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COUNTERPOINT | Prop 119 is a 'sinister' scheme

- Michael Merrifield
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Michael Merrifield

Halloween! What perfect timing for a deceptively disguised, wolf-in-sheep's clothing proposal like Proposition 119, the Learning Enrichment and Academic Progress Program (LEAP)! Proposition 119 is no treat for Colorado's kids, but a scam-bag of tricks to benefit wealthy, out-of-state backers and anti-public education schemers.

Here's what's in Proposition 119's bag of tricks:

Using millions of dollars from the school land trust and higher taxes on marijuana, LEAP creates a whole new government bureaucracy with a budget twice that of the annual budget of the entire Colorado Department of Education.

It robs public schools of funds by unconstitutionally “reallocating” millions of dollars from the School Land Trust Fund, (which was legally formed in 1876 for the benefit of public schools). This means stripping away millions of dollars annually from the very schools and kids they claim to help, diverting precious funds to private, for-profit companies. According to the non-partisan Legislative Council summary, this would cost public schools at least \$21 million a year. Claiming to help our students by stealing money from their schools is vile and sinister. The State Land Board voted unanimously to oppose LEAP.

It creates a non-elected board, answerable to no one but themselves. This board would have sole authority to manage the money and programs entirely on its own with little accountability, oversight or collaboration with the experts at the Department of Education or any other state agency! With no state input, oversight, or accountability, the appointed governing board would develop its own criteria for selection of providers. Proposition 119 offers no guarantee that providers would be authorized in all areas of the state, meaning that rural areas would likely have none. Incredibly, the board would be shielded from any lawsuit or oversight, opening the floodgates to fraud, corruption and misuse of public funds.

LEAP is being promoted as a program to serve underprivileged kids, but there is no guarantee that those are the students who will be served. Students only need to be eligible to attend public school. However, their families must provide tax documentation of their income, meaning that undocumented students wouldn't be eligible. But home-schooled and private school students would be eligible, making LEAP a quasi-voucher program. The most vulnerable students are only guaranteed a focus for the first year!

There is no safeguard against discrimination of any kind by the providers.

If the voters decide to raise taxes on marijuana sales, the additional funds should go to our desperately underfunded public schools with supervision and accountability provided by CDE, which has an elected board, the majority of whom oppose LEAP. Other education groups opposing LEAP are the Colorado PTA, Colorado Association of School Boards, Colorado Association of School Executives, State Land Trust Board, American Federation of Teachers, and Taxpayers for Public Education.

LEAP is another effort by the rich, corporate elites, so-called “education experts” and “reformers” to profit from taxpayer dollars, convincing voters that they are the good guys riding to the rescue. LEAP's devious promoters have done an excellent job of disguising this Halloween monster of a proposition. Voters don't be fooled! Vote “NO” on Proposition 119. It's a LEAP of Bad Faith!

Michael Merrifield is a retired public school teacher, a former Colorado state representative and senator and chairman of the House Education Committee, and currently a board member of Advocates for Public Education Policy, a nonprofit formed to protect public education.