

AMERICAN EDUCATION

Are we getting value for what we pay and are we getting what we need?

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Thomas Jefferson said it best. Democracy requires an involved, educated electorate. Our Founding Fathers were brilliant men; able to conceive the Constitution and our government which has survived with all its bumps and bruises for over 200 years. Many believe we are facing an existential crisis in the level of our education in the nation which threatens our democracy. All we need to do is turn on the TV, listen to our politicians, observe our culture and wonder what's happening to us.

Let me begin with the concept: Are we getting the value we pay for?

Being in Westchester County, it's hard not to notice we have among if not the highest real estate taxes in the United States. Those taxes go to support our local schools. For many of the school districts, we pay over \$30,000 per pupil.

New York State despite spending more per pupil than any state in the U.S. lags far behind states which spend far less. Where this is most egregiously noted is the performance of New York State students on the New York State Regents Exam in Algebra. Statewide, 72% of the students pass this exam. However, that's not the whole story. If you would look online to see how the exam is scored, currently if you get 34% of the questions correct, your grade is elevated to 65 and you pass. How can this be? How did we "dumb down" the exam to the point where you can almost guess and pass the exam. What does this say about so many parts of our educational system, our educators, our politicians and even our parents?

We're all well aware there is a wide variance in educational support throughout our country.

New York spends \$21,000 per pupil. The median nationally is \$11,000 and the lowest is \$7,000 per pupil.

The recent school strikes around the country (Oklahoma, West Virginia & Arizona) were in response to the low level of spending per pupil in these states primarily as it reflects upon teachers' salaries.

Interestingly enough, when you look at educational outcomes, New York ranks 40th in 4th grade Math, 33rd in 8th grade Math, 28th in 4th grade reading and 31st in 8th grade reading.

In spending, Alaska spends second most to New York and in third place is District of Columbia which spends almost \$20,000 per pupil and yet educational outcomes are well below the national average. Only 27% of students read proficiently in the 4th grade and only 19% of 8th graders.

New York spends 77% more than Minnesota and yet Minnesota is ranked in #2 in 4th grade Math, #2 in 8th grade Math and #6 in 8th grade reading.

Utah only spends \$6,000 per pupil and yet more than 40% of their children are proficient in math and reading; much higher than New York while spending less than 1/3.

If one would look at charts going back to 1970, plotting the growth of spending per pupil for every state in the union, and then look at test scores on national exams, SAT's, ACT's, reading proficiency, math proficiency and science, you might be shocked to see that there's been absolutely no improvement for over 40 years even though we have on average increased our staffs by 60-80% and our spending more than 100% per pupil with inflation-adjusted dollars.

So there, it is shocking to know that the amount of money we have spent has had no relationship to the outcomes of our children contrary to what we're told on a daily basis by our politicians and our educational professionals. How could that be?

On an international level, we rank somewhere around 20th compared to other nations throughout the world; all of whom spend less money per pupil than we do.

If we wanted to compete on an international level, we would be wise to look at what other countries are doing and emulate their approach rather than as Einstein said "Keep repeating the same behavior and expecting a different outcome" which was his clear definition of insanity.

The USA is 19th in Math, 21st in Science and 17th in Reading.

Nations far ahead of us include China, Singapore, Taipei, Korea, Japan, Switzerland, Netherlands, Estonia and Finland,

It's interesting comparatively, in China the school day runs from 7:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. with a 2-hour lunch break.

In France, the school days run 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. and a 1/2 day on Saturday. There is no school on Wednesdays.

There are 29 students in the class and 5-6 computers for them to share. Uniforms are required; there are extensive rules about hair styles, shirt lengths, etc., etc.

In Korea, the school days run 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. with many staying late into the evenings. Students must clean their own classrooms before they leave. There are 30 students in a class. After 5:00 p.m., students go home for dinner or eat a school while study session and other activities take place in the evenings. Fridays and some Saturdays throughout the year.

It is interesting to see that often a longer school day and school year is prevalent in many of the countries that outperform the United States.

We've been stuck on 180 day school year for many years. The amount of days had to do with summer vacation so young people could help their families on the farm. That is no longer the case for most children.

Finland has created a world-class educational system and much can be learned from them. School only begins at 8 years of age. Entry into their educational teacher programs is the most competitive in any field and higher education. They require advanced academic degrees and therefore are well paid and protected professionals; teaching is an attractive career among young Fin's. Teachers must hold a Master's Degree in Education for primary school and in subjects that they teach in lower and upper school. Educational programs are 5-6 years for teachers and can only be done at research universities that offer advanced academic studies in their field and combine that with an additional educational program. Teachers routinely have 40 year careers in teaching. Only 20% who apply to teach are accepted and become primary school teachers in the Finnish school district. Those entering education have above average grades as high school students and above-average grades on matriculation exams. They are also evaluated for their personality, interpersonal skills and whether they have the right moral purpose to be life-long educators. It's considered a high-status profession akin to medicine, law and engineering.

One of the most glaring areas in the failure of American education is in the inner cities where African-American and Hispanic children, in the case of New York, have shown very little progress. Only 16% of the students who took their recent proficiency exam in English and Math were found to be proficient.

Many of the charter schools in New York City have outcomes that are higher than Scarsdale despite the fact that they are dealing only with minority children and many of whom are at a poverty level.

The charter school differs radically from that of the public schools and in many cases has demonstrated a better ability to educate those students who would have failed in a public school education.

I've had personal experience with charter schools. One of my sons was teaching in Harlem Village in Harlem at 120th Street and First Avenue in a charter school which had been started several years prior. When the children entered the school in 4th grade, similar to the other New York City children, 16% were at grade level in Math and Reading. By the time they reached 8th grade, 96% were proficient in Math and Reading; higher than almost all of the schools in Westchester County.

They spent only \$13,000 per pupil. The school day ended at 4:30 p.m. every day except Friday. There was a "boot camp" set up when the child entered the school to teach each student the rules of the school which were strictly enforced. Uniforms were required. Teachers would evaluate the students as a group every month. Students who had fallen behind and needed extra tutoring received this help. There was a demerit system clearly applied which resulted in Saturday detention which required the student to work with a teacher who came in on a Saturday to work with that student. It was not commonly necessary. The children were chosen by lottery.

I had an opportunity to lecture the high school students regarding my personal background and career in dentistry. I had come from a background not too dissimilar from theirs.

There were 15 students per class. The principal walked the halls constantly checking out student behavior. The classroom were visited daily by the principal to evaluate the progress of education as well as teacher performance. Teachers were evaluated strictly on the performance of their children and the observations made.

This is obviously not necessary or applicable to all schools but it made an enormous difference in this community.

It would be prudent to look at the length of the school year and the length of the school day in areas where there is an underperformance in education instead of applying "one size fits all". Obviously a child in Scarsdale enters school with a whole different set of advantages than one who enters school in an inner city/impooverished area.

It would make sense to have the best teachers and the highest paid teachers working in the areas where the educational needs are greater just as it would make sense to have police officers to work in the areas with the highest crime rates receive a higher salary than those who work in low-crime suburban districts.

The only way out of the conundrum for the underperforming youngsters in our country is to change the rules and the parameters for education. Something that is powerfully resisted by a combination of politicians, unions and often parents.

Two of the things that are the most powerful measures of our society are our health care system and our educational system. This is not a world anymore where we're just competing with each other; this is a world competition.

As always, I appreciate your feedback.

Yours truly,
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