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Straight Talk on Public Education

Byron Schlomach

“Our society and its educational institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling, and of the expectations and disciplined effort needed to attain them.”

- A Nation at Risk, 1983

“The very fact that the education system succeeds to the degree that it does is a testament to the good will and work ethic, mostly, of teachers.”

- This paper

Introduction

In 2009, despite a deep national recession, per-student funding and teacher salaries in Oklahoma reached an all-time peak due to a massive injection of federal funds. Since then, it is undeniable that public education in the United States, and specifically in Oklahoma, has seen a funding decline on a per-student basis. Yet, since that massive injection's withdrawal in 2010, public education spending has gradually declined nationally, and most states follow this pattern, as noted below for Oklahoma. ¹ Nevertheless, for a system accustomed to relatively small and temporary drops in funding, nearly continuous reductions for 7 years represents a considerable jolt.

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next, starting with the current decade. Oklahoma's is a familiar story across the United States wherein education funding and personnel grew dramatically for over 60 years, making this country the biggest education spender in the world. And despite an almost constant drumbeat of education reforms from various directions since 1983's *A Nation at Risk* report, that report's admonition, quoted above, still holds true.

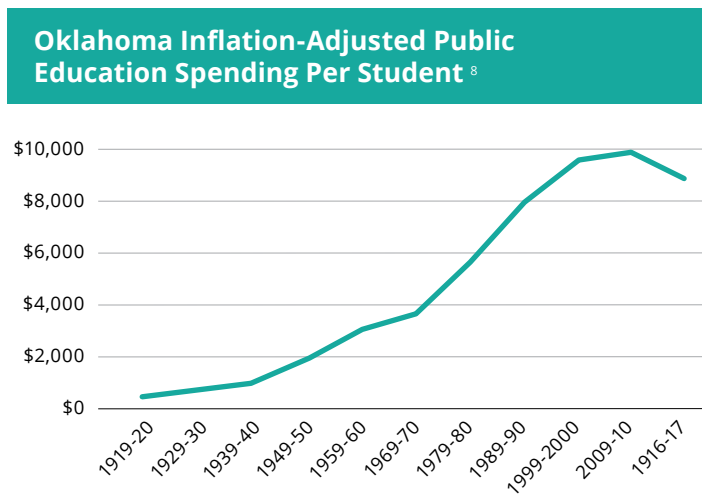
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The statistics below, focused on Oklahoma, illustrate the point. Following the statistics, a brief history of public education in the United States with some Oklahoma specifics is presented, along with recommendations for making real improvements. History makes it clear that the path we have been on is a matter of choice. We can choose better.

Trends in Oklahoma’s Public Education System

Emphasis on Numbers of Personnel and Spending in Public Education

- From 1940 to 1960, real (inflation-adjusted) spending per student in Oklahoma public schools more-than tripled.²
- From 1960 to 2000, real spending per student in Oklahoma public schools more-than tripled again.
- While real spending per student rose 200 percent from 1950 to 2000, real teacher salaries rose only 33 percent.³
- In 2009, real spending per student in Oklahoma reached its peak, having risen another 5 percent after 2000.⁴
- Since its peak in 2009, real spending per student has fallen by about 13 percent to a level about 12 percent above what it was in 1990 (even after adding pre-K, and proportionally more students, since 1990).⁵
- Today, considerably fewer than half of Oklahoma’s public school employees (>84,000) are teachers (41,047).⁶
- The 2018 increase in education funding will bring Oklahoma real per-student spending to a level several hundred inflation-adjusted dollars below that of 2000, keeping in mind that the 2000 level of spending was more than triple the spending level of 1960 and nearly double that of 1980.⁷



Note: The drop in funding from 2010 to 2017 occurred gradually over the intervening years.

Absence of Academic Improvement, Combined with Poor Resource Usage

- 40 percent of Oklahoma high school graduates who attend college must take remediation classes due to inadequate high-school preparation.⁹
- In a book published in 2013, it was said that if Oklahoma were ranked as if it were a country in student math knowledge, it would be about even with Croatia and Turkey, ranked 81st in the world.¹⁰
- In 2017, only 16 percent of Oklahoma’s high school seniors were college-ready on all four of ACT’s benchmarks while 42 percent of seniors did not meet a single college-ready benchmark. (Note: 2017 results are not directly comparable to previous years due to differences in exam participation.)¹¹
- According to the CATO Institute, from 1972 to 2010, while inflation-adjusted, per-student expenditures nearly doubled, SAT test results remained flat in Oklahoma.¹²

Oklahoma’s 4th-graders consistently score below the national average in math and reading on National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) assessments, begging the question of just when Oklahoma’s extraordinary effort in pre-K will pay off.

- The U.S. consistently ranks among the top five nations in per-student spending but struggles to stay in the top 20 in international academic comparisons.¹³
- Oklahoma is one of a handful of states formula-funding pre-K for all comers; only Vermont and Florida serve a higher percentage of their 4-year-old populations in public schools.¹⁴
- If, along with 40 other states, Oklahoma served half as many of its pre-K population, there would be \$200 more to spend on each remaining student.¹⁵
- Oklahoma’s 4th-graders consistently score below the national average in math and reading on National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) assessments, begging the question of just when Oklahoma’s extraordinary effort in pre-K will pay off. (NOTE: An upward blip in 2015 NAEP scores was erased by 2017.)¹⁶

- Since 2000, Oklahoma’s 8th-graders consistently score below the national average in NAEP. Overall, the results are best characterized as flat.¹⁷
- A great deal of emphasis has been placed on lowering class size over the years, and this has been done. There are presently 16.3 students per teacher in Oklahoma; in 1970 this ratio was 21.6. Given several research studies, and the fact that we are still getting 1970 level results, this suggests that the small class size emphasis has been a costly failure.¹⁸
- Foreign exchange students consider U.S. schools less challenging than the schools from which they came. Given Oklahoma’s relative performance, this must be especially true for Oklahoma’s schools.¹⁹

And Now, the Big Increase in Teacher Pay

- In 2009, real teacher pay in Oklahoma reached its peak. Since then, it has fallen over 7 percent, less than the reduction in spending per student.²⁰
- The recent increase in teacher pay will raise the real average by about 13 percent, to a level well above the previous peak (by about 5 percent, although this should be discounted somewhat to account for current inflation, which is not currently known).²¹
- The recent increase in teacher pay will move Oklahoma’s average teacher pay to 11th in the nation, after accounting for state differences in cost of living, according to the most current statistics.²²

While teachers did take a pay-cut due to inflation in recent years, it was not as big a cut as many think. The evidence is that the reduction in overall school spending has had no impact academically any more than previous large increases did. The controversy over spending and teacher pay has, in fact, worked to the education system’s political advantage, serving to insulate school administrations, school boards, and teacher unions from criticism of their mishandling and mismanagement of resources over many years.

A Brief History of America’s Education System

Today, few can imagine the United States without its current public education system. In fact, many Americans equate the current system with America itself, viewing public education as a uniquely American invention. This could not be further from the truth. In fact, the current government-monopolized public education system is *not* “as American as apple pie.” At its root, it is a German invention.

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The Puritans and Jefferson (The First 200 Years)

The earliest European Americans considered literacy absolutely essential, mainly because they viewed the ability to read the Bible as fundamental to their way of life. Parents were required to see that their children had some basic education according to a 1642 law in the Puritan colony of Massachusetts. In 1647, Massachusetts towns were required to establish schools that children could attend, but such attendance was not compulsory.²³ Basically, the law created an expectation that children would be taught to read, but that instruction did not have to occur in schools.

Thomas Jefferson, often portrayed as an early advocate of public education as we know it today, actually proposed a highly decentralized system in which a state’s only part would be to provide the basic institutional outline for

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establishing highly localized, parent-controlled schools. Were his plan realized today, there would likely be at least as many school districts as there currently are school campuses, probably many more, with schools placed only a few miles apart.²⁴ Perhaps the model Jefferson proposed is most akin to a fully “charterized” school system with parent-governed schools, but with parents substantially funding them.

Jefferson’s use of the term “public education” is best interpreted as “a public that is educated.” His plans to achieve this aim would have provided for very limited free schooling only for the indigent, and no centralization (a Jefferson protégé voted against a plan that would have established a state board of education). In essence, Jefferson would have mandated that parents see that their children were minimally educated and those who sent their children to school would mostly fund schools that they controlled

with other parents.²⁵ This is a far cry from the current centralized, entirely tax-supported system, run by people who are regarded as experts, and attended by children for free but with little choice about which school to attend.

Despite Jefferson's educational vision never coming to fruition, literacy in the United States during Jefferson's lifetime was quite high. By 1795, the literacy rate among white New England men was 90 percent, and nearly 100 percent in New England cities. Literacy rates were lower in the South than in the North, and most slaves were illiterate. The literacy rate among women was also lower. Nonetheless, literacy in the United States was likely higher than in

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Europe.²⁶ By one proxy, the ability to read complex prose, it is possible that, on average, Americans today are less literate than Americans at the time of the founding.²⁷

Thus, the degree to which Americans are literate today cannot be attributed to the existence of a centralized public education system. With no centralized education system and many children receiving very little formal education, the United States achieved one of the highest literacy rates in the world prior to the 19th century. In fact, with 32 million illiterate adults in the United States now, fewer than 90 percent of American adults are literate today. What's more, 21 percent of American adults currently read below a 5th grade level.²⁸ Nevertheless, given international comparisons that judge U.S. school children's language skills as relatively lacking, it is apparent that much of Americans' literacy is gained outside of schools. After all, the United States is rated the 7th most literate nation in the world, ahead of Germany and many other nations whose students score better than U.S. students in various international comparisons.²⁹

Horace Mann (The Next 80 Years)

The roots of the current U.S. education system can be traced to Prussia, the leading state of Germany under whose leadership Germany was united in 1871. The Prussian system was characterized by centralized control of curricula, centrally-controlled teacher training, and student testing that determined training for future careers. Attendance was mandatory, and the Prussian system was specifically designed to create a pliant and obedient population for the

state's purposes. One of its primary creators, Johann Gotlieb Fichte (1762-1814), said "If you want to influence a person, you must do more than merely talk to him; you must fashion him, and fashion him in such a way that he simply cannot will otherwise than what you wish him to will."³⁰

The Prussian education system has influenced education systems all over the world, but its primary exponent in the United States was Horace Mann (1796-1859) of Massachusetts, considered the father of American public schooling. Mann's interest in the Prussian system was not for its aim to fashion people on behalf of the state, but for its organizational advantages.³¹ However, Mann was fervently opposed to "sectarian" education. As a Unitarian and lapsed Calvinist, he was quite determined to, in some ways, impose his own vision of social cohesion on society, even as he rather hypocritically home-schooled his own children, out of reach of the common schools he promoted.³² As it happened, his message played well at a time (1830's and 1840's) of widespread Protestant angst regarding Catholic immigration.³³ The system he promoted and helped to create was, organizationally, basically what we have today, a top-down system of school districts and state-level authorities exercising central control.

At best, Mann's advocacy for a system modeled on Prussia's for the efficiency but without the social control was naïve. Highly centralized institutions cannot be controlled for all time by their creators. They are, in fact, ripe targets for

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anyone ideologically disposed to impose their will on others. As it happens, the education system in the U.S. is many things, but efficient is not one of them.

John Dewey's Influence (The 20th Century and On)

While Mann helped to centralize education in the 1800s in a way antithetical to the views of Thomas Jefferson, the U.S. public education system was not fully realized until early in the 20th Century. Mann viewed the administrative centralization of schools that he advocated more as an efficiency issue and to create greater social cohesion. It was John Dewey (1859-1952) who turned the system toward its Prussian roots of molding society, albeit in a different way

from that of the Prussians. His views continue to impact public education today, with his experiential learning philosophy.³⁴

In a nutshell, John Dewey's philosophy of education de-emphasized instructors who would define what students needed to learn and pushed the thoroughly modern (but not necessarily correct) idea that the learner should decide his or

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her own interests and instruction should adjust accordingly. Dewey stressed the notion of molding children into good members of a democratic society and stressed developing a child's ability to socially interact with others. He believed in directed education, but seemed interested in the individual as a member of a group rather than as an individual who interacted with other individuals.³⁵

Some view both Mann and Dewey as promoting a system of social control meant to crush individuality.³⁶ However, in many respects Dewey's ideas do not sound particularly nefarious and he was critical of at least some Progressive educators who were heavily influenced by his ideas.³⁷ However, as Thomas Sowell has put it, "Whatever the intentions of John Dewey or other pioneers of Progressive education philosophy, its practical consequences have been a steady retreat from the daunting task of making mass education a serious attempt to raise American school children to a standard, rather than bringing the standard down to them."³⁸

The strangest aspect of Dewey's influence on American public education is his advocacy for the whole-word reading instruction method (also called look-say, see-say, sight, psycholinguistic, word and whole-language over the years). This method ignores individual sounds that letters stand for (phonemic awareness/phonics) and became holy writ in public education for decades.³⁹ Unfortunately for generations of students, whole-word reading instruction is ineffective for many and leads to reading pathologies. Indeed, by 1929, Dr. Samuel T. Orton published an article in the *Journal of Educational Psychology* highly critical of the "sight method" of reading instruction and warned that it was an actual obstacle to the acquisition of reading skills for many.⁴⁰

Dewey's philosophy of education openly de-emphasized early literacy, to such an extent that he wrote, "It is one of the great mistakes of education to make reading and writing constitute the bulk of the school work the first two years."⁴¹ Given his own extensive record of scholarship, it is difficult to believe that Dewey intended that children be illiterate. However, his advocacy for whole-word reading instruction did play into Dewey's belief system.

Dewey, like Mann before him, had been raised a strict Calvinist, but where Mann remained at least nominally religious, Dewey became an atheist and was one of the original signers of the Humanist Manifesto.⁴² When the whole-word reading method became dominant, it displaced reading textbooks that contained references to God, Jesus, and excerpts from the Bible with the timeless prose of "Run, Spot, run! See Spot run." Whether the displacement of religious passages was a motive for Dewey's advocacy of whole-word methodology is not known. What is known, however, is that whole-word reading instruction is clearly not the correct way to teach reading, and Dewey was well enough read that he would have known of concerns regarding his preferred reading instruction method's lack of efficacy.⁴³

Modern Public Education in the U.S. – The Last 60 Years

The story of modern public education has been one of constant cycling through re-packaged pedagogical fads (witness the many different names for whole-word reading instruction), mission creep, and frustrated efforts at reform, all regularly accompanied by spending increases. Over time, non-teacher personnel have come to outnumber teachers in

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some states, and the system has lost focus, with its priorities dramatically shifting.

While public education, considering the price tag, often does not do its one core function well,⁴⁴ its concentrated numbers of employees, with their family members and supporters, wield political power very well. Tragically, that power is often not exercised for the betterment of students'

educations or for the effective use of taxpayers' resources, but for the interests of the adults in the system.

Since the early 20th century, school districts have increasingly consolidated, moving farther and farther from Jefferson's vision of parent-directed schools. Where there were nearly 130,000 districts nationwide in 1932, there were fewer than 15,000 in 2000.⁴⁵ School districts with 40,000 and more students have become increasingly common. Yet, the supposed greater efficiencies from consolidating school districts have never materialized.

Fads and Mission Creep

When the Soviet Union launched Sputnik in 1958, widespread angst about the United States' ability to catch up and keep up with Soviet technology led to a great deal of emphasis on science education. The effect was greater federal involvement, especially in higher education, and more money being poured into education in general.⁴⁶ Little else changed. In fact, the "Dick and Jane" whole-word readers that became popular in the 1930s remained the primary textbooks for reading instruction for at least another decade.⁴⁷

Where the reaction to Sputnik saw federal action largely at the university level of education, in 1965 the federal government passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) which directed federal money to schools, previously entirely a state and local responsibility. The ESEA has been renewed every five years since its first passage. These renewals are the vehicles by which various federal education initiatives have been delivered, including the ESEA's name changes to the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and now to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).⁴⁸

Because of federal money, the federal government has been able to impose its will on states. It has also allowed federal courts to get involved in determining if states are meeting various mandates. A primary focus of the ESEA has been in special education, with sometimes very costly mandates placed on schools to serve children with

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occasionally profound behavioral, mental, and physical disorders that require extra personnel and facilities that are not fully funded by the federal government. Another focus of the law has been compensatory education – additional funding for students at the bottom of the socio-economic

spectrum. This program has had limited success, naturally enough, since poor or rich, kids are kids.⁴⁹ The ESEA name changes and amendments to bring about the NCLB Act and the ESSA did not change the special and compensatory education aspects of the law.

Long-time teachers and administrators can, no doubt, speak in great detail about the shifts in emphasis on methods and goals in public education over the years. "Marzano's taxonomy" (a way of breaking down learning that makes quantifying what teachers do relatively easy

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for lesson-auditing purposes) and "scaffolding" (breaking down and explaining the material to students in a logical progression) are terms of emphasis today that sound sophisticated but really reflect what teachers have always done. The emphasis on self-esteem, holy writ 20 years ago, still remains. Self-esteem is often used as an excuse for grade inflation and social promotion, although the evidence is that high self-esteem just discourages the hard work of learning.⁵⁰ Bilingual/bicultural education was all the rage 30 years ago but has mostly given way to the common sense approach of requiring speedy English-language acquisition.

In recent decades, a great deal of effort has been made to integrate younger children into the public education system. Indeed, in 1990, partly as a result of a teacher strike and union demands, Oklahoma became an early adopter of early childhood education. At that time, the state reduced its earliest age of compulsory attendance to 5 years, making it one of only 9 states to have such an early compulsory attendance age, and added an optional pre-kindergarten for four-year-olds that is formula-funded at a rate better than high school.⁵¹ Yet, as noted above, 4th grade NAEP scores are flat and continue to lag the nation. This reflects results around the nation where the best you can say about pre-kindergarten is it makes a positive difference for a year or two.

In the U.S., inordinate amounts of money are spent on sports and technology. Sports have been a long-standing disruption, so these activities have not significantly added to public education's expense. Technology, on the other hand, has added a great deal to the expense in recent decades.

Technology's implementation is always accompanied with demands for more funding, although it has been demonstrated that technology can (and should, as in other industries) bring down costs.⁵²

While technology is constantly held up as a path to greater educational productivity, in the context of bureaucratic public schools, there is no evidence that

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productivity has improved. In fact, exchange students from other nations report far more technology in the American classroom, yet those students' nations tend to perform better educationally.⁵³ In the public education system as a whole, gadgetry seems to be implemented simply for the sake of gadgetry. More than once, the author's wife, a public school teacher, has had expensive "smart boards" on the wall that would not interface with the school-issued computer. She used it as a rather expensive projector screen.

School children are constantly experimented on with changes in how mathematics concepts are presented. Group work, often called cooperative learning, is a point of emphasis in the modern classroom, despite a simultaneous emphasis on recognizing different learning styles, which presumably includes the child that prefers to work alone. Diversity is a near-religion, which seems to mean destroying any notion of common culture and history, hardly in keeping with the stated visions of Mann and Dewey.⁵⁴

Schools have become centers of social experimentation, social work, community health, entertainment, child care (witness the push for universal pre-kindergarten), transportation, and nutrition. Somewhere in their mission, education remains. However, there is a reason a corporation like Amazon is so successful and does its job so well – because it really just does one thing. It sells stuff, which Amazon executives would say is more complicated than it sounds. But then, so is educating students, which begs the question of why schools are asked to do so much else. The focus of schools is too often on something other than the one very complicated thing schools are supposed to achieve.⁵⁵ And, the effort to make relevant education schools in universities (considered the dregs of higher education scholarship), state education departments, and large district central offices, brings about constant cycling through fads that never make the difference that is promised.⁵⁶

Accountability/Testing⁵⁷

After *A Nation at Risk* was published in 1983, educational accountability became a major reform issue. It was envisioned that students would take tests that accurately measured how much they'd learned with the aggregate results reported for schools, districts, and states. Early reformers merely wanted what might be called "performance transparency." Aggregate SAT results at state and national levels were often made available at the time, and occasional international comparisons were conducted, but the public had no access to district or campus data

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that would make historical or cross comparisons within states possible. In some cases, nationally norm-referenced achievement test data were a closely guarded secret held to be strictly confidential.⁵⁸

The education establishment fought accountability every step of the way, but where the concept could not be beaten, it was turned as much to the establishment's advantage as possible. Reformers in many states were forced to build an accountability system from scratch. Educators, naturally anxious about their own positions, insisted that new tests had to be developed as "criterion-referenced" tests. That is, tests had to match a set of written, grade-by-grade standards determined within each state. This was so educators could fully anticipate material that would be tested. Traditional, nationally norm-referenced achievement tests, though initially used for several years in Oklahoma,⁵⁹ were off the table because their results were very difficult for the establishment to manipulate. Every state potentially had its own standards, and these had to be written, inspiring a great deal of ideological conflict.

The use of criterion-referenced accountability exams has encouraged "teaching to the test" rather than teaching curricula in full. It has also encouraged states to update the exams every few years. Each exam iteration supposedly gets more rigorous than the last. Each iteration sees a cycle of improved performance over time, and then once a plateau of performance is achieved, a new test is deemed to be in order. This cycle is consistent with a learning curve on the part of educators wherein they learn to "teach the exam." Changing the exam appears to be the only way to create a new educational narrative of improvement in outcomes.

It also makes it impossible to maintain any performance-measure continuity over many years.

All along, of course, there were reformers who wanted to use an accountability system as a means of changing incentives within the system. Ideally for some, school administrators and teachers would be individually rewarded and punished based on test results. This has never occurred except in limited cases.

Alternatively, fairly early on, the idea of rating schools arose. This put greater pressure on principals, and to some extent, district officials, who were, after all, ultimately responsible for educational outcomes. The high stakes nature of exams, whereby students could be held back a grade if they did not perform well, came later. Some within the education establishment wanted high-stakes testing because they felt this was the only way students would be encouraged to perform their best and reflect well on their teachers.

How did the education establishment respond to the accountability movement? They gamed the system from top to bottom, and they irked parents. The establishment introduced constant practice testing for the official state tests in addition to continuing to administer traditional achievement tests.⁶⁰ They also narrowed the curriculum to only those areas they knew would be tested.⁶¹ Reformers never intended for only tested subjects to become the basis for the entire curriculum and they certainly did not intend for test questions to be the curriculum, but in far too many instances, this has happened. What's more, cheating scandals became a problem.⁶² Students were often unjustifiably designated as special education since they were exempted under some states' systems.⁶³ Administrators did what they could to encourage some poor performers to leave school altogether.⁶⁴

Parents were not pleased as they saw the increase in time students spent being tested and preparing for being tested rather than studying for depth of knowledge. In addition, the breadth of subject matter to which students were exposed narrowed. Some subject-specific teachers' organizations even lobbied to be included in the standardized testing regime because they felt their subjects were being neglected. Of course, local education officials and teachers blamed their legislature for every irksome action by education officials actually in charge.

Other accountability measures such as drop-out rates, designed to prevent gaming, were introduced. They only increased confusion, uncertainty, misleading statistics, and gaming. In addition, the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which envisioned all students being proficient in certain subjects by 2014, had the perverse effect of incentivizing

some states to reduce standards so that all students would be defined as having achieved subject proficiency.⁶⁵ All of this has only eroded support for and confidence in education accountability policies.

The fundamental problem with the accountability movement, not foreseen by reformers but foreseeable nonetheless, was that reformers would never control the system. Accountability was conceived and implemented as a top-down reform within the system, as if the top of the education system (state agencies, their heads, school boards, and superintendents) were not part of the problem. In fact, the top is likely more of the problem than students, parents, and teachers who, if they had more choice, would likely choose to improve themselves, and therefore the entire system, from the bottom up. (See *The Only Solution: Education Choice* below.)

Funding Equity and "Adequacy"

Before accountability became an area of contention, education funding lawsuits and threats of lawsuits began. Two issues emerged: equity of funding across districts and adequacy of funding for all. In some circumstances, reliance on local property taxes and rigid state formulas that failed to account for different wealth levels across districts truly did create situations where some districts were starved for funding. In poor districts, taxpayers might be paying maximum rates but providing too little funding to keep roofs maintained. In rich districts, tax rates might be extremely low with school districts struggling to spend all the money.⁶⁶

In Oklahoma, funding equity became an issue in the 1970s. It was during this time that total funding was split into two formulas, foundation aid and incentive aid, though today these are closer to terms of art than meaningful distinctions.⁶⁷ In the 1960s, Oklahoma City and Tulsa

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were among the most racially segregated large-city school districts in the country. The change in school funding in the '70s likely resulted from a 1971 U.S. Supreme Court desegregation decision that required a more even racial balance in schools which, in turn, pushed the legislature to fund more equitably.⁶⁸

Adequacy and equity are actually two different concepts. Conceivably, all schools can be funded adequately but not necessarily equitably; some districts could spend luxuriantly on unnecessarily nice facilities, superfluous courses, or require that all teachers have advanced degrees while others barely afford the basics. On the other hand, districts could be funded equitably but inadequately by some measure.

The political expedient has been that legislatures take steps to fund all districts at least adequately, but without directly reducing spending in any school districts that spend lavishly.⁶⁹ This, of course, increases average per-student spending. But then, inequities still remain, with some activists arguing that if a given maximum amount per student is spent in one district in the state, the same should be spent in all districts since all children are equally valuable.

There are also different definitions of “adequacy.” Legislatures tend to ratchet spending upward in order to mollify the “adequacy” advocates. Various attempts to define “adequacy” have tended to view money as no object, and courts have often been accommodating. Kansas City, Missouri will long stand as a monument to how spending alone accomplishes nothing in education when a judge forced huge tax and spending increases in that district that made no positive academic impact whatsoever.⁷⁰ Washington, DC stands as another constant reminder that high education spending does not equal high education results. Despite Kansas City’s nearby object lesson, the Kansas Supreme Court recently ruled school funding in that state is too low, citing low academic performance among minorities as the reason for their decision.⁷¹

The main problem with the reasoning that more money automatically means better educated students are the two assumptions behind it, one of which believes in more money as a solution *must* believe. These assumptions are

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either: first, students are passive participants in their own learning and more money makes it possible to pour more knowledge into their heads; or second, that the U.S. spends so little on education that students simply cannot learn for lack of resources.

International comparisons of performance and spending obviously and plainly blow away the idea that U.S. schools lack for resources, so it must be that “adequacy” advocates believe learners are basically passive. “Adequacy” advocates must believe that there is no volition required on students’ part to learn, but if enough money is spent on educational bells, whistles, and talented teachers, student learning will take place in spite of students’ motivations. Actually, this reasoning implies that those currently teaching our children are incompetent and untalented, but spending advocates never call for replacing a system that tripled per-student spending while raising teacher pay only a third (see bullets above). Besides, excellent teachers quit all the time for reasons other than low pay.⁷²

Common sense, basic observation, and introspection blow away the passive learner assumption.⁷³ Obviously, no amount of money can magically force a student to make an effort or instill a student with the desire to learn. Money can help to hire good teachers, tutors, and others who can aid in learning. Money is used to provide meals and social services that are supposedly designed to remove learning obstacles, though these programs seem never to work. And in fact, a great deal of money has been devoted to hiring personnel other than teachers, as reflected in the bullets above. One thing that does not cost money, though, is high expectations, something to which students generally respond.⁷⁴ Expectations are entirely ignored by “adequacy” advocates and, in fact, given their assumption that minorities require more resources, they give away the fact of their own low expectations.

Though their assumptions fail, “adequacy” advocates persist. Even in relatively conservative Texas, Republicans pushed an “adequacy” study in 2004 that, at its base, assumed more money automatically meant more learning while ignoring prevailing culture and the low expectations that so often prevail. It has been argued in lawsuits in Texas that the legislature expected more of the schools under the accountability system than the schools had resources to deliver. But the reason the accountability system was imposed in the first place was the widespread and justifiable belief that taxpayers were not getting their money’s worth. Texas’ Supreme Court eventually saw the light and rejected much of the highly flawed reasoning of “adequacy” advocates.⁷⁵ In Pennsylvania, the “adequacy” fad has only just caught on.⁷⁶

Our Current Education System

If a group of Americans were to sit down today and create an education system from scratch, there are many goals and purposes of education about which they would

disagree. But nearly everyone would agree that it would be best if the system accomplished its tasks as economically and efficiently as possible and that children receive the best possible educations, given that providing resources so freely that everyone could have an underwater welding class is impractical (See Note 66).

John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe, in their Brookings study from 1990, *Politics, Markets and America's Schools*, demonstrated that the public education system cannot improve itself due to the incentives inherent within it. Efforts from outside the system to reform it are also doomed to failure, as has been demonstrated over the 30 years since the Chubb and Moe study was published, for exactly the same reason.⁷⁷

The U.S. public education system is a top-down affair wherein authorities in school district central offices, state capitals, and Washington D.C. (and sometimes principals' offices) effectively stick their noses into individual classrooms about whose students and teachers they know little or nothing. Consequently, educational quality cannot rise due to teachers and students being misdirected. However, international educational spending and performance comparisons prove that performance can rise, and without spending more money. To international evidence, add that of many charter schools, private schools, and some traditional public schools.

As Thomas Sowell has said about the U.S. public education system, "They have taken our money, betrayed our trust, failed our children, and then lied about the failures with inflated grades and pretty words."⁷⁸ There is no

The system has been shamed, prodded, threatened, begged, encouraged, asked, sued, pandered to, and bribed.

reason to believe the system can be improved from within or without. It has been tried. The system has been shamed, prodded, threatened, begged, encouraged, asked, sued, pandered to, and bribed. It has proven that it can swallow any amount of resources and demand even more. This as rank and file teachers have to reach into their own pockets to provide basic classroom supplies that any business would provide for their employees as a matter of course.

Teachers often justifiably corporately complain about the conditions under which they labor, yet they are reluctant, for fear of their jobs, to stand up and identify an individual administrator responsible for the drudgery, daily aggravations and creativity-snuffing impacts of class

interruptions, poor discipline, and Marzano-check-marked lesson evaluations. They give in to a system where they, the practitioners, are bossed around by people (principals, superintendents and many others who barely step into a

Administrators should serve teachers, not the other way around.

classroom) who *should* be there to do whatever it takes to help teachers do their jobs – like administrative personnel in a doctor's office. Administrators should serve teachers, not the other way around.

Instead, teachers blame their woes on state legislatures, a group of people responsible for little more than very general directives and providing money. Teachers do this because of what they've been told by their organizational "betters" – union bosses, superintendents, and principals. Then, the teachers disclose little about abuses they see administrators commit on a daily basis.

Chubb and Moe demonstrated that the public education system operates monopolistically and it is actually subject to little oversight. Superintendents, who have a great deal of personal self-interest wrapped up in the system they oversee, have the readiest access to information. School boards, for the most part, only know what superintendents tell them. Virtually everyone else in administration has the potential of becoming a petty tyrant, being strivers in a system undisciplined by a need to satisfy anyone other than an often distant supervisor and to survive the petty internal politics of the moment. The very fact that the education system succeeds to the degree that it does is a testament to the good will and work ethic, mostly, of teachers, who are tragically misinformed about policy by their supervisors and union bosses on a regular basis.

The Only Solution: Education Choice

Almost 30 years ago, Chubb and Moe came to the conclusion that the only way to educate children as effectively and efficiently as possible, and raise student performance, is to allow for educational choice. Their realization came some 30 years after an education voucher system was first suggested by Nobel-winning economist Milton Friedman. Where Friedman arrived at his conclusion through economic reasoning and general observation of market-system behavior versus socialist-system behavior,⁷⁹ Chubb and Moe arrived at basically the same conclusion by a different path. Chubb and Moe observed that the schools with the best outcomes were led by principals who hired

good teachers and then let them practice their profession as they saw fit. And these schools often cost less than poor performers.

In the 30 years since Chubb and Moe reached their findings, a great deal of empirical work has shown that

What's more, educational choice reduces segregation, does not harm existing public schools, and has positive impacts on student civic engagement.

educational outcomes improve when there is choice in education. A review of rigorous statistical studies of voucher programs from all over the world indicates that while improvement in the U.S. is lower than in other countries, the improvement is still statistically significant.⁸⁰ What's more, educational choice reduces segregation, does not harm existing public schools, and has positive impacts on student civic engagement.⁸¹

Among the lessons Chubb and Moe learned from their research 30 years ago is that good schools and good teachers are not micromanaged. Good schools do not see administrators critiquing or dictating teachers' lessons, questioning the grades they give, or unnecessarily taking up instruction time with arbitrarily-scheduled entertainments. Good schools are populated by teachers who are intellectually curious, passionate about their subjects, and who love kids. In other words, good schools have the sort of teachers that parents who care at all would likely choose.

These are also the kinds of teachers other teachers would likely choose if they practiced their craft the way lawyers do and the way some physicians still do, as partners in professional enterprises focused on satisfying customers and competing with other firms. But this can only occur in a bottom-up system. It too rarely occurs even now with charter schools and private schools because of how both consumers and educators are conditioned to view schooling and because laws sometimes dictate management organization in charter schools.

Besides, parents don't get a choice in our locally monopolized education system, except to the degree that they can afford to move from one school district to the next. This means poor parents don't get much choice at all. And since they can't choose, there is little reason for them to act as if they care even when they do, except to the extent that they can advocate for their child with accusations of racism

and other forms of discrimination.

Schools in poor neighborhoods perform worse than schools in rich ones, but it's not because of differences in funding, although such differences do occur, occasionally with schools in poorer neighborhoods getting *more* money (Washington D.C. is a champion at spending but full of low-income students, for example). It's because parents in poor neighborhoods can't choose quality alternatives and the feedback loop in a socialized monopoly yields administrations who have little incentive to satisfy the needs of those parents.

Poor parents get a bad rap. While it's true that some parents will never be good, caring parents, many would step up were they to have options. In Venezuela, people are going without many necessities. But that country has been

Poor parents get a bad rap. While it's true that some parents will never be good, caring parents, many would step up were they to have options.

relatively rich in the past, with people working hard and caring about their futures. Have people decided not to care and work hard, *or is it that they would act but for a system that makes caring and working hard pretty much a waste of time?* This, in short, is the problem with public education. All too often, caring and doing is a waste of time because of the institutional structure that denies anyone the ability to pick a quality alternative, much less for enterprising individuals to start one up.⁸²

So, whether through charter schools, education savings accounts, tax credit scholarships, or voucher scholarships, the key to improving the educations of Oklahoma's children is school choice. There are many sources that show the efficacy of school choice as noted above. None show it to be an immediate panacea in terms of student educational attainment, partly due to the ongoing faith in "experts" at the top dictating methods when teachers need to dynamically respond to students' needs. This is part of the overall education culture that must change. Nevertheless, there is a good deal of evidence student performance does improve with educational choice over time. That improvement, though, generally comes at a lower cost to taxpayers. Thus, the evidence is that school choice results in both greater efficiency and greater effectiveness.

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