OPINIONS

PUBLIC EDUCATION

Forget DEI. These issues matter more

FRANK MORGAN

Virginia's gubernatorial election campaign season is gearing up, along with the usual barrage of dark money campaign ads with their grainy, unflattering pictures and histrionic narration.

In 2021, Glenn Youngkin rode the hot-button education issues of "parental rights" and "critical race theory" to the governor's mansion. Upon taking office, he even established a tip line to report the teaching of "divisive concepts" in public schools. Alas, the tip line didn't generate much.

Republican candidate Winsome Earle-Sears got the ball rolling on education by promoting legislation banning transgender women from participating in women's sports. Democratic candidate Abigail Spanberger countered that the Virginia High School League (VHSL) and the NCAA should direct decisions on this matter. Since both governing bodies plan to comply with President Donald Trump's executive order concerning transgender athletes, the point becomes essentially moot.

This year's favorite Republican whipping post — diversity, equity and inclusion, or DEI — will undoubtedly be a key education talking point for Ms. Earle-Sears. However, the executive order from President Trump abolishing DEI would seem to reduce the issue's political clout.

Warmed-over narratives from 2021 should not be allowed to dominate this year's gubernatorial debate about education. Since K-12 education represents such a sizeable investment in public funds, the gubernatorial candidates should be able to articulate coherent positions on practical educational issues beyond those hyped by culture warriors. There are simply bigger fish to fry.

A clear exchange of views about the following areas would be helpful.

Equal educational opportunity

Students in economically disadvantaged communities in Virginia have many fewer educational opportunities than their peers in affluent communities. Poor communities typically have substandard facilities, fewer qualified teachers, fewer academic programs, and lower achievement levels than wealthy districts.

Virginia's results on the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) underscore the challenges faced by districts serving high-poverty populations. More state-generated school shaming ratings won't fix this problem.

Funding

A 2023 study by the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC), the research arm of the Virginia General Assembly, indicated that Virginia's support for K-12 education was $3.5 billion below the national average and ranked in the bottom third nationally in per-pupil funding.

This longstanding shortfall in financial commitment especially hurts poor and rural districts and is a major cause of the huge disparities in educational opportunity and achievement that continue to plague our state.

Educator recruitment and retention

A recent survey reflected around 3,200 statewide teacher vacancies, with a particularly high number of vacancies in elementary education, science and math. Curiously, federal funding has been eliminated for programs that recruit and prepare teachers for hard-to-staff schools.

It is unclear how many vacant positions since the pandemic were filled by underqualified or uncertified applicants, especially in disadvantaged communities that already struggle academically. Research has repeatedly shown that the most critical factor to student achievement is teacher quality.

Lt. Gov. Winsome Earle-Sears and former Congresswoman Abigail Spanberger are Virginia's 2025 candidates for governor.

TIMES-DISPATCH

School choice

The Youngkin administration has touted charter "lab schools" and "Virginia Opportunity Scholarship" vouchers as strategies to expand school choice for underserved students. Interestingly, Ms. Earle-Sears has stated that the landmark Supreme Court school desegregation ruling, Brown v. Board of Education, was about "parental choice." African-American families denied access to public schools in the wake of Virginia's Massive Resistance to this ruling might disagree.

If school choice is a desirable option for Virginia, would it be structured in a way that ensures legitimate access to private and charter schools for all students and not just for the students these schools want to cherry pick? Further, how should private and charter schools benefiting from public funds be held as transparently accountable for academic results as regular public schools?

Elimination of the U.S. Department of Education

President Trump is moving to eliminate the U.S Department of Education and give states the responsibility for overseeing the expenditure of federal education funds and for the enforcement of federal laws relating to discrimination, special education and Title IX.

Candidates need to honestly lay out how they would enforce federal education law. Candidates also need to specify where federal Title I funds for high poverty schools and special education funds would go if the Trump administration gives states greater flexibility in their use. Would they, for example, support some of these funds going to private school vouchers?

Curriculum and materials

Candidates need to specify their views on the role of the state in mandating curriculum content and selecting materials for classrooms and school libraries. Another important issue is how the subject of race is addressed in public school curriculum.

Virginia voters deserve a far more substantive discussion of K-12 education than occurred in 2021. Voters would greatly benefit from a candidate debate dedicated solely to K-12 education, with questions developed by parents and educators.

How about it?

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STUDENT DEBT RELIEF

Blame colleges, not government

BOSTON HERALD EDITORIAL STAFF

Student loan borrowers are learning a harsh lesson familiar to most adults: when you take out a loan and agree to pay it back, there are consequences if you don't.

Cue the outrage.

The Department of Education announced that it will restart collecting federal student loans in default on May 5, ending a years-long pandemic-era pause, according to reports.

More than 5 million borrowers are in default, the department said in a news release. Federal student loans go into default after 270 days without payment.

"American taxpayers will no longer be forced to serve as collateral for irresponsible student loan policies," Education Secretary Linda McMahon said in a statement. "The Biden Administration misled borrowers: the executive branch does not have the constitutional authority to wipe debt away, nor do the loan balances simply disappear."

But that didn't stop former President Joe Biden from trying his best to court the youth demographic as he tried, repeatedly, to have student loan debt forgiven en masse. The Supreme Court blocked him, but he succeeded with smaller efforts linked to relaxing eligibility requirements for existing programs.

This was great, if you were a borrower hit with the fiscal realities of loans coming due. It wasn't so great if you were a taxpayer covering this largesse .

As CNN reported, the Education Department's Office of Student Aid will restart the Treasury Offset Program, which collects debts by garnishing federal and state payments, such as tax returns or Social Security benefits.

The department's recent announcement urged defaulted borrowers to contact the student aid office's Default Resolution Group and "make a monthly payment, enroll in an income-driven repayment plan, or sign up for loan rehabilitation."

In other words, things you do when you have to repay money and are having a hard time of it. We can expect the usual wailing and gnashing of teeth over "outrageous" demands for money borrowers owe, as if the debt were thrust upon them unwillingly.

President Donald Trump will be blamed. "The system" will be blamed. But few, if any, will ask the question: Why are college costs so high?

The outrage should be aimed at colleges and universities, who charge enormous sums for a four-year education. Not that the cost of tuition goes to pay for classes exclusively — there is administrative bloat to be fed, and six-figure salaries to be paid within the halls of academia.

Student loan borrowers struggle to pay off loans that covered a chancellor's million-dollar salary — that's outrageous.

If politicians really cared about students seeking higher education, they'd target the fat cats of academia, the enormous salaries, and task institutions with providing education that can lead to well-paying jobs.

As McMahon wrote in a Wall Street Journal op-ed Monday: "Many of the degree-granting programs that qualify for student loans are worthless on the job market, but colleges continue to accept students to these programs and encourage them to borrow to pay for them. Accountability is a two-way street. As we push to hold student borrowers to account, we will also push colleges to be responsible and transparent."

It's about time.

AUTOMATION

For safer air travel, rely less on humans

ELLA ATKINS

The January collision of a military helicopter and a passenger jet over the Potomac River underscores the urgent need for upgraded air traffic safety standards, domestically and internationally.

The immediate aftermath of the crash in congested airspace drew attention to understaffing in the air traffic control tower. Though we need our towers fully staffed, it is unclear whether that would have made a difference in this situation.

Pilots flying by instrument flight rules must file flight plans and follow a known route with precision. An aircraft navigating by visual flight rules — what a pilot can see — need not do this.

When an experienced helicopter pilot requests authorization to follow visual flight rules, the standard response is to grant that request. To prevent more tragedies like this one, all aircraft flying near commercial airports should be required to follow instrument flight rules.

Even more crucial for the future of safe air travel, the industry should universally adopt datalink and automated safety systems for which technology is now available but not deployed in commercial aviation.

Most aircraft communications systems are already automated — but the most safety-critical things pilots must do require them to pick up a microphone and talk.

We need data links connecting aircraft with each other and with air traffic control, instantly sharing speed, altitude, trajectory, requests for flight plan changes and more — at a far faster rate than voice alone can convey.

Just as vital, automated emergency systems should be installed that take over for a pilot and steer the aircraft away from an impending obstacle, preventing collisions.

Starting in the mid-1980s, NASA worked with the U.S. Air Force and Lockheed Martin to develop the Automatic Ground Collision Avoidance System (Auto-GCAS) for military jets expected to fly near terrain to avoid radar detection. If, for example, a pilot becomes disoriented in fog, this system automatically pulls up and turns so that the aircraft cannot hit the mountain. It has saved lives.

There's nothing revolutionary about these proposals. Upgrades can be phased in gradually. Precedent already exists for testing new systems while keeping the old one available as a backup.

In the 1970s, when the industry introduced electronic instrument displays, the old mechanical gauges remained in the cockpit, off to the side where pilots could refer to them in case of glitches — a fail-safe still in place in most aircraft. Similarly, voice communications should remain in place in addition to the automated datalinks.

In decades past, planes operated with mechanical controls that used levers and cables to manipulate its moving parts. Now, with "fly by wire," those moving parts are controlled by computers throughout the plane, linked by a network. We trust those computers and networks every day. They make flying safer.

Objections to the automated sharing of data revolve around security concerns, such as the potential for jamming and spoofing. While those risks should be addressed, they don't pose reasons for delay, as the systems we have in place have security vulnerabilities of their own.

Costs also present barriers to overcome. These datalink systems would need to be safety certified, a process that for a new product typically costs in the millions of dollars using current methods because of the amount of manual labor that goes into documentation of all phases of the design, manufacturing and testing.

As we cannot expect private industry to undertake these tasks alone, government agencies must give guidance and assistance. An effort jointly run by NASA and the FAA would work best to implement these policy changes and technological upgrades, with NASA focused on the technology and the FAA handling necessary new regulations.

To assuage companies concerned about sharing data with competitors, NASA could be made the agency for collection, curation and sharing of data, in collaboration with the European Union Safety Agency.

Accumulated data showing the effectiveness of automation in improving air safety would lead to the creation of a whole new marketplace for this technology, laying foundations for new industry and new jobs.

Policymakers, passengers and industry leaders should consider money and effort toward these upgrades well spent, as the benefits would be far-reaching.

In pursuit of the worthy goals of increased automation and improved safety, Virginia Tech is collaborating with NASA to tackle the navigation challenges with automating takeoffs and landings, and joined in a multi-university U.S. Department of Transportation effort to protect transportation infrastructure spoofing and jamming of GPS signals. Research in AI-enabled autonomy for resilience and contingency management is also underway, converting comprehensive data into decisions that will save lives by avoiding accidents when failures and potential collisions are otherwise imminent.

Adopting datalink technologies will add resilience to air traffic safety systems by not making humans completely responsible for every aspect of collision prevention in the air or on the runway.

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