



Tons More Spending, No New Results

By Tom Knighton March 1, 2013

With the sequester and its effects breathing down our necks over the past week, we've heard a lot of horror stories about what would happen if we didn't somehow magically come up with some way to avoid it, despite the fact that there's just not enough money to pay for everything. One of the areas President Obama has talked about being hit hard by the cuts was education. After all, teaching kids to read and write is something that Democrats and Republicans, to say nothing of most folks in between, agree should be done.

However, are we really as "doomed" on education as the president has made us out to be?

In September of last year, Andrew J. Coulson wrote over at Cato at Liberty about how increases in spending haven't exactly correlated to higher test scores like proponents of that additional spending claimed. He presents this graph to illustrate the point:

Coulson goes on to say:

In the past, some readers have wondered if the use of two separate scales (\$ on the left and % on the right) might skew the way we perceive these numbers, making the public school productivity collapse look worse than it really is. To allay that concern, I present an alternate version of the chart that places all the data on the same percentage scale. Alas, the second picture is no less bleak than the first.

Indeed, it does. Just look for yourself.

Kind of hard to see much of a difference, is there?

Coulson compared these trends to a different industry, saying:

If music players had suffered the same cost/performance trends we'd all still be lugging around cassette boom boxes, but they'd now cost almost \$1,800.... Aren't you glad we didn't give tax-funded state monopolies to 19th century Victrola manufacturers?

Frankly, he was right.

Now, some will argue that education isn't subject to market forces like music players, and they might be right. I'm not all knowing after all. I don't pretend I am. However, I will note that despite a huge increase in spending over the last 40 plus years, we see absolutely nothing in return. Remember, the dollar amounts are inflation adjusted, so we can't say that dollars then were different than dollars now. That's been accounted for.

So, now that we see there's been no real change, we need to try and figure out why things haven't gotten better. Honestly, my money is on the fact that our educational system takes a one size fits all approach that exposes weaknesses while doing absolutely nothing to help a student actually figure out where that fits in life.

Take, for example, someone who sucks at math. In our educational system, they're told to keep ramming their head against a wall until they achieve some kind of miraculous breakthrough that, frankly, almost never happens. Students are told to just keep doing it, regardless of where they may want to end up.

Now, some will point out that quitting is a bad idea, and generally I agree. However, I also believe that there's nothing wrong with someone accepting that their strengths lie elsewhere. After all, someone who practices guitar for five years and can't get past Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star probably should accept that they're not going to be Carlos Santana.

Besides that, those who don't excel in one subject generally do well in another. However, our current system doesn't really seem to understand that. After all, a gifted writer is still pushed to study math and science. By contrast, a kid who is gifted in math and science are still expected to also produce results in history and English.

Perhaps instead of spending more and more money, which clearly hasn't accomplished a damn thing, we should instead take a look at not just what we are teaching, but how we are teaching it. Instead of throwing more money at the problem, why don't we start trying to throw out some new ideas instead.