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The Education Debate We're Not Having

By Scott McPherson

My adopted state of New Hampshire may be at a crossroads. The state supreme court has commanded the legislature to find a new way of funding public schools by next summer, or else the justices will impose a solution of their own.

Many people here fear that a directive from the court will require so large a funding increase that a statewide sales tax or income tax would become inevitable — a radical departure from New Hampshire's historic low-tax mentality.

Democrats, naturally, are for the most part ecstatic. They would love to see New Hampshire become like neighboring states that tax their citizens through every means possible.

In response, conservative Republicans have proposed that a state constitutional amendment be passed denying the court any say in education matters.

All this handwringing over the best way to pay for public schools distracts us from a far more important point: that we are dealing, first and last, with a broken system — and one that is inherently defective. Rather than patch it up with more money, we ought to try a different approach.

Few dare speak of it, particularly in political circles, but an alternative to public schools does exist. While the state, to some extent, has always had its fingers in education, its role was initially minimal. Prior to the wholesale takeover of education by government, parents typically paid about half their kids' tuitions directly, while the other half was made up in local taxes. Education was mostly a private enterprise. The tireless research of historian E.G. West shows that the earliest movements at the state level to increase education funding were meant to address only the perceived need of those living far from city and village life in small pockets of rural poverty.

It was understood even by these early interferers that the overwhelming majority of families were already providing an adequate education for their children, and at their own expense. Parents would routinely forgo creature comforts for the sake of their children's needs. One anecdote West supplies is that of a poor family living on nothing but potatoes so they could

afford to send their children to school. Official education commissions in the United States and England in the early 19th century consistently found that children were being competently schooled and, of equal importance, that *the number of kids in private schools was steadily growing*.

Growing demand fueled a boom in the education industry. Rising general income and fierce competition made school more affordable for more people. More schools opened, but that tells only half the tale. There were many different *kinds* of schools, with different goals, curricula, and teaching styles. Literacy levels were higher a century and a half ago than they are today.

Public-school proponents would have us believe that government took over education for the sake of the poor. The truth is, early activists — urged on by education bureaucrats — idealized the militaristic atmosphere of Prussian schools and wanted to mold the nation’s children into “good citizens”.

Later on, great industrialists such as Andrew Carnegie wanted government schools to mold citizens for work in the factories. Today teachers and their powerful unions love the job security. Meanwhile, quality education falls by the wayside.

Such is to be expected when we relieve families of the responsibility for their children’s needs and place their fate in the hands of so-called experts. At a national education summit last year, Microsoft founder Bill Gates, a huge supporter of public schooling, nevertheless told the audience that schools were “ruining” the lives of “millions” of children every year. Given the 12 years of mind-numbing, stultifying boredom and mediocrity that makes up the average student’s public-school experience, it’s hard to disagree with him.

Sad to say, the “solution” proposed by Gates and other public-school supporters, including the New Hampshire Supreme Court, is more or “better” funding, and widespread acceptance of this cure-all leads to our present predicament.

It is at times of crisis when free people most need to return to first principles, and the founding principles of our republican government include a belief in individual initiative, importance of family, private enterprise, and personal responsibility. We’ve largely abandoned belief in these things, and our tragically flawed system of public schools reflects that fact. The Republicans have it half right in this debate: a constitutional amendment is in order — but one that separates school and state.

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