

Money and Education

Education is an expensive function, and therefore the connection between money and education is a frequent issue. Local governments struggle with school budgets, homeowners struggle to pay their property taxes, and Christian schools and parents struggle with tuition costs. Just how does money relate to education?

First of all, what is the connection between money and the quality of education? Apologists for the public school system make frequent claims about the connection between funding levels and the quality of education. When attempting to explain the perennial failures of the system, the standard response has almost uniformly been to claim that funding levels were inadequate to achieve quality results. However, statistics going back well over a century do not support such claims. Both Zach Montgomery, Assistant Attorney General of the United States in the 1870's, and William Bennett, Secretary of Education in the 1980's, presented statistics that belied the claim that the quality of education corresponds to the level at which it is funded. While this may be the subject for a future article, our purpose here is to examine the true connection between money and education. Let's start with the factors that support good education.

1. Private or Parental Control:

Not to repeat myself, but again statistics going back well over a century demonstrate that in every comparison of a private or parentally controlled school system with a governmentally controlled system of public schools, the former radically outperform the latter. When one adds to that the fact that these systems generally operate at significantly lower levels of funding, the argument that money is a determining factor begins to lose a lot of its punch. It is also significant that this effect is proportional to the degree of statist control. A century ago when local government schools were actually under local control, and parents wielded real influence on their schools, the consequences were not nearly as severe as they are today when educational bureaucrats at state and federal levels control education while local communities are left with the bills. However, my main issue is that it does not cost anything to have this type of control. There is no expense involved in selecting this kind of system. A major factor impacting the quality of education is completely isolated from monetary concerns. That is the point.

2. A Sound Philosophy of Education:

Would a steel company survive if it was ignorant or totally misinformed about the basics of metallurgy? For a school to prosper it needs to understand both the goals and techniques of education, and particularly it needs to understand its students. In other words, it needs a sound philosophy of education, including a Biblical anthropology. The Dr. Spock anthropology of the public schools, inimical to sound discipline, oriented to issues of self esteem, and driven by politically correct concepts of man, has not only proven to be destructive of good order and discipline, but has created an environment where education cannot be expected to take place. Again, this is not the place for an extensive discussion of educational philosophy. I am simply stating the importance of this ingredient, and making the point that it is not related to issues of money. A sound educational philosophy may be critical to education, but it is free!

3. Quality Teachers:

Here again we broach an issue that is frequently related to the quality of education in the public mind. Again we ask, what is the relation between money and quality education? Specifically, what is the relation between teacher pay and performance? If the teachers unions are to be believed, you get what you pay for: good pay equals good teachers, equals quality education. All are agreed that quality teachers are an essential ingredient for success. The question thus becomes whether or not good pay ensures quality teachers. The answer is "not necessarily." The public schools are themselves highly demonstrative of that fact. Almost all would acknowledge that the public schools have significantly declined over the past generation. A generation ago the public elementary schools were staffed by a lot of underpaid dedicated spinsters as opposed to the overpaid cadre of feminists that comprise much of the current staffs. Teacher pay is at an all time high while performance is mired in all time lows. States that are at the top in teacher pay are not achieving commensurate results compared to states that are much lower. The connection simply doesn't exist.

Secular corporations have long realized that money is a poor motivator. Overpaid spoiled professional athletes are a good example of that. Any teacher that is "in it" for the money has to be suspect. A teacher's education, mastery of the subject matter, leadership skills, dedication to the students, philosophy of education, etc. all have far more impact on that teacher's performance than what's in their pay check. Good teachers should be paid well, but paying well does not ensure that they will be good. Teachers unions are effective at driving up teachers' pay scales, but

otherwise union policies are generally inimical to quality education. They are specifically inimical to obtaining quality teachers, while they are more effective at tenuring unqualified ones.

4. Quality Students:

The old saying is "You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear," and this is certainly true to some extent. This aspect of education is a frequent complaint of public educators, who point out that public schools have to take all students while private schools can cherry pick theirs. This is of course true. It need not be that big an issue, though. It is precisely because public educators have designed educational policies that are subversive of discipline, and that have made public education a right, instead of a privilege, that they have hamstrung themselves with respect to their ability to deal with disruptive students. Not surprisingly, inner city private schools employing strict discipline and rigorous concentration on educational basics have performed wonders with the very student material that public educators complain about. But to be fair, this is where Christian schools have a great advantage. Christian homes generally produce far better student material than the population at large does. However, to stick to our point, this advantage is not something that was bought and paid for. It was acquired by the grace of God and through his covenant mercies. Again money is not a factor.

5. Quality Curriculum:

Textbooks and teacher guides are basically paper and ink. It doesn't cost any more to publish a good textbook than it does to print a bad one. Or to put it more directly, you can't save any money by buying poor textbooks. Curriculum costs are basically neutral. They are essentially the same if you invest in a great curriculum or in a bad one. Again there is no connection here between money spent and the quality of education. It is one's philosophy of education and the wisdom and experience applied to selecting a curriculum that determines its quality. The curriculum budget is not the arbiter of its quality.

Conspicuous by their absence from this list are the two chief culprits cited by statist educators, money and class size. We have dealt with the former. Let's take a look at the latter. The Clinton administration, to respond to a perceived public demand that the federal government do something to improve our system of education, sponsored legislation to provide subsidies for local schools to hire additional teachers with a view to reducing class size. As critics pointed out, this could actually be counter productive if

improved quality of education is the goal. Staffing up generally means hiring less experienced and more marginally qualified teachers. Since teacher quality has much more impact on the quality of education than class size, this can actually lower the quality of education. In point of fact, done within reasonable limits, reducing staff size by eliminating marginally competent teachers can actually improve the quality of education. All Clinton accomplished was to achieve the enthusiastic support of the teachers' unions, who were the chief beneficiaries of this financial windfall. Also for some subjects, such as English literature, history, etc., where discussion and interaction are essential ingredients, many private schools could enhance the quality of their education by larger class sizes. Again, within reasonable limits class size is not a significant factor in the quality of education.

Quality education is Christian education. Christian education has quality built into it, that is, to the extent it is Christian it will have quality. To the extent that its philosophy and curriculum are Christian, and to the extent that its teachers are motivated by a Christian commitment to exercise their calling to the glory of God, it will be a quality education. Is this then good economic news for Christian parents? Can they assume that they can get quality education on the cheap? Not necessarily! And thinking so has been one of the factors working to the detriment of Christian education. What then is the real connection between education and money?

As stated above, education is expensive. And the real issue is who should pay for it. The statist answer is that our children are really the children of the state and that the state should educate its children in public schools and finance that education through compulsory taxation. The Christian answer is radically different. We believe that children belong to the parents and that it is their responsibility to provide for the education of their children. We believe that educational responsibility rests not with the state or the church, but with the family. It may be expensive, but it is the parents who have to foot the bill for the education of their children. And parents have the duty to pay what that education really costs. They have a responsibility to pay a fair wage to the teachers and to pay the actual cost of educating their children.

There are some Biblical principles involved here. As Paul states it, "*For the scripture saith, Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn. And, The labourer is worthy of his reward.*" (1 Timothy 5:18) and "*For it is written in the law of Moses, Thou shalt not muzzle the mouth of the ox*

that treadeth out the corn. Doth God take care for oxen? Or saith he it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, this is written: that he that ploweth should plow in hope; and that he that thresheth in hope should be partaker of his hope." (1 Corinthians 9:9-10) Paul says that the teachers are worthy of their just reward for their labors. And underpaid staffs have been the bane of Christian schools for decades. Frequently dedicated teachers cannot afford to stay in their chosen calling. After a few years of sacrificial service they have decapitalized and need to find an alternative way to provide the necessities of life.

We are speaking here of responsibility. In actual fact of course Christians form supportive communities. Christian school staff willingly work sacrificially. Christian school administrators raise money from other sources than just tuition. As much as possible, the Christian community pulls together to support this critical function of educating their children in the fear of the Lord. But the prime responsibility for financing this function remains with the parents. That is the point. The real point is that if we are convicted that Christian education is a Biblical duty, then the parents, the teachers, and all involved should labor together and share the sacrifices required. Too often I have seen teachers laboring for one third of the market value of their services driving old clunkers to enable the education of children whose parents are driving luxury vehicles. As James says, "*Brethren, these things ought not to be so.*" Let us labor sacrificially together, sharing the burdens to carry out our Biblical responsibilities. Only when we have behaved justly can we justly expect the Lord's blessing on our enterprise.