



Our public education system 'is failing'

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The major stakeholders in K-12 public education are at an impasse. Teachers' Unions are primarily concerned with self-preservation, maintaining extravagant perks for union administrators and exerting disproportionate political influence. A handful of publishing houses sell us \$8 billion worth of warmed-over text books every year. Testing companies collectively spent tens of millions lobbying in states and on Capitol Hill from 2009 to 2014. These politically powerful, entrenched special interests are heavily invested in maintaining the failing status quo.

The U.S. is falling behind other countries in test scores across a broad range of subjects and grade levels. Polls show growing public dissatisfaction with everything from school choice, classroom sizes, aging infrastructure, standardized testing and curriculum. Everyone can criticize our government's public education system, with justification. Based on any rational review of the facts, it is failing.

The current presidential wannabes address us with empty platitudes about fulfilling potential, without talking specifically about how they would actually fix our failing education system. This is mainly because the amount of money at stake is enormous. In 2015, U.S. government spending on education topped \$1,435.8 billion, with \$788.7 billion for K-12 alone. It may be political suicide to risk alienating sources of political contributions, blocs of union voters and entrenched special interests, but here's what needs to be done:

- **Fix #1 Disband the Department of Education:** The DOE currently employs 5,000 government workers and has an annual budget of \$73 billion, yet according to the CATO Institute, it has not affected student outcomes in any demonstrable way over its 40-year history. It has successfully created a system that requires educators to teach reams of "politically-correct" content and focus on scoring well on standardized tests. It has created an atmosphere of testing in our schools, putting intense pressure on teachers and students to "ace the test" rather than mastering the material. This promotes a culture of

teaching to the test and score tampering. Drive control of the standards and testing to the State and local level.

- Fix #2 Abolish public sector unions: According to the Bureau of Labor statistics, union participation in the U.S. private sector is at 7 percent, compared with 35 percent in the government sector. Simply put, if a private company's products become too expensive vis a vis their competitors' offerings, their products won't sell, the company goes out of business and jobs are lost. In the government sector however, union political efforts elect public officials, who then deliver pay, benefits, and pensions, at the expense of their actual constituents, the taxpayers. A vicious cycle ensues. Monopolies are unhealthy in the private sector, and much worse in the government sector. Unfunded pension liabilities across the nation are just one indication of how serious the problem is. These entrenched special interests will resist reform at all costs.
- Fix #3 Invest state and federal dollars in open educational resources: Mandate that all monies for state and federal curriculum be used to develop, curate, align, and disseminate open educational resources. The small cabal of publishers who are currently feeding at the public trough by selling us warmed-over textbooks needs stopped. Two plus two has equaled four for a long time.
- Fix #4 Give parents choices: Vouchers create competition for the best teachers and give parents choices. And parents DO want that right to choose where their kids go to school. Vouchers, charter schools and the other "school choice" policies each receive majority support from mothers of school-age children in the "Schooling in America Survey," a project of the pro-reform Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, conducted by Braun Research, Inc. Vouchers were supported by 61 percent of respondents, while charter schools were favored by 53 percent. This creates a competitive landscape for the best teachers.
- Fix #5 Eliminate tenure: When workers in private companies stop working, they get fired. When companies become uncompetitive, they die. When teachers with tenure stop putting in the effort, they are untouchable. Why? Impressionable kids learn more than the 3R's from these people. How can a teacher who has stopped trying, prepare our kids to be successful in life? We need to reward the good ones and fire the bad ones.

Fixing public education in the U.S. is a very complex problem. Entrenched special interests will resist change at all costs. The monies in play are enormous. Many politicians receive generous campaign contributions to insure the maintenance of the current status quo. In twenty five states, even teachers who choose not to join the union are required to pay the portion of union dues that goes to collective bargaining because they are still covered by that contract. Major text book publishers aren't going to let go of \$8 billion annually without a fight. Childless taxpayers pay into this system, which then pays public schoolteachers' salaries, which go in part to union dues. These dues pay for political contributions to elect officials who in turn perpetuate the failing status quo, including the coming fiscal catastrophe that unfunded pension liabilities will soon visit upon us all.

The stakes are too high not to fix public education. We risk our competitive position in the world if we don't. Our presidential hopefuls are giving education simple lip service. We need sweeping changes, major overhaul. Someone has to "cut the Gordian knot." Alexander became "the Great" by doing that. I, for one, need to hear what our next president will actually commit to doing to

make the changes we can all agree are so desperately needed. Which of the current set of candidates has the courage to stand for education? We owe our kids the best future possible.