



SPENCER: Excellence in education can be bought

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By GIL SPENCER

Woo Hyeong-cheol is a math teacher in South Korea.

You wouldn't immediately think an Asian nation would pay its math teachers very big money. But Mr. Hyeong-cheol does pretty well.

He makes about \$4 million a year.

How?

Well, he's a very good teacher. And it isn't the nation that pays him, it's his students. He has a lot of them. Some 50,000. And they learn, mostly from watching him lecture and teach online. So much for the argument that small class sizes are essential to learning.

Jaime Escalante was a very good math teacher, too. He taught at a public high school in a ghetto of Los Angeles. For eight years back in the 1980s, he ran one of the most successful public school math departments in the United States. It turned out more AP calculus students than any other high school in the state. And then it went away.

Escalante didn't make very much money. He made your standard public school teacher's salary. But he did have a book written about him: "Escalante: The Best Teacher in America." And a movie, "Stand and Deliver."

However, after 10 years of remarkable success, Escalante left the school disappointed and dejected. It was the educational establishment and the teachers unions that finally got him.

Tired of dealing with their petty jealousies and limits on the number of students he could have in his classrooms, Escalante packed it in. Eventually, the other math teachers he trained at Garfield left, too. And that was the end of that success story.

Hyeong-cheol, however, remains a going concern.

It was in talking to Andrew Coulson last week that I learned about Woo. (I already knew about Escalante.)

Coulson is the director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute and is a student of excellence in education. It can be found, Coulson says, in all manner of schools from public to private — from nonprofit to profit-making investor driven enterprises.

The question is, what sort of school system best lends itself to excellence for the most students. Coulson has found that countries that allow for a wide variety of different schools appear to do the best job in educating the most children. And within those countries, for-profit ventures have the sort of incentives that breed the spreading of success.

Looking at public schools all over the world, Coulson has found that they are generally “pretty bad at replicating excellence.”

It’s not that some aren’t excellent, it’s just that they have no strong incentive to expand.

For-profit schools, however do.

“The only kind of system that consistently does replicate excellence is ... free enterprise.”

The reason is pretty basic. The owners of for-profit schools have a financial incentive to grow, to increase their customer base. The more schools and students they have, the more money they make.

Excellent nonprofit, private schools don’t have this incentive. So instead, what they do is create waiting lists. While that increases the cache of the school, it certainly doesn’t help the students who don’t get in.

As for good public schools, they’re basically limited to the people who live within the school district boundaries.

Of all the countries that might embrace for-profit schools, you would hardly think that the socialist paradise of Sweden would top the list. And yet it does.

Sweden has a nationwide school choice program, in which education dollars follow the students instead of getting shoveled to school districts.

Coulson again says there are good non-profit public schools and good for-profit private schools in Sweden. The difference between them is that the good for-profit schools “scale

up.” They branch out and grow.

“The more they grow, the more money they earn (for their investors). That’s good for the families that now have access to these schools that didn’t exist before.”

In Korea, Japan and other Asian countries, the for-profit education business is booming. And in the U.S., too, it’s starting to take off, though it’s only as tiny percentage of the amount government spends on public education.

Coulson mentions Kumon Learning Centers, which grew from one student (the son of math teacher Toru Kumon) in the 1950s to four million world-wide today.

Still, there remains in this country today a stubborn bias against for-profit schools, as if there is something wrong with the profit motive itself. This Luddite attitude is especially bone-headed when you consider how downright awful many of our public schools have become.

For-profit enterprises are, of course, no guarantee of long-term success. But as Coulson and others have observed a freer market with more educational choices is good for everybody, including teachers.

While everyone is paying attention to the crisis in Chester Upland, Coulson said one pro-education program in this state isn’t getting enough attention.

Pennsylvania is one of only nine states that has an Education Improvement Tax Credit scholarship deal that encourages businesses to help low and middle income kids go to the schools of their choice.

“It’s a wonderful, really incredible program,” said Coulson, and it helps about 38,000 students a year.

Almost as many as Woo Hyeong-cheol.

Gil Spencer’s column appears Sunday, Wednesday and Friday. Email him at gspencer@delcotimes.com. Check out his Spencerblog every day at delcotimes.com.