

Duluth News Tribune

Local view: Kids count; not school boards, not teachers unions

Gord Harteau

April 25, 2016

I'd like to talk to you about little Sally. You don't know little Sally? Sure you do. You might not know her by that name, but you know her. You've seen her standing on the sidewalk facing the street, pressing up against her mom's leg, with a wide-eyed look on her face, her mom looking down at her with a sad smile on hers.

As she climbs onto that bus, what will be her thoughts? What will be her mom's? Will Mom be thinking of the quality of education her daughter will be receiving? Probably not, but she will and soon.

It always comes up in any discussion or decision that has anything to do with education: It's the kids that count. If that's the case, why is it that the little Sallys of this world keep getting lost in the shuffle?

Years back when school vouchers were first brought up, I thought, this is it; what a great answer to the poverty cycle question. Finally, a way for the youth of today to get out of high-risk neighborhoods and rise above not only poverty but a future of crime, violence and drugs their families have been trapped in for generations. Here's a way out.

Even though this was brought forward by Republicans, I knew Democrats would be all over it and give their support. I was wrong. Democrats were dead set against it. Was it just another case of, "If they're for it, we're against it"? No. The unions. Especially the giant National Education Association, or NEA, the largest union of any kind in the United States. So much for Sally.

NEA leaders saw this as a threat to their very existence. And their control over the teachers, the educational structure, and the schools. That's why it's easier to impeach the president than to fire a bad teacher. Which must outrage good teachers.

The teachers unions have been strong-arming the Democratic Party for decades. They give them over 90 percent of their support and funding, so when the NEA told them to stay in lockstep they did. Then the misinformation campaign started.

Meanwhile, notable people such as Nobel Prize laureate and economist Milton Friedman and organizations like the National Institute for Policy Research and the CATO Institute have stated that vouchers improve standards and lower costs.

I add here that there are several types of voucher systems, and none are perfect. It's about parental choice. That's why we need the option of charter schools, private schools, and traditional public schools.

Monopolies have no incentive to improve or become more efficient. Nor do they fear repercussions for doing a bad job. Where are their customers going to go? I also add that this is no reflection on the dedicated administrators and teachers who have to work within the system.

On March 31, the Duluth School Board declined an offer for the district's Central High School property, even though the offer was \$500,000 over list price. School Board members wouldn't even discuss the possibility of just selling the building and parking lot so Edison could use it, leaving the rest of the 77-acre site to sell to different developers. This was even though the Duluth school district has

a \$3.3 million budget deficit.

The school district has a policy against selling to competing interests, which the board would not suspend. Board members argued that the short-term profit would have long-term repercussions.

See, there's the problem. This shouldn't have been about the School Board. It was about Sally. It wasn't even about what the School Board thinks is best for the children. That's up to the parents, guardians or protective service. In that order.

The School Board should be willing to see itself go extinct if that's what it takes for the greater good. Which it won't, of course; there's always going to be a place for public schools. The News Tribune brought up the fact that Duluth's public schools offer courses charter schools don't, a point the district should sell to prospective students and their families.

Anyone who questions whether Sally is worth the effort can consider what the advancement in education will do for us as a nation. The U.S. used to be ranked No. 1 in education among other nations, as recently as in 1992. We are now 14th out of 40 countries in cognitive skills, 17th out of 40 in educational performance, 24th out of 40 in literacy, and 36th out of 64 in science and math.

The U.S. led the way in science, technology and medicine for generations. We've given a grateful world the benefit of our advancements to save lives and to make life better. The Americans who were responsible for these things are dying off and retiring. Who's going to replace them? A nation full of graduates who place 36th out of 64 nations? China? Who?

Sally's going to want to help; you know she will. But will she have what it takes? Will she even have what it takes to help herself?

In the future, when we look to Sally — and we will — what will we say to her? More importantly, what will she say to us?