

It's the education conundrum -- dollars vs. sense

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There are two sides to every argument and, near as I can tell, the argument over the quality of public education comes down to this: While both sides acknowledge that our public schools are found wanting, the Left wants more money thrown at the problem, the Right wants less rigidity in the public approach.

Liberals lean on the argument that outside-the-public-school-box proposals -- such as charter schools and vouchers designed to provide eligible students with the means to leave failing public schools for greener pastures more conducive to learning -- will simply create poorer public schools left to the impossible task of educating the poorest and the least educable among the flock. Their argument seems to be that we need to tolerate the under-education of the masses in order to assure adequate funding for the daily babysitting of the non-educable minority. Call it No Child's Behind Let Out.

Conservatives, on the other hand, argue that it is an indictment of the system itself that a diploma from our public schools has evolved into little more than a certificate of attendance, a get-out-of-school-free card. They see each child as an individual piece of human potential whose future should not be confined to the teaching standards of lowest common denominators.

As the argument slithers on insolubly from generation to generation, basic skills and the knowledge necessary to navigate an increasingly complex world become intellectual commodities possessed by fewer and fewer emerging adults. Undereducated youngsters become undereducated adults, and soon enough undereducated parents who obviously cannot impart what they do not know to their offspring. By necessity, then, Big Brother government must eventually step into the breach to offer increasingly essential levels of government support to more and more adults incapable of self-sustenance -- from post-secondary skills training to outright welfare and everything in between. While this seems a perfectly logical solution to big government liberals, conservatives view it as simply throwing good money after bad.

Consider a not so rare example: A young man "graduates" from a local high school and, believing in his diploma, enrolls at the local community college. He's out of that boring high school and anxious to build on a future. Then he discovers, following an obligatory entrance exam, that he needs "remedial work" in math or language, often both. He cannot proceed until those skills are improved upon, skills he should have already acquired, of course. Now he must spend more school time -- at further public expense -- "catching up" to what his public school led him to believe he had already achieved.

Often, such young men are looking at two years of remedial courses. That's two more years of school before earning a single college credit. Such young men, burdened by the peer pressure of contemporary American adulthood, frequently throw in the towel and move on. Thus do many potentially productive futures prematurely expire.

At our own community college, some 65 percent of all enrolling students -- including New Jersey Stars scholarship students -- require at least one remedial course before officially enrolling and earning any credits toward a degree. Why should that be?

The education industry, not surprisingly, fights tooth and nail to keep every eligible child as a ward of the state of public education. The industry looks at our children, not as the raw material of our

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nation's future, but rather as assigned dollar values in bloated budgets designed to maintain the status quo.

And education is a huge industry these days, sadly much more industry than profession. According to the Cato Institute, over the past 40 years public school employment has risen 10 times faster than student enrollment. Not 10 percent, mind you, but 10 times.

That growth seems to me to be in inverse proportion to the product it has delivered. But absent some political magic wand waving, those budgets will continue to rise, the dilemma will remain, and we'll all continue to pay the price, both culturally and financially.

Francis Reilly is president of Reilly Communications Inc., a local public relations firm. Direct comments to fran@wrylywrit.com.

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