

End Them, Don't Mend Them

It's time to shutter America's bloated schools.

BY [P. J. O'Rourke](#)

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The school year is drawing to a close. Time to balance the educational accounts and see what's been learned. Though not by my kids. I don't worry about them. They're geniuses like your kids and soak up knowledge the way a sponge (or a SpongeBob) does. Muffin, in sixth grade, has learned that Justin Bieber is very talented and doesn't—really, Dad—sing like a girl. Poppet, third grade, has learned how the Plains Indians made tepees. (They waited until after dinner to announce that their "Lifestyles of the Cheyenne" project was due tomorrow so that all the Cheyenne dads were up until one in the morning gluing dowels and brown wrapping paper to a piece of AstroTurf.) And Buster, kindergarten, has learned he can make himself giggle hysterically by adding "poop" to any phrase. The Little Engine That Could *Poop*.

No, the accounts that I'm balancing—and it's quite educational—are bank accounts. What's been learned is that it costs a fortune to send kids to school. Figures in the *Statistical Abstract of the United States* show that we are spending \$11,749 per pupil per year in the U.S. public schools, grades pre-K through 12. That's an average. And you, like me, don't have average children. So we pay the \$11,749 in school taxes for the children who are average and then we pay private school tuition for our own outstanding children or we move to a suburb we can't afford and pay even more property taxes for schools in the belief that this makes every child outstanding.

Parents of average students believe it too. According to an annual Gallup poll conducted from 2004 through 2007, Americans think insufficient funding is the top problem with the public schools in their communities. But if throwing money is what's needed, American school kids are getting smacked in the head with gobs of cash aplenty. That \$11,749 is a lot more than the \$7,848 private school pre-K through 12 national spending norm. It's also a lot more than the \$7,171 median tuition at four-year public colleges. Plus \$11,749 is much less than what's really being spent.

In March the Cato Institute issued a report on the cost of public schools. Policy analyst Adam Schaeffer made a detailed examination of the budgets of 18 school districts in the five largest U.S. metro areas and the District of Columbia. He found that school districts were understating their per-pupil spending by between 23 and 90 percent. The school districts cried poor by excluding various categories of spending from their budgets—debt service, employee benefits, transportation costs, capital costs, and, presumably, those cans of aerosol spray used to give all public schools that special public school smell.

Schaeffer calculated that Los Angeles, which claims \$19,000 per-pupil spending, actually spends \$25,000. The New York metropolitan area admits to a per-pupil average of \$18,700, but the true cost is about \$26,900. The District of Columbia's per-pupil outlay is claimed to be \$17,542. The real number is an astonishing \$28,170—155 percent more than the average tuition at the famously pricey private academies of the capital region.

School districts also cheat by simple slowness in publishing their budgets. The \$11,749 is from 2007, the most recent figure available. It's certainly grown. The *Digest of Educational Statistics* (read by Monday, there will be a quiz) says inflation-adjusted per-pupil spending increased by 49 percent from 1984 to 2004 and by more than 100 percent from 1970 to 2005.

Bell bottoms and Jerry Rubin hair versus piercings and tattoos—are kids getting smarter? No. National Assessment of Educational Progress reading test scores remained essentially the same from 1970 to 2004. SAT scores in 1970 averaged 537 in reading and 512 in math, and 38 years later the scores were 502 and 515. (More kids are taking SATs, but the nitwit factor can be discounted—scores below 400 have decreased slightly.) American College Testing

(ACT) composite scores have increased only slightly from 20.6 (out of 36) in 1990 to 21.1 in 2008. And the extraordinary expense of the D.C. public school system produced a 2007 class of eighth graders in which, according to the NAEP, 12 percent of the students were at or above proficiency in reading and 8 percent were at or above proficiency in math. Many of these young people are now entering the work force. Count your change in D.C.

The average IQ in America is—and this can be proven mathematically—average. Logic therefore dictates that National Assessment of Educational Progress eighth grade “at or above proficient” reading and math levels should average 50. This is true in only one of the 50 states. National averages are 29 and 31 percent. Either logic has nothing to do with public education or that NAEP test is a bear. Which I doubt. I have been told by the third grade teacher that my daughter Poppet is reading at middle school level. Yet if I leave Poppet a note in block letters telling her to feed the dogs I will come home to find the dogs have been . . . given a swim in the above-ground pool, dressed in tutus, provided with hair weaves. What I will not find is that the dogs have been fed. “I thought you wanted me to *free* the dogs,” says Poppet whose school district is not spending quite what D.C.’s is, thanks to voter rejection of the last school bond referendum.

The District of Columbia is an extreme example of disconnect between financial input and educational outcome. Unfortunately extreme is not the same as abnormal. Comparing the *Statistical Abstract’s* 2007 ranking of states according to per-pupil public education spending with state-by-state NAEP 2007 eighth grade proficiency levels is an exercise that produces little information about the relationship between money and learning. In fact, if you stare at the figures long enough you will find information being sucked out of your brain.

Massachusetts (fifth in spending per student) and Vermont (first) do lead the reading proficiency list with 43 and 42 percent respectively. But there’s not much to choose between that and 25th-biggest spender Montana’s 39 percent. Montana, in turn, is tied with third-most-expensive New Jersey. And the four states with 37 percent proficiencies on the NAEP are sixth-in-spending hyper-literate Connecticut, 19th-in-spending rube Minnesota, eighth-in-spending canny Yankee Maine, and 43rd-in-spending hayseed South Dakota.

The NAEP math proficiencies are no more illuminating. Massachusetts leads with 51 percent. Second is Minnesota at 43 percent. Third place, with 41 percent, is shared by North Dakota (37th-in-spending) and champion spender Vermont. And both lavish New Jersey and 23rd-ranked middling Kansas have math proficiencies of 40 percent.

Looking at the bottom of the heap is just as confusing. Perhaps it’s possible to spend too little on public education, and 47th-ranked Mississippi is trying to prove it. The District of Columbia aside, Mississippi’s proficiency levels are the worst in the nation—17 percent in reading; 14 percent in math. However, the state that spends the least, Utah, slightly exceeds national averages. Meanwhile the second-worst state, New Mexico, is completely average in its school spending, ranked at 24. Tenth-in-spending Hawaii, with 20 percent in reading and 21 percent in math, is marginally inferior to 31st-in-spending California with 20 and 24 percent. And 49th-in-spending Arizona is a few points better than either. The only thing that can be said for sure is that the illiterate kids who have to take off their Crocs to add six and five have mostly been out in the sun too long.

There are other numbers that make better sense. As of 2006—of course the numbers are out of date—4,615,000 people were employed full-time by some 13,000 school districts (although if school districts used the same definition of “full-time” as the rest of us the number we’re talking about would be zero). Of these 4,615,000 there are 300,000 “clerical and secretarial staff” filling out No Child Left Behind paperwork and wondering why 64,000 “officials, administrators” aren’t doing it themselves, which they aren’t because they’re busy doing the jobs that 125,000 “principals and assistant principals” can’t because they’re supervising 383,000 “other professional staff” who are flirting with the 483,000 “teachers’ aides” who are spilling trail mix and low-fat yogurt in the teacher’s lounge making a mess for the 726,000 “service workers” to clean up, never mind that the students should be pushing the brooms and swinging the Johnny mops so at least they’d come home with a practical skill and clean the bathroom instead of sitting around comprehending 29 percent of their iPhone text messages and staying awake all night because they can only count 31 percent of sheep.

“Classroom teachers” number 2,534,000. That makes for a nationwide student/teacher ratio of 15.4:1, which compares reasonably with the 13.3:1 ratio in private schools and is an improvement over the 22.3:1 public school ratio in 1970, when kids still occasionally learned something. But the people-doing-who-knows-what/teacher ratio is getting close to 1:1.

Enough, however, of outrageous statistics. Let’s generate some pure outrage. Here’s my proposal: Close all the public schools. Send the kids home. Fire the teachers. Sell the buildings. Raze the U.S. Department of Education, leaving not one brick standing upon another and plow the land where it stood with salt.

"Wait a minute," the earnest liberal says, "we've got swell public schools here in Flourishing Heights. The kids take yoga. We just brought in a law school placement coordinator at the junior high. The gym has solar panels on the roof. Our Girls Ultimate Frisbee team is third in the state. The food in the cafeteria is locally grown. And the vending machines dispense carrots and kiwi juice."

Close them anyway. I've got 11,749 reasons. Or, given the Cato report, call it 15,000. Abandon the schools. Gather the kids together in groups of 15.4. Sit them down at your house, or the Moose Lodge, or the VFW Hall or—gasp—a church. Multiply 15.4 by \$15,000. That's \$231,000. Subtract a few grand for snacks and cleaning your carpet. What remains is a pay and benefit package of a quarter of a million dollars. Average 2008 public school classroom teacher salary: \$51,391. For a quarter of a million dollars you could hire Aristotle. The kids wouldn't have band practice, but they'd have Aristotle. (Incidentally this worked for Philip of Macedon. His son did very well.)

"But what about the world class facilities to which every American public school student is entitled as soon as we get that bond issue through?" America spent more than \$83 billion on elementary and high school construction in 2008. If you think kids care the slightest about their physical surroundings, take a look at my daughter Muffin's bedroom.

"Wouldn't having just one teacher—without even a qualified teacher's aide—narrow the scope of curriculum being offered to students especially at the secondary education level?" Maybe. But our public schools seem to have addressed this issue already. In the article on Education in the 1911 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, I found this quaint description of the subjects studied at a typical American high school: "Latin, Greek, French, German, algebra, geometry, physics, chemistry, physical geography, physiology, rhetoric, English literature, civics and history." Or, as we call them nowadays, a smattering of Spanish, Fun With Numbers, Earth in the Balance, computer skills, Toni Morrison, safe sex, and multicultural studies.

"Don't kids need to experience the full range of human diversity that public schools provide?" No. And if you don't understand the process by which modern kids become socialized, you seriously need to update your Facebook page. Also, let the *Statistical Abstract* tell you something about the diverse experience provided by public schools. During the 2005-2006 school year 78 percent of public schools reported "violent incidents," more than one in six schools reported "serious violent incidents" (robbery, rape, sexual battery, or a fight or attack with a weapon), and 46 percent of schools reported thefts or larcenies. More than 10 percent of high school boys admitted to carrying a weapon to school during the previous 30 days. Among middle schools, 8.6 percent reported daily sexual harassment, 30.5 percent reported daily disrespect shown to teachers, and 43 percent reported daily bullying. Operating on the assumption that adults notice only about a third of what goes on among kids, this means that daily bullying occurs at 129 percent of middle schools. Furthermore 31.5 percent of middle schools and 38.7 percent of high schools reported "undesirable gang activities." As opposed to the desirable kind.

"Wouldn't closing the public schools eliminate valuable programs targeted for disabled students?" Yes. As of 2007, there were 6,007,800 children and young people with disabilities in the United States. But, also as of 2007, the Department of Education's budget was \$66 billion. Those funds have been freed up. That's about \$11,000 per disabled child plus the \$15,000 each will receive as his or her pro rata share of the nation's education spending. A yearly benefit of \$26,000 should provide some tutoring and therapy—or a pocket full of Ritalin.

"But some of America's disadvantaged regions may not have the financial resources to provide \$15,000 per school age child." Yes they do. The 2007 per capita income in America's poorest state, Mississippi, was \$28,845. The 2007 per capita GDP of South Korea was \$27,400. Ever heard anyone say Korean kids are dumb as a bowl of kimchi?

"But some of America's disadvantaged persons may not have the cultural resources to utilize privatized educational disbursements. Some disadvantaged children may not receive any education at all." Fifteen grand per kid buys a lot of culture. And the possibility that someone's child may not receive any education is an improvement on a certainty that the child won't. Also, why are liberals so convinced that poor people are stupid? Is it because poor people vote for liberals? That is a fair point. But if smart liberals want to find out if poor people are stupid, I suggest that smart liberals go to the worst neighborhood they can find and get in a craps game.

"And this \$15,000, is it just going to be available with no strings attached? Won't there be all sorts of exploitative scams cheating people who are seeking to educate their children?" Unfortunately there will be scams. What's to keep the District of Columbia Board of Education from going private?

America's public schools have served their purpose. Free and compulsory education was good for a somewhat unpromising young nation. The country was half turnip-head hillbilly and half slum trash from foreign refuse heaps. Public schools were supposed to take this mob of no-account pea pickers and bumbling greaseballs and turn them

into a half-bright national citizenry. It worked, causing six or eight generations of public school kids to rush home to their shanties or tenements shouting, "Everything's up-to-date in Kansas City!" or "Mom, Dad, this is *America*, quit boiling cabbage!"

Public schools helped create the idea of America and inculcate Americans with a few rudiments of knowledge. To judge by that very American item, the Internet, a few rudiments is all anyone cares to have. As for the idea of America, everybody's got it now, all over the world. I've had a cab driver in New York who got the idea of America in a country so remote that not only had I never heard of it, neither had he. I don't know if this cab driver's reading level was at or above proficient, but his math skills were well-displayed on the taxi meter after he took me from JFK to Manhattan by way of the Brooklyn Belt Parkway. I'll bet he sends his kids to private school.

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