

Public schools — the craziest government program of all

By Heather Wilhelm
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Now that we've hit mid-August, it's worth considering a certain sprawling government program, due to pull in waves of children across the country over the next few weeks. I'm talking about you, public schools. You might be the craziest government program of all.

People love public schools, or at least they love the idea of them. But when you grow up with something crazy — your dad fires your cat from a cannon; your brother plays bagpipes in the bathtub; your mom regularly wears a Jimmy Carter T-shirt — you tend to think it's normal. If you were to explain our country's educational system to a moderately bright space alien, however, it would look at you like you had three heads.

With so many oddities in our current system, it's hard to know where to start. Across America, arbitrary school district lines radically distort real estate markets. Anyone who has house-shopped in the U.S. knows one sad truth: Better school districts command a premium. (The other truth is that you probably won't like the kitchen.) Despite lofty government rhetoric regarding free and equal public education, the fact remains that better-off families can buy their way into better schools.

It gets crazier, because despite this disparity, public school funding doesn't seem to make much of a difference. The average American public school spends \$11,455 per pupil, and that's just the average: Washington, D.C., home of legendarily horrible schools — among eighth-graders, 17 percent are proficient in reading and 19 percent proficient in math — spends upwards of \$18,000 per student. That's from the U.S. Census Bureau; the Cato Institute estimates that D.C. might actually spend \$25,000 per pupil. Nationally, inflation-adjusted per-pupil spending has tripled since 1970. Test scores have been flat.

Where does the money go? Well, in 2012, D.C. teachers made an average of \$90,681 in salary and benefits. But the real school spending growth hits outside the classroom. According to the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, nonteaching staff in American public schools spiked 130 percent between 1970 and 2010. Student enrollment during that time grew only 8.6 percent. Since 1950, school employees in general — many in “administrative” positions — grew by almost 500 percent.

This week, Morgan Smith, a Texas Tribune reporter, lit up Twitter by posting a revealing photo of a response to her Freedom of Information Request from the Department of Education, signed by an official “FOIA Denial Officer.” Someone’s entire taxpayer-funded job title, in turns out, is devoted to shutting down taxpayer requests for information. Digging from journalist Lachlan Markay revealed that our friendly federal “FOIA Denial Officer” makes \$155,000 annually.

I haven’t even mentioned the cultural problems endemic in broad-brush, one-size-fits-all government schools: fierce battles over curriculum and Common Core; the fear that your sixth-grader might come home with a lunch box stuffed with school-nurse provided condoms; or, even worse, the fear that your child, stuck in a school racked with gang violence, might not come home at all — all because you can’t afford to leave your ZIP code.

According to the Council for American Private Education, average private school tuition in America is \$8,549 — thousands less than per-pupil spending at your average struggling public school. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that private schools consistently outperform public schools on national achievement tests.

School choice, it seems, should be a no-brainer. Why not give families vouchers, allowing them to make free choices for their children’s education? There’s a reason increasing numbers of inner-city activists in places like Chicago and Washington, D.C. are fighting for charter schools and voucher programs. They know choice would be better for their kids. They know the government has failed them.

Ardent defenders of America’s sprawling, failing government school system insist they want “social justice.” Occasionally, these people are sincere. Sometimes, they’re just lucky enough to live in a neighborhood with good public schools. Most often, they’re somehow on the payroll of our vast, growing government-educational complex — like Karen Lewis, the notorious head of the Chicago Teachers Union. She makes \$200,000 a year. Let the buyer beware.