

Of Education

By

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If you would be free, then you must know those things which make you independent. These are the things by which you 1.) contribute to society in perceptually valued ways, and 2.) discern the difference between good information and bad, especially when you read a newspaper, view a newscast on television, or listen to a speech by a political candidate.

The first entails vocational training: the ephemeral knowledge of how to do things that people want done at any given moment, but that not just anyone can do. The reason why restaurant kitchen helpers are poorly paid, for example is that just about anyone can wash dishes. The reason rocket scientists frequently find themselves out of work is that few people are willing to pay for what rocket scientists do. The reason computer network administrators cannot be fired for even the grossest moral turpitude and receive salaries beyond the dreams of avarice is that almost all businesses have networks, but relatively few people are willing or able to manage them.

The second entails education: fundamental, enduring knowledge about things, and of how to find and use information. If you can read, you can do research on the Internet or at your local library. If you are numerate, you can buy things on credit without necessarily getting ripped off, and you can examine intelligently such quasi-statistical myths as those which permeate studies of global warming and AIDS. If your sense of history extends further than last Thursday, you can make thoughtful comparisons between the Oklahoma City Bombing of 1995 and the Reichstag Fire of 1933, usually to the utter consternation of those persons who would prefer that you not be free to do so.

Public elementary, middle and high schools can educate, but they cannot provide vocational training. This kind of training is a matter of apprenticeship and practice to master subjects that change far too rapidly and too radically to be of more than short-term use. There remains little demand, for example, for people skilled in the mainframe computer languages of the 1980s. The people who once made handsome livings using them are now either out of the business or are programming in new, object-oriented, client-server environments. Most of these retirees don't return to school to master the new systems. Rather, they change as their surroundings do, and they train themselves, often with help from their employers.

What enables them to do so, however, is education: knowing about things and knowing where to find knowledge. It is education that makes vocational training, and with it one's ability to contribute to society, possible. It is education that we as taxpayers hope to

purchase when we finance schools. And it is education which in our present-day public school systems is becoming a rare and chimerical commodity.

Consider, for example, that according to the U. S. Department of Education, fully 43% of our adult population is functionally illiterate and that 40% of our third-graders cannot read at all. Note that 60% of college freshmen today are required to take remedial courses upon admission. Listen to the radio advertisements of an organization whose membership includes the American Federation of Teachers bewailing the fact that America placed 14th in an international mathematics competition – And no one even noticed! Clearly, if education makes one independent, then more of us are becoming dependent on a declining number of educated people. Just as clearly, if independence is what makes one free, then we are on the road to dictatorship and serfdom. It can happen again. It can happen here.

The Committee for Oklahoma Educational Reform first met in 1991 to address the issue of declining educational accomplishment against the backdrop of an illegal teachers' "strike" designed to extort money in exchange for a continuing substandard performance. What resulted over the following years is an amendment to the Constitution of the State of Oklahoma to reform education there and to restore the educational system to its former excellence. Although tailored to Oklahoma, the ideas underlying this amendment have much broader application to educational reform everywhere. They can and should be used as a model by other states seeking to reverse permanently the current dismal trend.

The COER Plan, then, seeks to recover the freedom and independence of Oklahoma citizens through reform of public schools by means of a state constitutional amendment, returning the schools to local parental and taxpayer control, and placing them into competition with one another and with private schools through a system of vouchers called "scholarships."

Restoring the public schools to the people who pay for them calls for recognizing that most public school problems are related to management. In Oklahoma, for example, there are 635 school districts, each heavily encumbered with layers of management within and further lumbered by school board micromanagement from without. Of course, state, county, and municipal governments also have considerable say in how the schools operate, and they worse confound the confusion.

The result, as in most management-heavy organizations, is a system in which no one is accountable for anything, and in which nothing can change. If a teacher has an idea for improving the quality of instruction at a school, there is no avenue by which that idea can receive any recognition. If a parent has a complaint, or merely wishes to become more involved in a child's education, no one has the authority to redress the parent's desire, however sympathetically it may be heard. If a taxpayer, alarmed at the declining value of his or her investment in education, has a plan for changing the system, that change cannot be made within the system: There simply isn't anyone to tell it to.

The COER Plan takes the Alexandrine approach to this situation by eliminating all school districts, replacing the myriad school boards with an elected Board of Regents in each of the state's 77 counties. The only responsibilities of each Board of Regents are to hire, monitor, and fire School Managers within its area and to negotiate the remuneration of its School Managers.

School Managers have full authority to operate individual public schools. They hire, fire and discipline. They disburse funds and other resources. They build their own management teams. They negotiate teachers' salaries and bonuses.

School Managers also have full accountability for the success of students attending their schools. A State Board of Regents is selected from the other boards. Its only responsibilities are to set curricula in and performance standards for five core areas: language (*i. e.*, English) arts, mathematics, physical and biological sciences, history, and geography. The State Board of Regents measures performance by contracting with disinterested third parties who design and administer core-area tests, the effectiveness of which is assured by monitoring the number of college students who must take remedial courses. If a School Manager's students should fail these tests in any significant numbers, that manager is fired.

The voucher system divides all operating funds, after deducting for special education, by the number of students in the system. The number thus computed is the value of a scholarship. The parents of a student attending a public school receive 100% of the scholarship; a private student's parents receive 70% thereof. Students who have not been expelled must be accepted by the schools in their local areas, but may attend any public school willing to accept them.

To forestall the kind of tuition inflation that accompanied the G. I. Bill, parents may negotiate with public school managers outside their local area, or with private schools, for a reduced tuition. Any savings realized accrue to the parents to be used for whatever purpose the parents deem fit, such as transporting their children outside their local area.

The system works by bringing powerful market forces to bear on the problem of educating students: Regents are empowered to reward a School Manager who attracts students and their scholarships. Teachers are rewarded for the kind of performance that retains students and the money they bring to the school. Dissatisfied parents can send their children to private schools without paying a full share of taxes for the public system that doesn't perform for them, but even then they leave 30% of the scholarship amount in the public system. This money is earmarked for improving teachers' salaries.

Notice, too, that the COER Plan makes no provision for curriculum beyond the core subjects. Thus a School Manager who wishes to attract and retain the greatest possible amount of scholarship money can profit by negotiating with parents over electives. This makes every public school a charter school. Since the COER Plan contains nothing that prohibits a School Manager from raising money from sources other than scholarships, School Managers can also profit by negotiating with local businesses, using electives to

tailor curricula to business needs while helping employers to ensure a steady supply of properly educated employees. Every public school, that is to say, becomes an enterprise school. And these institutions are automatically free of the kind of micromanagement and oppressive regulation that have so seriously encumbered such efforts in the past.

Under the COER Plan, therefore, everybody wins. Is it necessary, however, to amend a state's constitution just to simplify the way we educate students? For any number of reasons, it is.

The Supreme Court of the United States, according to Clint Bolick of the Institute for Justice, has been quite consistent with respect to the three characteristics of a constitutional voucher system: The system must give the money to students, or to parents acting on students' behalf, and not to the schools. The COER plan requires this. The system must not provide an economic incentive for attending a private school. The COER Plan accomplishes this by making the private scholarship amount less than the public scholarship amount. A constitutional voucher system must not set up any continuing involvement by government in the operation of any private school. The COER Plan explicitly forbids such involvement: The only consequence to a private school of a student's failing in the core subject areas is that the student loses the scholarship that would otherwise be spent there.

If we pass any scholarship system as legislation, we leave it vulnerable in these critical legal areas: What the Legislature giveth, the Legislature taketh away.

The best example of this is the Hillsdale College case, in which Hillsdale, a private institution, began accepting students under the G. I. Bill, then a constitutional scholarship system. The Federal Government told Hillsdale that it would have to institute affirmative action programs because its students were attending on the government's money. Hillsdale refused, the government sued, and the case was ultimately decided in Hillsdale's favor by the Supreme Court.

At this point, Congress changed the law, setting up the very continuing government involvement the Supreme Court had consistently forbidden. The G. I. Bill itself is now in danger of being overturned as unconstitutional. Indeed, it awaits only a legal challenge to nullify it. Likewise, if the COER Plan were implemented through legislation, nothing would prevent the Oklahoma Legislature from destroying it through other legislation afterwards.

To avoid this danger, the COER Plan must be implemented in the same document which implements public education as it now exists. That document, in Oklahoma as in the other 49 United States, is the State Constitution.

Another problem with legislative school reform is that it encourages tweaking the system in an attempt to improve it piecemeal. The result is always less than what is required.

There are many examples of this, the most typical being the voucher system that only benefits a limited segment of a school population, like poor students, or students in substandard schools. The problem with this approach is that it obscures the obvious indication of a 43% adult functional illiteracy rate: Standard or not, few schools can be performing satisfactorily with this kind of ignorance pervading our society. By pretending to do something about this problem only for a few students we allow ourselves to feel good about an institution that is fundamentally and systemically in ruins even as we evade the substantial issues.

There is also a fundamental injustice implicit in plans like this, which is that they don't benefit the people who pay for public education. All taxpayers are required by threat of force to pay taxes. They all have a right to value received for that money. A 43% functional illiteracy rate among adults is of no value to anyone. The word for taking money from people by threat and returning nothing of value is "extortion."

These plans, of course, are not conceived in malice, but they do seem to share the common attribute that they're very poorly thought out. They are thus terribly vulnerable to unintended consequences -- and to legal challenge -- as so many other legislative efforts seem to be.

Contrast these efforts with the COER Plan, a constitutional reform carefully hammered out over almost eight years. Floyd Coppedge, Oklahoma's Secretary of Education, has called the COER Plan the "best thought out" of the many plans he's seen. The COER Plan has been submitted to some of the best constitutional and legal authorities in the United States, and their suggestions have been built into it. The COER Plan has been presented before many, often hostile, audiences, and their criticisms have played an important role in strengthening it.

Finally, there is a moral aspect to the COER Plan: It returns tangible value to taxpayers in the form of a literate, independent populace, able to contribute materially to their own families and to a free society. It prepares free citizens to vote and to order their public affairs. It rewards honest effort and solid, competent management while holding the stewards of taxpayers' money to the strictest standard of accountability. It provides for every student in the state -- not just the rich, poor or otherwise favored -- a public education that is in every respect as good as or better than anything they'd get in private schools. And it does all of this by exerting the benign market and management forces that have made the United States the envy of all the world's people who have the misfortune to live elsewhere. We should do these things, not just because they're profitable, but because they are and have ever been the right things to do.

So let us begin. Working together, we will take back our schools.