

from
Upholding the Law
and Other Observations

by
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A Modest Proposal For A New Industrial Policy



As is typical at the start of a school year, the tax-funded education industry is rolling out another of its perennial whines for a funding hike, airing the hoary proposition that success in public schooling is available... but only if we all fork out a little more money. This despite the record of the last 70 years during which expenditures on that industry steadily increased while performance steadily declined.

For instance, we were taxed an average of \$867 per pupil in 1930, with that figure rising to \$6,043 in 1993 (both figures in 1992 dollars). Despite this phenomenal increase, during the same period test scores dropped. In 1967 verbal SAT averages were 466, and math averages were 492. By 1991, verbal scores were down to 422, and math had dropped to 474.

Current numbers appear higher, but this is the result of simple fraud-- prior to the 1995 cycle the test's scoring template was "re-centered", incorporating a 100 point drop in the average raw score into the scale and resulting in nominal scores above those of previous years. ACT results over the last decade have continued to reflect the trend of decline no longer

acknowledged by the SAT. Along with the explosion of remedial courses in colleges across the country, this unadulterated measure reports clearly that nothing has changed regarding the shoddiness of the "education industry" product.

The picture painted by these U.S. Department of Education numbers is highlighted by some additional statistics from the same source: While in 1960 the average student to teacher ratio was 25.8 to 1, by 1995 it had dropped to 17.3 to 1; over that same period the percentage of teachers with master's degrees more than doubled (to more than half) and the median years of teacher experience increased from 11 to 15. Nonetheless, we continue to be told that we just haven't spent enough to allow the industry to achieve success.

Thankfully, every home-schooled kid in the country decisively puts the lie to such nonsense. Academically, these students, on average, far exceed their public-schooled peers-- despite relevant per-pupil expenditures that are a tiny fraction of what is spent on those institutionalized counterparts. As reported in Lawrence Rudner's 1999 analysis of the largest study of its kind to that point, involving 20,760 students:

"Almost 25% of home school students were enrolled one or more grades above their age-level peers in public and private schools.

Home school student achievement test scores were exceptionally high. The median scores for every subtest at every grade (typically in the 70th to 80th percentile) were well above those of public and Catholic/Private school students.

On average, home school students in grades 1 to 4 performed one grade level above their age-level public/private school peers on achievement tests.

Students who had been home schooled their entire academic life had higher scholastic achievement test

scores than students who had also attended other educational programs.

There were no meaningful differences in achievement by gender, whether the student was enrolled in a full-service curriculum, or whether a parent held a state issued teaching certificate."

(Rudner, L. M. (1999a). Scholastic achievement and demographic characteristics of home school students in 1998.)

Surveys of homeschooling families consistently report average per-student expenditures of well below \$1000 per year. For that matter, even private-schooled children consistently, if far less dramatically, out-perform public-schooled kids for, typically, half the money. The lesson is that spending is irrelevant to success-- it is incentive that makes the difference.

It will be observed that the homeschooling expenditure figure mentioned above does not include the value of the 10 or so weekly educational hours each home-schooled student receives from the teaching parent. However, as the relevant issue is not what the education of any given child costs that child's parents but rather whether additional spending on public schools can produce similar results, that value is moot. It is, after all, associated with services which are by their nature unavailable as discrete market goods and are capable of exchange only from a parent to that parent's child, regardless of amounts spent. Furthermore, that value is not the product of any training, specialty or other quantifiable characteristic toward which such spending could be targeted.

Even boundless optimism denying that simple economic reality can't support a case for more spending on the public schools-- and, in arguing the point, helps reveal its futility. In light of the insignificant spending of homeschoolers on all other academically-related expenses, it is clear that nothing but the securing of much better quality teachers, or far more mediocre ones-- in an effort to replicate the quality and focus of the

homeschooling parent-- could offer any hope of benefit from increased spending.

The former, of course, could only be a viable potential solution if the teachers we have now are no good (or are deliberately holding back on their performance in order to blackmail the community into paying them more by ruining its children's futures until such demands are met). Since we are assured by both the school administrators and the teachers that we are already getting the best available (no one lobbying for more money is accompanying his or her efforts with a standing offer to resign in order to make way for the better quality replacement secured by the sought after higher salary...)-- and that they are working their very hearts out-- expectations of success from this spending-more-to-get-better-quality approach will prove to be misplaced.

The latter would require that we finance one full-time teacher with benefits, administrative expenses, support personnel, bussing, etc. for no more than every couple of students-- while still failing to secure an educator even remotely as committed to the success of the endeavor as Mom or Dad. Clearly, we'd be better off simply to offer all parents of school-age children a pro-rated share-per-child of what would be spent on such a teacher's salary, in order to encourage more of them to attend to their children's education directly. That way we would maximize the benefits of that group's proven record of success-- while enjoying bus-free roads, to boot.

(Actually, those parents already taking responsibility for their own children's education would be more than content at simply being spared the school taxes taken from them, for which they receive no benefit whatsoever. I'm confident that most others, upon joining their ranks, would take the same view. More on this in a moment.)

What this leaves are the other public-education-industry expenses by which increased spending is sometimes justified, such as infrastructure, diversity counselors, "Gay, Lesbian,

Bisexual and Trans-Gendered safe rooms", armed guards, STD treatment centers, drug-rehab facilities, book-banning committees, etc. All of these are ancillary to the whole surrogate-teacher concept, of course. Given the futility and indefensibility of that core program, spending on such 'perks' at any level can be seen as nothing more or less than throwing good money after bad.

Our hundred-year-old national experiment with government schools has been degenerating into fiscal irresponsibility and personal tragedy for its young victims for decades now. It is way past time to face the facts on this score, and acknowledge that the education of children is a responsibility properly attendant upon parenthood. Happily, as in so many other areas, giving propriety its due naturally and harmoniously delivers the best possible results.

We will never be entirely without a public education industry, of course-- there will always be orphans, and the children of addicts and the irremediably self-absorbed, for whom the provision of such welfare will be the unavoidable obligation of a charitable society. But we can and should recognize that this option is the worst of all possible worlds from an educational standpoint-- delivering the poorest results for the most money.

The best option, homeschooling, may not be for everyone (although learning the truth about the 'income' tax would negate one of the chief obstacles for many-- the loss of one parent's earnings). But as a society, we should be encouraging it as broadly as possible. Recourse to the next best alternative, private schools, should also be supported. In both cases, the single most significant public policy change that could effect such support and encouragement would be the crediting of all taxes earmarked for their own children's education to parents not using the public system.

Simple fairness demands such a policy, and even though for some this would mean an insignificant reduction in taxes, it would be enough to induce many-- who otherwise feel that since they're being made to pay for the public system anyway, they may as well use it-- to take direct charge of their children's education, or at least move to the private school option. Each one of those not currently paying their children's entire public-school ticket through their own taxes who makes that choice would leave more money per student in that system; those paying more than is spent on their kids would continue to pay the excess, with the same beneficial result.

Here's an example: Presume that per-student government spending is \$10,000. When a family with one child of school age which currently pays \$5,000 in school taxes keeps that child out of the public schools, its tax bill goes down by the \$5,000. The \$5,000 balance however, which has been being subsidized by others all along, stays with the public school system, resulting in a net gain of that amount for the system. On the other hand, if that family is currently paying \$12,000 in school taxes, they keep the \$10,000 when they pull their child out of public schooling, but continue to pay the other \$2,000-- again resulting in a net gain for the public school system. Those who had been paying exactly what is spent on their own children would have no effect on the existing system at all.

On balance then, public schooling would have more money per student, and society as a whole would gain better-educated citizens. Ultimately (and quickly) the tax burden on those subsidizing other people's kids would go down as the public education industry found itself with more and more money for fewer and fewer students, delivering even more benefits more broadly. It's a win-win solution.

Interestingly, one of the groups that would enjoy the greatest net benefit from this policy would be public school

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teachers who, on average, have half again as many of their own children in private schools as does the general population of parents, according to the U.S. census. I'm sure I can count on their enthusiastic support for my plan...