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Are public schools ready for change?

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The public school system is facing a difficult time in the history of American public schooling. Twenty years ago the United States was ranked top in the world in math, reading and science. Today our students are average. How did our results go through the floor and is change possible to meet the challenge?

In the United States, public schools over the past 40 years have tripled per pupil spending, cut the teacher/pupil ratio in half, and increased the number of employees by 100 percent. Student enrollment has increased by 10 percent. Our per pupil spending is the highest in the world. Our results: test scores that have flat lined. Forty years ago, a fifth-grade student would be reading the equivalent of an eighth grade text in today's classroom.

Our current centralized approach to schooling is now being questioned by those who want better results. The answer lies in more flexibility through experimentation and choice.

There are examples where more freedom of choice by parents, competition among schools and higher pay for successful teachers, has resulted in higher student achievement. We need to consider these approaches in order to prepare our students to be independent, employed, responsible adults.

Both centralized public education and free market education are not new. They have been in practice for a very long time.

Andrew Coulson in his book: *Market Education: The Unknown History* cites a story of a successful lawyer in a small town that did not have a high school. This was in the 60s. The lawyer decided he would create a high school and although he could fully pay for it, he only provided a third of the necessary funding. He explained it this way:

“I would promise the whole amount were I not afraid that someday my gift might be abused for someone's selfish purposes, as I see happen in many places where teachers' salaries are paid from public funds. There is only one remedy to meet this evil: if the appointment of teachers is left entirely to the parents, and they are conscientious about making a wise choice through their obligation to contribute to the cost. People who may be careless about another person's money are sure to be careful about their own, and they will see that only a suitable recipient shall be found for my money if he is also to have their own ... I am leaving everything open for the parents: the decision and choice are to be theirs — all I want is to make the arrangements and pay my share.”

The author of this story was not from the 1960s, but from the early 60s of the first century A.D. His name was Pliny the Younger, a citizen of the Roman Empire.

Another example of free market education was found in Athens. Athens had no official school system, no regulation of teachers, and no required curriculum. Athenian teachers charged parents directly for educating their children. Each teacher specialized in a subject, and parents simply chose teachers with good reputations who taught the subjects they wanted their children to learn. Competition for students kept prices down. Some excellent teachers were

wealthy and did not charge the poorer students in the community, notably Plato and Aristotle. The result of this free market education was a city that became its country's leader in art, philosophy, and science.

Literacy was more widespread than any other society of the time. So, though Athens was one of the most liberal and diverse societies in antiquity, it was also one of the most cohesive.

Educational choice worked well in Athenian culture and the basis for success was, in part, due to the important role the parents played in the educational process. The parents had choice and could support the teacher best suited to their child's needs. Excellent teachers were rewarded accordingly and rose in status in the community. Such education can and should be available today.

History can help us understand the basis for successfully educating our youth and strengthening our society. Current examples of success can be seen in alternative education and outcomes. Change, although difficult, is the pathway to this goal.

Three principles can make this change effective:

1. Parents should have choice and responsibility.
2. Schools should have freedom. They should be able to change quickly to meet the demands of their clients (parents and students).
3. There must be competition among schools and a profit motive.

It is evident that our public school system has challenges and without improvement we will continue on the same path of lower test scores and increasing education costs. In order to implement positive changes in the current system, parents, community stakeholders (a.k.a. taxpayers), and public leaders will need to demand innovative change where costs and accountability are more closely aligned.