

What President Garfield teaches us about education

September 27, 2020

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The lyrics of Johnny Cash's ballad concern the shooting of President James A. Garfield on July 2, 1881. It is an accurate description of a little-known piece of history about a little-known president. Garfield, the 20th president, only occupied the office for four months before being shot by a man disappointed at not receiving a political appointment.

President Garfield died from his wounds on September 19, 1881. He is one of the "forgotten presidents" that served between the Civil War and the turn of the century. However, Garfield was one of the more erudite and accomplished men to serve as president. Before he launched his career in politics, serving in the House of Representatives for 17 years, he was a major general in the Union Army and before that was an educator. He received his education at what was later to become Hiram College in Ohio, and at Williams College in Massachusetts. At age 26 he was named president of Hiram College. Garfield was a man of strong and insightful opinions about many things, including education.

Ms. Cathy Connolly, minority leader in the Wyoming House of Representatives and professor of women's studies at the University of Wyoming, also has strong opinions about education, especially when it comes to spending. In a recent opinion piece in the Casper Star-Tribune, she urged the legislature to disregard the dire financial straits in which Wyoming presently finds itself. With the rig count at zero and mines continuing layoffs, she chose this moment to advocate for increasing Wyoming's education budget.

Ms. Connolly suggested expanding Wyoming's "basket of education goods and services" by piling on more "goods and services." Items such as social workers and publicly funded preschool were suggested.

Such an expansion would result in even more per pupil expenditures on top of the funding model that outspends, by a wide margin, each of our neighboring states. Current evidence suggests we spend more per pupil, and get less for it, than any neighboring state.

The most recent statistics on state expenditures and educational outcomes does not support the thesis that more money results in better outcomes. Wyoming spends \$16,537 per pupil, sixth-highest in the nation. However, our neighboring states spend less: Nebraska \$12,579; Idaho, \$7,486; South Dakota, \$9,176; Colorado, \$9,809; Montana, \$11,443 and Utah, \$7,179.

The latest ranking of National Assessment of Educational Progress for 2019 showed Wyoming scored higher in some categories and lower in others, compared to neighboring states. There was little correlation between expenditures and outcomes.

A 2018 report from the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, using NAEP test data and accounting for different demographic characteristics as well as cost of living differences across the states, ranked them on the efficiency of education spending. The report explains: “In these efficiency rankings, achieving successful outcomes while economizing on education expenditures is considered better than doing so through lavish spending.”

In Cato’s efficiency rankings, neighboring states are ranked higher than Wyoming. South Dakota ranks 8th, Colorado 9th, Utah 12th, Idaho, 15th, Montana 16th and Nebraska 29th. Wyoming is 37th. According to Cato, 37 states get more bang for their educational buck than does Wyoming.

Adding more dollars to the educational budget isn’t needed. What is needed is more efficient spending. That means spending on basics and not bells and whistles. It also means auditing the expenditures to assure taxpayer money is being spent wisely and efficiently. This is called “performance auditing” and Wyoming currently has no such mechanism in place.

So where should the spending focus be? Mr. Garfield suggested the answer: It is not fancy buildings and expensive equipment. It is the teacher. It is the connection between teacher and student that is indispensable to a quality education. The focus should be there.

Mark Hopkins was president of Williams College from 1836 to 1872. He was a former professor of Garfield’s. At a Williams College alumni dinner at Delmonico’s restaurant in New York City in 1871, a debate about raising money for the college’s building and equipment fund broke out. Garfield strode to the podium and declaimed, “Give me a log hut, with only a simple bench, Mark Hopkins on one end and I on the other, and you may have all the buildings, apparatus and libraries without him.” Mr. Garfield knew that true education is an interaction between student and teacher independent of lavish surroundings, expensive apparatus or auxiliary personnel.

Yes, the things mentioned are nice when money isn’t a limiting factor. But in austere times, it is the focus on fundamentals that will assure quality education. Nothing is more fundamental to education than a quality, dedicated, knowledgeable teacher.

Mr. Garfield was a good and wise man. Decision-makers in Wyoming can learn from his wisdom.