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## An Interview with Lawrence Picus

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*Lawrence O. Picus is a professor at the USC Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California. His research focuses on adequacy and equity in school finance. He has published numerous books and articles, including School Finance: A Policy Perspective (with Allen R. Odden), and Where Does the Money Go?: Resource Allocation in Elementary and Secondary Schools (with James L. Wattenbarger). His consulting firm, Picus and Associates has worked closely with the Arkansas General Assembly over the past few years, making several key recommendations that many state legislators believe have been critical in helping the state achieve educational adequacy.*

**OEP:** *What was your general sense of how the Arkansas General Assembly did in terms of achieving adequacy?*

**LP:** I think they met the bar they set out to meet. They've worked very hard in Arkansas to develop a level of funding that will provide roughly that level of resources in every school. And I think it definitely deserves to be congratulated for not only doing it in 2003 and 2004, but then reviewing it and carefully looking at it again and making adjustments after they've had some experience in looking at those data. So, I think that they should feel good about what they've done, and it's also addressed over time the difficult issue of finding revenue to make that happen. And that's often, in the legislative bodies, the hardest problem of all.

**OEP:** *How well did the effort made by the Arkansas General Assembly mesh with the recommendations in your 2006 report?*

**LP:** My take is that it comes pretty close. I think the one thing that may be in our 2006 report that wasn't fully funded were some of the recommendations for struggling students. That is, the evidence-based model is for development as sort of a four level approach to struggling students. It starts with teachers as tutors. It also suggests resources for extended day, for summer school, and for some additional pupil support personnel. And, we're pretty clear that you don't necessarily need to do all four all at once, that it might make some sense to provide funding to enable districts to have some combination of some of those and if that doesn't work, then perhaps add on later. I don't believe the funding model

covered all four of those areas, but it certainly provided additional resources and they still continue to provide additional, more intensive resources as a percentage of free and reduced price lunch or instance of national school lunch children increases in Arkansas.

My view is that they've put in place a very good, strong system, and like anything; it requires continual monitoring and maintenance and evaluation to see how successful it is, and if it's not, finding what the problems are and determine what's the appropriate approach to resolving those problems at the time.

**OEP:** *What does the state need to do to continually maintain educational adequacy?*

**LP:** I think the first one is to develop a system of support for a strong curriculum so that across the state all children have access to instructional programs designed to meet the state's performance standards. Second, and at least as important, I think is to ensure that there are high quality teachers available to teach to that curriculum. Third, I think that the state needs to use the systems of testing and accountability that's in place to measure students' success and understand where students are and where students are not succeeding, and try to get some understanding when they're not succeeding, of what the problems are. And then, with those data, you can design and put together a funding and management system to resolve any issues that come up. Our thought is that the resources that are in place should enable most schools to make substantial improvements in student's performance over time. Important to note is that we're not going to see everything happen next year.

Educational adequacy, as I see it, is a two-fold process—one of continuous evaluation and measurement of student learning, and one of providing the resources that'll meet those students' needs. Then you look back and observe if districts are providing the resources to the students in need. If not, then I suspect the first question you need to ask is — What are districts doing with the resources and are there better ways to use the existing resources to improve student learning? And then ask the question — Do we have enough money?

At this point, I automatically assume the problem is that there's not enough money. I'd try to understand why. For example, we still may not have the quality of teachers we want to have, so teacher's salaries may be a concern. However, teachers in Arkansas are pretty well paid regionally these days. If low income children are not learning, what is it about that? Do they not have access to high quality teachers, are there just not enough resources to provide the small class sizes and the strategies for struggling students that they need? I would think in Arkansas there are, but we weren't asked those questions. Finally, I'd see what else is going on that's preventing success and think about what's needed to help out and overcome those obstacles.

**OEP:** *How important are teacher salaries, raising teacher's salaries, in terms of achieving adequacy?*

**LP:** What's important for adequacy is the ability to attract and retain highly qualified teachers. Salaries are an important component of that. I suspect from what I read in the teacher literature it's not the only component, working conditions, class size, children you're working with, those sorts of things also have some impact and the salaries are a large piece of that and insuring that the salaries are competitive is important.

Within that context, most of the literature I see suggests that teacher salary markets are pretty regional and so you're really competing with other occupations within the state and therefore in the long run, what you're looking for is the ability to have salaries that look perhaps across the south regionally competitive; which I think in Arkansas is good these days. Let's go back to the recommendations that came out of the 2003 adequacy study; we're recommending dramatic increases in teacher's salaries with two components. First, we recommended bringing Arkansas teachers up to a more reasonable level of competing with the regional average. Second, we recommended that certain amounts of money be provided for harder-to-staff positions. That would be perhaps math and science, special education, parts of the state where it's hard to attract teachers for whatever reason.

**OEP:** *How do we figure the cost of an adequate education when each school and each district is different?*

**LP:** I think you asked the really crucial question of the day. Where I come down on this is that the state needs to provide a set of resources that, if used correctly, research suggests we ought to see improvements in student performance. The difficulty and the findings from our study last year in Arkansas showed that school districts

had resources to do a number of things and make very different decisions about how to use the money. For example, one of the core findings of our model is a strategy for struggling students which starts with using certified teachers as tutors to help struggling students in very small groups for short periods of time to get those children back into the class room and the existing curriculum. The research is very clear that those teachers working with classroom teachers on a regular basis to improve instruction can make a real difference in someone's learning. So if you've got money for two people to be coaches, we should see coaches there and not something else. Eventually you link that, at least at the school level, to measures of improvement in performance over time.

*The complete interview with Dr. Lawrence Picus can be accessed online, along with past OEP interviews with leading education policymakers at <http://www.uark.edu/ua/oep>.*