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Don't bet on a lottery

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ALABAMIANS MAY say they want a lottery to support public education, but savvy state leaders would be shrewd not to wager too much on the idea.

A recent poll by Auburn University researchers found nearly 80 percent of respondents agreed education should be an "urgent" or "high priority" for local and state officials. More intriguing, pollsters found eager support for an education lottery, with about two-thirds saying they want one.

State leaders would be wise to pursue more sensible means for funding education, though, like reforming the state's tax code so big landowners pay their fair share for education. But if they lack the political will to fully fund Alabama's schools the old-fashioned, time-tested way with taxes then a lottery might be a last resort for Alabama's perennially underfunded schools.

Indeed, lotteries have some appeal. That's why Florida, Georgia, Tennessee and Louisiana have them, and why Alabamians cross state lines to play them. Additionally, public education has thrived with revenue generated from well-configured lotteries like Georgia's and Florida's.

Details can bedevil a lottery proposal, however, as former Gov. Don Siegelman found out in 1999, when voters trashed his lottery-for-education plan. Voters rejected the specifics of Mr. Siegelman's proposal, and concluded the money wouldn't go to where it's most needed — the classrooms.

Moreover, with vociferous opposition to a lottery from Gov. Bob Riley and other conservative leaders, the chance of fashioning a winning proposal remains slim.

Wise state leaders won't read too much into the latest poll results. The people who say they think public education should be an "urgent" priority don't necessarily think more money should be spent on it. And the people who say they would support a lottery won't necessarily vote for one at election time.