

PATCHING THE SCHOOL ROOF

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The time has come to state and argue for a new educational truism, no less true for being blatantly tautological: The only way to improve public schools is to improve public schools.

The need to emphasize such a principle is a consequence compelled by the confused condition of most of the public discourse focused on what to do about our deficient education system.

Virtually none of our national leaders and few of the rest of us have a genuine understanding of what is wrong with our schools. Lacking such an understanding, the recent political attempts to ameliorate the situation have been a patchwork of inefficacious changes. Consequently, the decline continues unabated, and the patches continue to be applied.

As Georgia's legislature wrapped up its session last week, two of the recent patches considered involved vouchers (Senate Bill 10) and charter schools (House Bill 469), neither of which is indefensible in itself. Two others involved class size reduction (House Bill 332) and honors courses (Senate Bill 75), both non-issues that have become issues.

The voucher (read: scholarship) measure for "special needs" students is complex. It has one virtue that most voucher proposals lack, namely the scholarship amount that it bestows upon each student (an average of \$9000) is almost enough to pay the full tuition at many private schools. There is in our nation a tradition of targeted schools for targeted-needs populations, e.g., schools for the deaf or blind. However, in our public schools, the category of special-needs students has been abused: it has been made—usually tacitly—a catch-all that includes not only the corporeally and neurologically impaired, a relatively small percentage of students, but also a wide variety of "problem" students whose difficulties are rather behavioral than organic. Therefore, if such a proposal is to be implemented, the criteria for what constitutes a special need must be rigorous and precise. In addition, if such voucher-scholarships are to be made available, the funding should come not from any part of the regular school budget, but should be established in a separate and independent fund administered by state social service agencies.

Moreover, some see this voucher proposal as a stalking horse for a proposal offering school choice vouchers to all students. This must be resisted, because the only demonstrable effect of current voucher proposals, which offer but a small fraction of most private school tuitions, is to perpetuate economic inequities (by being, in essence, scholarships useful only to the well-off) without any positive impact on the public school system.

Expanded charter schools will do nothing more than effect what already has been effected by the existing network of charter schools, namely a mixed bag of schools that are marginally better than the public schools and schools that are no better, or even worse. Simply put, additional charter schools will not improve public schools.

The notion that smaller classes provide better education has become adored by the self-indulgent left and is anathema to the penny-pinching right. The plain truth is that societal and student attitudes toward learning and education are far more decisive than class size. In other nations, industrialized and underdeveloped alike, class sizes are far bigger than ours, yet their average students learn more and more efficiently than ours do. The difference is that their systems have not been infected by the idolatry of self-esteem that has undermined our system. What needs to be reduced is not class size, but concern for self-esteem. Instead, we must inculcate a culture of personal responsibility. If we do, class size will become largely irrelevant (within fairly broad parameters).

Finally, the proposal to give increasing grade P\point average weight to honors courses, so that students who take them are not penalized in qualifying for HOPE scholarships, is misguided. I put aside the fact that the perceived need for honors courses is nothing more than a knee-jerk reaction to the perceived inadequacy of the rest of the curriculum. The true problem here is that HOPE scholarships are determined by high school GPA. Since there is no uniformity of grading in the system, to base a scholarship on grades is foolish. HOPE scholarships should be determined by a rigorous series of statewide, uniform, core course examinations, or perhaps by SAT scores. Without such an objective assessment, we are setting up our students for failure at the college level by fostering in them the illusion that they have competencies that they actually lack.

Our legislators should not be wasting their time on such inefficacious cosmetic band-aids.

Frank Zappa once said, "Most rock journalism is people who can't write interviewing people who can't talk for people who can't read." Substitute "legislation" for "rock journalism," and you have a description of our politicians that is not altogether inapt.

It is worth considering that while a trickle-down theory is dubious for economics, it is indubitable for culture and learning. But instead of setting standards high and allowing the trickle-down effect to operate, we seem bent on proving Nietzsche's diagnosis that in a democracy, leveling is lowering.

We can prove Nietzsche wrong if we remember that the only way to improve public schools is to improve public schools.

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