



Enormous Amounts of Money Flow into the Bottomless Education Pit

How much will it really help student achievement?

By Larry Sand

August 20, 2022

Spurred by COVID panic, schools have been the recipient of ungodly sums of money. And it's not as if the beast was starving before. To put things into perspective, the United States spends about \$800 billion on national defense, more than China, Russia, India, the UK, France, Saudi Arabia, Germany, and Japan combined, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. America now spends even more on K-12 education, with an outlay of about \$900 billion dollars a year, which includes an additional \$122 billion from the COVID-related American Rescue Plan.

While we have a military that is second to none, our education spending has not yielded a similar result. Our annual education outlay is second highest in the world, trailing only Norway. But in achievement, we are in the middle of the pack. For example, the 2018 rankings by the Programme for International Student Assessment, or PISA, has the United States 36th out of the 79 countries that participated in the math test, which is given to 15-year-olds.

So where does all this money go?

Not to the kids. In fact, over 80 percent of it goes to salaries and benefits for teachers and other employees.

Maybe the money will help alleviate the teacher shortage?

Hardly. The teacher shortage writ large is non-existent. Using data from a National Education Association report, Mike Antonucci writes that there were 48,985,186 students enrolled in the nation's public school system in 2021, about 256,000 fewer than in 2012. But school districts hired an additional 276,000 instructional staff during the same period. He adds that student enrollment fell 2.4 percent in the United States from fall 2019 to fall 2020, falling in every state and the District of Columbia, yet 17 states added teachers.

Maybe if we spend even more, it will equate to higher student achievement?

Again, negative. In fact, there is no correlation between money spent and student proficiency whatsoever, and history bears this out. Using inflation-adjusted figures, we have increased our education spending over 17-fold in the last century. While there is no available data that tracks

student performance for the early part of that time frame, the Cato Institute's Andrew Coulson reported in 2012 that we tripled our spending between 1970 and 2010, and had absolutely no academic progress to show for it. Looking at more up-to-date data, even though spending rose, the average NAEP scores in math for black and Hispanic students, and male and female 13-year-old students were lower in 2020 compared to 2012.

But shouldn't teachers be paid more?

It is a persistent yet convincing lie that teachers are underpaid. Most recently, Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers came out with one of her typical statements that has no basis in reality. In an interview, she asserted, "You have a hot labor market where teachers can get 20 percent more for the skills and knowledge they have teaching in non-teaching jobs."

But according to Just Facts, in the 2020–21 school year, the average school teacher made \$65,090 in salary, and received another \$33,048 in benefits (such as health insurance, paid leave, and pensions) for \$98,138 in total compensation.

Also, importantly, full-time public school teachers work an average of 1,490 hours per year, including time spent for lesson preparation, test construction and grading, providing extra help to students, coaching, and other activities, while their counterparts in private industry workers work an average of 2,045 hours per year, or about 37 percent more than public school teachers.

All in all, with various perks included, a teacher makes on average \$68.85 an hour, whereas a private sector worker makes about \$36 per hour. (While it's true that the average teacher has more education than the average private sector worker, much of the added study is in our schools of education, which the late Walter Williams, a standout professor of economics at George Mason University, referred to as "the academic slums of most any college." Also, a 2011 paper in the journal Education Policy Analysis Archives backs up Williams' assertion, finding that education majors are subject to considerably "lower grading standards" than other college students.)

Regarding the recent \$122 billion infusion of money into education, the Wall Street Journal reports that as of May, states and school districts had spent only 7 percent of it. As such, Tim Scott, U.S. Republican senator from South Carolina, has proposed the "Recover Act," which would allow states and school districts to use their unspent dollars from the American Rescue Plan to "issue Child Opportunity Scholarships directly to parents. The scholarships, targeted for low-income students, could be used for tutoring, school tuition, curriculum materials, educational therapies for children with disabilities, and other resources designed to get students the individualized help they need."

Scott's idea is certainly sound, but any move to empower parents will be met by fierce resistance from the education establishment.

I can hear shrieks coming from the Randi Weingartens of the world. "Children must go to a school run by the government with a state-credentialed (unionized) teacher! Education is too important to leave to the whims of the free market! We just need more (and more) money!"

The simple response here to the union boss and fellow travelers is to compare education to food. To feed your family, do you go to the government-run supermarket near your home? Of course not. You find a local, privately-run store that has the food you want at the best price. Just imagine

if the government forced you to buy food from that awful government market down the street that sells rancid meat, overripe fruit, and month-old bread, staffed by incompetent store employees.

Also, making education into a free market entity would dictate that teachers be paid according to their effectiveness. The great ones would become wealthy while the competent ones would still make a good living, and the stinkers would be looking for work in another field.

The establishmentarians would then clutch their pearls and whine, “But, what about poor people who can’t afford to pay for their kids’ education! The answer is that we will do the same thing for schooling that we do for food. If a family demonstrates it can’t afford to buy food, we give them a SNAP card so they can buy groceries. Similarly, we can assist impoverished families by helping to subsidize their child’s education.

Pouring endless sums of money into the government-run education black hole is a terrible idea. It does little for children, and scams the taxpayers. But it does fortify and enrich the educational industrial complex.

It’s now time to change course and become competitive in the field of education. Our future depends on it.