

## **More Freedom Would Enable Better Education**

By Roy Minet (Rev. 06/30/14)

According to Commonwealth Foundation figures, K-12 education spending in Pennsylvania topped \$25 billion last year or \$15,341 per student. It has *tripled* over the past 25 years. Yet, test scores indicate little or no improvement in academic outcome. In spite of such damning evidence, calls for even greater spending persist. Burdensome taxes continue to rise – especially property taxes.

It should be abundantly clear that additional money is not the solution. The problems are much more fundamental.

The root cause of our education trouble is an improper use of government force (through laws and regulations). As eloquently explained in our Declaration of Independence, the only proper purpose of government is to protect and secure individual rights to life, liberty and property.

Instead of protecting the rights of parents and children, government has instead destroyed the ability of the free market to provide their education needs, reducing their freedom by limiting their choices. Government also has infringed upon the freedom would-be providers should have to competitively offer education services. Taxpayer rights are infringed by forcing them to pay for services they don't use.

Look around. The free market clearly does the best job of most efficiently providing thousands of goods and services with many variations and choices. It is a completely voluntary system, performing its magic without any force or coercion. Problems are fixed automatically, quickly and locally. Suppliers who do not provide what customers want at a competitive price must either improve or go out of business. We are shooting ourselves in the foot by not allowing the free market to satisfy education needs.

If the above logic is not convincing enough, consider this evidence: The parents of nearly 400,000 Pennsylvania students spurn “free” government schools. The majority of those pay to attend private schools which manage to survive in spite of having to unfairly compete with schools that charge nothing. Substantially all alternative education options have lower costs per student, some are much lower. The Commonwealth Foundation estimates that it would cost Pennsylvania an additional \$3.8 billion if these alternatives were not being utilized. The clincher is an analysis by the Friedman Foundation which shows that these less expensive alternatives actually produce better academic outcomes.

In order for free market mechanisms to work, there must be open and fair competition that offers parents choices. And those making the choices *must* be the ones who pay for what they choose or costs will never be effectively contained. Yes, parents actually pay for the education of their children, just as they pay for food, clothing, shelter, medical care and all other needs.

Schools must be free to innovate and not be hamstrung by boneheaded regulations like “No Child Left Behind.” Those doing the best job thrive when parents freely choose to spend their education dollars there. Bad schools perish, which is far better quality control than any batch of regulations can ever be.

Parental rights should include wide latitude in how offspring are raised. But children have rights too. They should have the rights to reasonable food, clothing, shelter and K-12 education, as well as the right not to be abused or recklessly endangered. It is proper for government to step in with force only if/as necessary to protect children’s rights, always striking a careful balance with parents’ rights. Government must not tread beyond that.

We have an obstacle to achieving true free market education in Pennsylvania. Article III, Section 14, of the Pennsylvania Constitution says the state “...shall provide for...a thorough and efficient system of public education...” One could convincingly argue that what we have is nowhere near as thorough and efficient as the free market would be, but that probably won’t fly with the courts. Unless and until the Constitution can be amended, the best that can be done is a carefully designed voucher system that gives parents the freedom to spend their piece of the education budget in whatever way they think best for their children.

Competition always drives improvement. We will be amazed at the many “thorough and efficient” choices the free market will quickly offer.

(Published, *Lancaster Sunday News*, 07/20/14.)

(Published, September, 2014, *Wilkes-Barre Independent Gazette*)