

Fix Our Schools!!!

By Roy Minet (Rev. 2022/08/25)

Tis the season when school property taxes come due. It's a good bet that yours are even higher than they were last year; that's a good bet *every* year. While you are steaming about that, think about the larger picture: Almost nothing is working well with the way we educate children.

There is the matter of school choice. Parents are locked into a single school determined by their address. Sure, you can choose another if you want to pay for it in addition to paying your taxes. No wonder tempers explode when schools are unresponsive to parents' desires. Many parents are effectively trapped in a bad and deteriorating situation.

In Pennsylvania, school district spending per student increased to \$19,900 in 2020–21, according to the Commonwealth Foundation. Per-pupil spending at charter schools was considerably less. Costs have increased rapidly for years, driving property taxes ever higher.

The "solution" to any problem always seems to be to shovel more of taxpayers' money at it, and to add complexity with more laws and programs (see HB2169). The new laws are supposed to fix the problems that a previous batch of laws created. Yet, by no measure is school performance improving. And in spite of all the money, many schools still complain they are "unfairly" underfunded, no matter what "formula" politicians may devise.

The fundamental problem with public schools is that they are a monopoly. It is the worst kind of monopoly – a government-run monopoly. No matter how bad a school may be, it never "goes out of business."

The solution should be obvious: first, stop doing what doesn't work; end the monopoly. What is needed is simplicity, not more complexity. Get the government and politicians out of the education business. Stop using government force and let people run their own lives.

Put parents into the driver's seat. All schools will be "private" schools. The schools will compete to provide the best possible education at the lowest price. Their "funding" will be unquestionably "fair" as they will have earned the tuition dollars parents pay them when voluntarily choosing a school for their children.

Schools *will* be attentive to parents' desires. Varying student needs will be better served by specialized schools instead of the one-size-fits-all monopoly. "Bad" schools will quietly go out of business or be acquired by new management.

That's the easy and obvious part. It should be no surprise that a free market economic system works best. It doesn't use any force. There is absolutely no way to know how much educating children should cost OR how well it can be done until free, fair and open market competition shows us.

Now, we come to the completely separate issue of whether or not taxpayers should be forced to subsidize the education of other people's children. Perhaps the answer to this question is somewhat less clear.

There is a powerful, fundamental argument for, "Hell, NO!" After all, it is parents' choice to have children. Parents are responsible for them. Parents pay for their children's food, clothing, shelter, medical care, entertainment and all manner of other expenses. Why should education be any different? Such a pure free market solution would result in the best possible education efficiency.

Parents who struggle to adequately provide for their children fall back on charities and assistance programs to help. There is no reason such help shouldn't be for education as well as food, clothing, etc.

If parents are to be subsidized, there could be at least two approaches. The simplest would be to just mail 'em a check – an amount for each child. Some parents may decide to spend more than their subsidy on education; some may decide to spend less (or home school) and pocket what's left over. This *must* be allowed in order to preserve the competitive economic pressures that lower costs!

More complicated would be to deposit the subsidy into a non-taxable Education Savings Account (ESA) to which parents may also contribute. ESA funds could be used only to pay education costs, including college, and would be tied to each child. Any left-over amounts would roll forward and could be used in future years. Upon, say, age 35, the ESA could be dissolved and any remaining funds go to the young adult as taxable income.

However, and note well: there is no way to defeat the laws of economics. Any amount of subsidy absolutely will drive prices up to higher levels! If subsidies are to be provided, they should end after age 18 and be funded by a broadly based sales tax on goods and services (food, clothing and tuition not to be taxed). School property taxes should be completely eliminated.

A very generous subsidy would be the median amount that parents actually spent per child the prior year. A smaller fraction of the median might be considered, OR the subsidy could be gradually phased out over a period of years to achieve a purely free market education system.

Article III, Section 14, of the Pennsylvania Constitution says, "The General Assembly shall provide for the maintenance and support of a thorough and efficient system of public education to serve the needs of the Commonwealth." There is no way that requirement is being met by the current system.

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