

TOWARD SELF-RELIANCE ... Public Education

by Vic Berecz

American education is under attack from all sides. "Why should I pay taxes to educate other people's kids?" "Let's get rid of art and music and focus on the three-R's." "Public schools are dominated by the unions." "They're teaching ungodly and un-American values." "Why can't my child pray in school?" "I should get a government voucher to send my kid to any school I want." "The U.S. is lower than 26 other nations in math scores." "Make those football and basketball players pay to play." "I walked five miles each way to school, why do they need buses." "Sending kids to college is not cost-effective." And on and on ... you get the idea. And, even if all this noise is coming from tiny, vocal minorities on both sides of the aisle ... it is an attack, and it's an attack on a bedrock institution critical to our *American Way-of-Life* ... our public school system. You'll also note from the above, that most of those concerns come down to the *almighty dollar*. They are largely instigated by *greed!*

We've had public schools for over 200 years. Over that period our public schools have changed and improved, but most of all they have evolved to meet the challenges of changing times. That's clearly as it should be. So, let's start with the most basic question: "Why do we have a publicly-funded school system in the first place?" As America evolved from what had been an almost totally agrarian society, employment opportunities grew in manufacturing and commerce. The *captains* of these industries needed skilled workers ... workers who could read, follow instructions, calculate, and innovate. In other words, they needed an educated work force if our nation was to progress. Yet, most farm families lived essentially at a subsistence level. There was no cash to send their younger sons off to elite schools such as Phillips Academy in Exeter, NH – as the wealthy did (and still do). Rather, by pooling their resources through local taxation, they funded a system of locally-controlled schools that provided a basic education which allowed some of their kids to step out and succeed in the new, evolving *American Way-of-Life*. This was ... and still is ... good for families, good for business, and good for our nation.

It's critical that we understand the rationale for local control of public schools. Beside the Constitutional mandate that powers not specifically given to the Federal government are retained by the States, it meant a focus on specific local concerns. For instance, our family's Pennsylvania ancestors went to the first local public schools in the 1820s and learned English-as-a-Second-Language (yes, ESL two centuries ago!). These people, who were American citizens from Day-1 (you know, July 4th 1776) and fought in our Revolution, lived in an isolated German-speaking community and never before had a need for English. But, by teaching English to all, public schools provided for the basic communication needed to bring this nation together, and allow people to effectively work together. Yes, public schools and ESL were critical to America becoming a world leader in 19th Century industry and commerce ... and also to this day continue to meet the unique needs of evolving American life.

Given that publicly-funded schools are both necessary and desirable, let's examine the appropriate role of the Local, State and Federal governments in their funding and operation. Most of us would opt for *local control*. This sounds good, but what does it mean? Do the mega-districts of Los Angeles, Chicago, or even our larger Florida counties really provide local control? Are the tiny school districts of New England towns and villages too small to meet real-world needs? How should states ensure that there is reasonable consistency in their schools? Where, if anywhere, does the Federal government fit in?

Constitutionally, the States would seem to be the principal gatekeepers of public schooling. So, it makes sense that each State, through its taxing authority, ensure that there is a consistent base for

public education throughout its territory. This means establishing minimal standards regarding age of students, facilities to be provided, general curriculum guidelines, services for special needs children, etc. It also means funding those mandates ... as few of us are willing to countenance *unfunded mandates*. In addition, States must determine how local school districts will be established and organized, how they interface with other local government entities, and must specify the powers delegated to local School Boards. Local school districts will work out the details and implement the programs. Most will use their local taxing authority to go beyond the minimum standards mandated and paid-for by the State. But, while money can help, it's clearly not the answer ... just look at Hartford, CT to see that high per student expenditures don't necessarily make for effective education.

Before we talk about what is often the *missing link* in education, let's briefly ask whether there should be any Federal role in education. In my opinion, the answer is a clear YES. Face it, our Constitution established a Federal Republic to "promote the general welfare" and in the 14th Amendment precludes States from denying any person "equal protection of the law." So, at least in these two respects the Federal government should have a role. In the first instance, if our Federal government establishes and imposes on the States educational mandates for the *general welfare*, those mandates should be funded from Federal coffers. Other strictly Federal involvement in educational activities to promote the *general welfare* (such as funding university research) are clearly permitted by the Constitution, but are not part of the issues we're dealing with today. In the case of *equal protection*, the Federal government principally through Federal judicial action has the obligation to right any wrongs permitted by a State. Beyond these two circumstances, it seems there is little need for Federal involvement in public school education.

OK, so what is it that I consider the missing link regarding education? It is the family, primarily parental, involvement in education. Sure, we as parents pay taxes to fund public schools, but our interest and involvement should go far beyond that. First, as parents, we must decide what type of schooling is most appropriate for our children. For most that choice will lead to public schools, since their focus should be on meeting the needs of most local families. I'll talk later about how public schools may reinvent themselves to meet the needs of an even larger population.

But, public schools will never be *the best* for everyone. There are some who would opt for home-schooling; something the State should obviously permit so long as the parents have the requisite resources. Likewise, some prefer religious-oriented education. Here, the State is precluded by our Constitution from meeting this need, and so parents who want it and can afford it should be free to send their children to parochial schools, whether Catholic, Lutheran, Evangelical, Jewish, or Muslim. The State's role here is to simply ensure that these schools meet the minimum criteria of facilities and programs established by law. Finally there are the folks who believe that a private education is best, and can afford it. For them, the traditional residential academies of the Northeast and military academies of the South, or the fine private day schools all around the country, like *Charlotte Latin* or the *Canterbury School* in Fort Myers, fill the bill. If it meets basic criteria ... and you want it ... and can afford to pay for it ... you should be able to have it. That's simply American freedom of choice! But, if you make the choice of non-public schooling (or don't have children in school), it doesn't exempt you from supporting through you taxes and otherwise the public schools. They are established for the *general welfare* of our nation and therefore are the responsibility of all. I maintain though, parents must do more than choose their kids' schools ... they must participate in their education. This means everything from potty training ... to supervising homework preparation ... to overseeing good sleeping and eating habits ... to teaching safety and social skills ... instilling your traditional moral and/or religious standards, and on and on ... but, perhaps most important, by serving as appropriate adult role models.

I think I've made the point that public schools are not for everyone, but they are for most of us. They are intended for the *general welfare* of our nation, but to be most effective they need a great deal of help ... from families of the students, but also from our entire population. I also noted that they must change and evolve, as the world changes and evolves. That means that Grades 1-8 are not enough anymore. That means the Three-R's are not enough anymore. That means we must continuously re-evaluate methods, practices, curriculum. We must innovate and experiment ... that is continually re-invent our school system. Some of those experiments will fail. So be it! That's why experimentation is best done at the local level. If an experiment fails it dies quietly ... if it succeeds it's picked up and used by others. Some of today's experiments are called *Charter Schools* or *Magnet Schools* we'll see how they work out. Other experiments involve merit pay for teachers and changes to the traditional tenure system ... to read a lot more about these issues see my essay "Teachers are the Key to Better Education." Finally, I'll comment on the failed Federal experiment called *No Child Left Behind*. It should have been obvious from day-1 that this pie-in-the-sky scheme would fail ... because for it to succeed we'd have to turn the entire U.S. into a Lake Wobegon where "all the children are above average" which, by definition, cannot be the case!

Here are my general recommendations for public education in the U.S. today. Publicly-funded schooling should begin at about age three, to better accommodate working parents. Publicly-funded elementary education should give parents the option of traditional neighborhood schools or focused schools such as Charlotte's *Socrates Academy* aimed at specific community needs. Publicly-funded secondary education must serve the university-bound youth as well as preparing students for the local job market. Publicly-funded schooling should be available through the "community college" level to ensure that those entering the trades and service occupations have the requisite computer and other technological skills to function effectively in the real-world of the future. Community colleges also serve those lacking financial resources in getting a start on a university education. The publicly-funded school curriculum should focus on effective communication and problem-solving, and yet provide our youth with a broad exposure to the arts as well as the issues of everyday living and earning a living. Public schools should be operated by administrators, teachers, and support staff selected for their knowledge, skills, and flexibility. School boards which control the budgets and facilities, fine-tune the curriculum, and hire/fire the staff should be responsive to national needs and trends while recognizing specific local concerns. Publicly-funded schooling should exemplify the *American Tradition* and the *American Way-of-Life* ... including the importance of family in all we do.

Given this shopping-list of desirable qualities for public education, you might ask: where does self-reliance come in? Let me reiterate. A critical aspect of all education – public or otherwise – is the support and cooperation of parents. Parenting, that fully supports effective education of one's children, is perhaps the finest exemplar of personal self-reliance. By having the local community ... not only parents, but all thinking citizens ... take responsibility for needs assessment, day-to-day operation, and evaluation of our public school systems, we see another significant example of necessary local self-reliance. This coupling of parental and community self-reliance in support of public schooling should effectively meet the educational needs of our American youth in "Body, Mind and Spirit" -- and, I heard those words a lot at the "Y" 60 years ago. So some things never change!