

Kirwan's work should not be dismissed

By: [Joe Nathanson](#) October 24, 2019



If you are concerned with this region's long-term economic development prospects, you should be paying attention to the recommendations of the Kirwan Commission.

If you think that Maryland should be preparing young scholars for college and careers that will require the skills to adapt to a rapidly changing environment, you should heed the work of the commission.

If you believe that a child should be able to receive a high-quality public education no matter where in Maryland she lives, you should be taking a close look at the findings of this group.

The Kirwan Commission, named for its chairman Dr. William E. "Brit" Kirwan, the chancellor emeritus of the University System of Maryland, was established by the Maryland General Assembly in 2016. More formally designated the Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education, the 25-member group was charged with coming up with recommendations to prepare Maryland students "to meet the challenges of a changing global economy, to meet the State's workforce needs, to be prepared for postsecondary education and the workforce, and to be successful citizens in the 21st century."

Return on investment

During the 1980s and 1990s, as a staff member of the Baltimore Metropolitan Council and its predecessor agency, I and my colleagues spent considerable time examining workforce development issues, precisely because having well-prepared students and incumbent workers is so closely tied to our region's economic well-being. We also looked at the educational underpinnings of that preparation.

In the course of that work, one of the clearest findings was that providing resources to support high quality early childhood education had the highest return on investment. Multiple studies indicated a benefit-cost ratio on the order of 7:1. It is no surprise, therefore, that Kirwan is calling for universal pre-kindergarten education for all 4-year-olds and for 3-year-olds living below the poverty line.

Students also need programs, including career technical education, that will prepare them for the jobs of the future and will entail mastering the latest technologies. Assuring the availability of the latest textbooks, computing equipment, laboratory facilities and modern classroom settings could be another outcome of the commission's efforts.

At a time when reportedly half of Maryland educators are working a second job to make ends meet, the Kirwan Commission seeks to support these individuals who have chosen their own careers to open future opportunities for their students. The commission also recognizes the need to have high performing teachers, with salaries in the range of \$60,000 to \$80,000 to attract and retain the best talents. And, yes, these higher salaries will also entail higher pension obligations.

And, among other priorities, the commission will derive measures to provide an effective way to count low-income students to direct funding and resources to those schools with the greatest needs. They will also identify resources needed to combat the negative effects of poverty on school communities.

Cost in perspective

So, of course, these measures will require additional public investments, which are now estimated at \$3.8 billion over the next decade. Some, most prominently among them Gov. Larry Hogan, are saying that Maryland cannot afford these expenditures. In fact, the governor is organizing a lobbying effort to thwart any tax increases that legislators might champion in support of the Kirwan initiatives.

Others can put these numbers in perspective. Kalman Hettleman, a member of the Kirwan Commission and a former secretary of the state's Department of Human Resources, points out that the seemingly daunting figure of \$3.8 billion through the year 2030 represents about a 2.5% annual increase in the current level of state and local spending for local schools. He further notes that these increased costs represent about one-half of 1% per year of state and local spending for all government purposes.

Once the commission completes its final report, due in December of this year, it will be up to the General Assembly to determine how to pay for these education investments and how the costs are to be shared between the state and local jurisdictions.

Maryland, by many measures one of the wealthiest states in the nation, should not take steps to jeopardize that enviable economic standing. Actively opposing the work of the Kirwan Commission, even before its findings are fully aired, as Hogan is currently doing, is exactly the wrong reaction from someone who wants to tout the state's economic progress.

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