can have two possible results: reducing funds available, raising property taxes for Wilkes County property owners, or a combination of the two. Neither of the Wilkes representatives addressed the fundamental issue of shared responsibility which historically has involved state level taxing and funding of education for local communities by raising more taxes from regions of the state which are economically prosperous and funding regions of the state, such as Wilkes County, which are struggling economically.

Further, while not raising the issue during their meeting with local retired school personnel, they both supported major changes in the state's tax structure which have the effect of radically lowering revenue for the state to fund all state services.² The result will be a significant loss of revenue and a greater reliance on the sales tax, which hits middle-class and low-income taxpayers the hardest. Further cuts to public education, health care and public safety are sure to follow, which will come on top of years of cuts to these vital services during and after the Great Recession..³

The tax plan

- reduces revenues by \$171.0 million in the 2014 fiscal year and \$512.8 million in the 2015 fiscal year,
- with the losses ballooning to more than \$700 million per year once it is fully implemented.
- The cost will total approximate \$2.8 billion over the next five years.

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North Carolina's population will grow by about 100,000 people each year over the next few years. Such deep revenue losses will make it much more

difficult for North Carolina to rebuild a strong economy and help children, families, and communities to thrive. When combined with the loss of the state Earned Income Tax Credit for working families, this tax plan requires low-and middle-income families to pay more, on average, while the highest income taxpayers pay less.

The inevitable result over the next five years is that funding for Wilkes County education has and will be continually reduced with the result that county taxes will have to be increased to make up the gap or the county's education budget will be reduced even more.

Elmore noted, "I have never seen a time period with so much transition with the direction of education the changes now are really weighing down on educators.... and are hurting teachers right now. A big concern of mine is morale of teachers," he concluded. This comment at the Elks Lodge in North Wilkesboro did not negate the fact that he supported a budget and changes in the law which will hurt Wilkes County today and in the future.

Randleman noted, "I don't like change, but since this legislation is in place, we have to seize it as an opportunity." *Is Randleman really so helpless in Raleigh?* Her sentiment in Wilkes County was in no way in evidence in her votes in Raleigh. Neither elected official explained to Wilkes County why their concerns didn't get expressed while they were supposedly representing the county's interests in the General Assembly. Randleman defended *her* actions, claiming that the fiscal 2013-14 budget increased state spending on K-12 [education](#) by almost 5 percent. "The state spends close to \$5 billion to provide our state's teachers a package of salary and benefits worth an average of \$55,264 for 10 months of employment". So our state Senator dismisses the concerns of Wilkes County teachers about salary levels, which are now ranked 46th in the nation, with the suggestion that they only work 10 months of the year!^v She is apparently unaware that teachers work during the other 2 months getting prepared for the school year and maintaining their certifications.

While the 2014 budget exceeds last year's in overall dollars, it still falls short of what was needed to maintain current service levels in public education. Total state spending as a share of North Carolina's economy is below the forty-year average and far below pre-recession levels. Consequently, the budget fails to keep up with a growing population and changing needs, weakening a number of vital services that directly benefit families and the state's economy.^{vi}

Dr. Marty Hemric, Wilkes County school superintendent, reported that the 2013-14 budget decreased funding for the Wilkes school system by \$1,098,000. Neither Randleman nor Elmore *explained* why a reduction of \$1,098,000 is not going to hurt Wilkes County education. In fact, the impact of the state budget at local level is still being worked out. To see the developing results at the by district go to the following link: <http://pulse.ncpolicywatch.org/2013/08/19/tracking-the-cuts-the-dismantling-of-our-public-schools-6/>.

The budget that our local representatives supported:

- Is a 1.9-percent increase over the continuation budget, or what was needed to maintain current service levels for all of state government. However, when adjusted for inflation it spends 8.3 percent less than the last state budget approved before the onset of the Great Recession (2008).
- Fully funds the enrollment growth in K-12 schools but makes harmful cuts—such as reducing funding for teachers, which could increase the number of students in each classroom, and eliminating funding for 1 in 5 teacher assistants.
- Cuts 2,400 at-risk students from pre-Kindergarten education.
- Falls \$117 million, or 1.5 percent, short of what was needed for K-12 education, continuing a pattern of inadequate investments in our schools and children since the Great Recession.
- Provides \$10.7 million to fully fund the projected growth in student enrollment and saves schools \$376.1 million by eliminating a requirement that local school districts identify and implement a cut to their share of state funding every year, however, these savings are offset by other cuts that will affect students.
- Increases the teacher-to-student ratios used to determine total funding for classroom teachers. Higher ratios reduce total funding for classroom teachers by \$286.4 million, meaning local school districts will have to cut teacher positions or find other funding sources. The Department of Public Instruction estimates that this could result in 5,200 fewer teachers.⁷ In Wilkes County is the reduction of one full time teacher in 2013, because funded positions which become vacant have not been filled for the past three years. Further, number of positions allocated to Wilkes County had been reduced from 470 to 435 during the recession.
- Cuts 21 percent of funding for teachers assistants which equates to approximately 3,800 positions.
- Cuts instructional support personnel and instructional supplies—such as preparatory materials—by \$23.9 million. The impact on Wilkes County this year is a 50% reduction in funds available for materials. Thus, teachers and students will do without or provide the materials from their own resources.
- Reduces funding for textbooks to only 25 percent of what the Department of Public Instruction determined is needed.

Elmore noted that Lt. Gov. Dan Forrest has raised doubt about the implementation of the Common Core curriculum in the schools and said he agrees with Forrest. “North Carolina has been a leader in education but we are now moving toward a federalism system,” Elmore added. Apparently, Elmore

doesn't appreciate how our federal system works or that the Common Core is a bipartisan product of the National Governors Association and is supported by several Republican governors, including NC's McCrory.^{8 9}

Mrs. Randleman said the 2013-14 state budget includes \$10.2 million to begin funding annual merit pay raises for the best educators in each school system. The plan would pay the top 25 percent of teachers identified by their local school boards built-in annual pay increases starting in 2014 and they would receive four-year contracts. "That means over the next four years, those highly effective teachers could earn an additional \$5,000 through a permanent salary increase," she said.

Features of the budget which Randleman did not mention include:

- ending teacher tenure and approved a 2013-14 budget with no raises for teachers for the fifth time in six years
- ending pay increases for advanced degrees, including a 10 percent pay increase for a master's degree, starting after the 2013-14 school year.
- five additional vacation days but no across-the-board pay raise for teachers and state employees. This, while average teacher pay in North Carolina is ranked 46th in the nation, down from 27th over the last six years.¹⁰

Except for last year's 1.2 percent raise, teacher salaries have been frozen in North Carolina since 2008. This has left teachers coming into their sixth year earning roughly the same as new teachers. The N.C. Department of Public Instruction reported that about 14,550 teachers, which is 18 percent of all public school teachers, are still on that bottom salary step. The bottom salary step pays \$30,800 a year, plus a local supplement set by individual school systems. Wilkes County's local supplement is 5 percent. Since 2008, teachers have lost 12% of their purchasing power, which means that it will take \$112 to purchase what \$100 purchased in 2008.¹¹

What does this mean for the Future for Wilkes County?

Randleman and Elmore failed to explain how these "new directions" are going to be good for Wilkes County, for its children or for our 430 + teachers who are working to ensure that these children have a secure future. In fact, both of our representatives in Raleigh supported these measures without question and with no obvious concern for the implications for Wilkes County's future.

Have a comment on the actions of our representatives in Raleigh? Go to: wilkesdemocrats.com for an online discussion.

¹ Wilkes Journal Patriot, August 23, 2013.

² The 2013-15 Fiscal Year Final Budget, Budget & Tax Center, NC Justice Center, August 2013. <http://www.ncjustice.org/?q=budget-and-tax/factsheet-new-state-budget-puts-north-carolina-path-mediocrity>

³ “Final Tax Plan Falls Far Short of True Tax Reform,” Budget and Tax Center, NC Justice Center, August 2013. <http://www.ncjustice.org/?q=budget-and-tax/media-release-final-tax-plan-falls-far-short-true-tax-reform>

⁴ Office of State Budget and Management. “State Budget Responsibilities and Budget Overview.” November 2012. Available http://www.osbm.state.nc.us/files/pdf_files/2012TransitionDeck.pdf

^{vi} National Education Association. “Rankings and Estimates: Rankings of the States 2012 and Estimates of School Statistics 2013.” December 2012. Available at: [http://www.nea.org/assets/img/content/NEA_Rankings_And_Estimates-2013_\(2\).pdf](http://www.nea.org/assets/img/content/NEA_Rankings_And_Estimates-2013_(2).pdf) and National Education Association. “Rankings and Estimates: Rankings of the States 2006 and Estimates of School Statistics 2007.” December 2007. Available at: <http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/HE/07rankings.pdf>.

⁷ NC Department of Public Instruction. “Summary of Special Provisions-Senate Bill 402.” May 2013. Available at:

<http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/fbs/budget/summary-sb-402-2013.pdf>

⁸ “War on the Core”, *ibid*.

¹¹ See inflationdata.com.