

What is a *good* education?

New Mexico's educators and the general public have been wringing their hands for decades over the poor performance of our children in our schools while we continue to throw money at the problem. There is much disagreement, however, as to the effectiveness of that investment and questions remain if there is ever enough money to solve the problem without a clear definition as to what a good education is and how can it be measured. The problems do not only exist in our primary schools, but also in our middle schools and even in our universities. It seems to many of us that we've dragged our feet on instituting real reforms that would create an environment where learning is valued more than pandering to a social agenda that relies on social promotion and kowtowing to teachers' unions.

If we are serious about preparing our children to take their rightful place in the real world where English language skills, basic math and an understanding of how our society works are essential, we must face facts. One of those facts is that we seem to be on a quest to sequester or separate all the stakeholder groups that want what's best for our children. Students, parents, teachers, the business community, government and our municipalities are all integral parts of this complex machinery we call education.

As a layman, with grown children, I'm at a disadvantage. I'm on the outside looking in, but even from my vantage point it's easy to see that our children are floundering because of the ideological split that exists between a state government that wants to squeeze out charter schools, home-schooling and anything that does fit their idea of a one size fits all (public schools) solution and those seeking new ways to tackle NM's education problem.

Teachers feel overburdened with accountability requirements and unacceptably low wages for their hard work. Parents feel helpless and don't take an active role in supporting their own children because they lack the skills to help them with their homework in subjects they can't fathom. Businesses want well-educated, well-rounded workers that have basic skills, know how to learn on the job and work in teams. Government wants a top-down approach with massive spending, thinking that will save our children from a bleak future of limited job mobility in an economy that demands a good education. Many of the rest of us feel that social promotion is just passing on the problem instead of solving it at grade level. If children are not reading at their current level, it will do them no good to be promoted to the next, more demanding grade. That's just common sense, but THAT it is not an idea that is shared by social scientists or some 'enlightened' educators that believe little Johnny or Juan would be psychologically damaged if they were not part of their classmates' move up the grade ladder.

We whose children are grown but are still part of the funding stream for NM's educational industry recoil when school systems demand millions more dollars from us to keep an educational ship afloat that is taking on water and living on borrowed time. We must have a 'come to Jesus' moment and admit our collective failings instead of shooting at each other in a circular firing squad. If we want to reverse the disturbing trend of under-educating our children, we must admit that we've made some serious mistakes like abandoning the old traditional system of regular testing and holding teachers and students accountable AND for not embracing newer approaches to helping the least in the class without injuring the majority.

In many European school systems there is a two-track approach used in high schools to place students on one of two paths: vocational or college-bound. This is done by assessing students' capabilities, their aptitude and yes, testing. The system works well in two countries in which I've lived, Germany and Denmark. For those taking the college path, college-level courses are offered in high schools. There is no stigma associated with taking the vocational path as graduates that go on to further training in specific fields often end up earning just as much as those who've taken the university path.

Call for a plumber, electrician or carpenter in Germany or Denmark and you'll soon be presented with a healthy bill for their services. Many of the graduates from vocational training also go on to start their own businesses which helps grow their countries' small business sectors.

In Denmark, a country of just over five million people, the universities, which are all public universities, offer tuition-free education. Students even get a stipend to help defray the costs of housing, etc. There are strings, however. Prospective college students must *qualify* to attend these universities by demonstrating a high grade point average from their high school years. Qualifying is one thing; studying what they want is another. There is no guarantee that they will be able to study the subject of their choice. The reason is simple. There are only so many spots open to them as the Danish government has placed a limit on how many may study a certain specialty.

The number of these openings is dictated by a close collaboration and consultation with industry. If industry cannot support a dearth of architects, for example, the universities won't allow an overabundance of university spots for them and will raise the grade point necessary for entry into that discipline. THAT is the price the Danes pay for free tuition. I do not believe that will work here because we have so many private colleges that are all too willing to take any student's money and enroll them in any study they choose, irrespective of the demand for graduates with their specialty in the commercial world. So, while the prevailing wisdom here may be that a college education is the key to a higher lifetime earning power, ask the bartender or barista with a B.A. in art history or women's studies if they regret choosing their specialty instead of a more marketable skillset.

The plan to make our universities in the U.S. and New Mexico free of tuition is not an educational plan it is an ideological plan. It pits those in favor (the collective) against those opposed (the individuals) and is based on the mistaken notion that college is for everybody and that everybody will be better off for it. This removes choice and accountability from the equation and is an Obamacare-type solution that forces everyone to accept a flawed premise. Why should I or other taxpayers pay for somebody else's children to go to college? Proponents will say that by graduating more students we will improve our society. I say that by graduating more students who choose degrees of non-commercial worth will only increase unemployment not lower it. I'm for choice. If your son or daughter wants to go to college, great. You can pay for it or share the cost burden with them...or make them compete for a scholarship.

There are other pressure points that are driving up the cost of education in America, too. They are: over-administration in our universities, escalating wages for professors and unionization of educators. Here in New Mexico, at our so-called 'flagship university' - UNM - there is an 'embarrassment of riches' of highly-paid professors among UNM's faculty. To add to those on the tenure gravy train, there are at least a half-dozen or more administrators at the Vice-President level drawing down salaries in the \$200,000/year range, one of them being a VP for 'diversity.' Then there are the sports programs where coaches command high six-figure salaries and control generous budgets in their individual fiefdoms. What does this have to do with a good education you might ask? My answer would be...nothing. What it does do is provide a revenue stream for the universities so that they can offset their operating costs. I am sure that many of UNM's professors will disagree with me on my assertion that they are overpaid and would probably point to many other neighboring states' universities as proof that they are in fact underpaid!

What they would forget to mention in their argument is that the cost of living in New Mexico is considerably lower than in Arizona, Colorado or Texas, so shouldn't we the taxpayers get a break and demand that they take less for their work? We will never be a BU or a Yale or a Columbia. We don't offer what these universities offer and we must accept that fact. We can, however, create a university system that targets certain specialties and works to create centers of excellence with a smaller, less expensive footprint that turns out graduates that will stay in our state after graduation. But that brings us back to the question of what a good education is.

Well thought out and sensible, market-based education choices enable graduates to adapt to the changing economy and reinvent themselves from time to time and thereby secure a reasonable path to financial stability. They also help them pay off their student loans and not turn to the rest of us to forgive their debts. Instead, we are busy turning out specialists that are not in demand for their specialty.

Each person and each state must decide what constitutes a good education, whether that is in the primary or secondary schools. If New Mexico is to raise itself up by its own bootstraps and move its students up the quality education ladder it's got to stop thinking with its brain tied behind its back. Opening up the state's purse strings and throwing money at the problem may make the Governor popular with teachers and win her a second term, but it won't trickle down to the benefit of our students...not without some serious soul-searching and educational reform. Ideas matter, but good ideas matter more.

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