

OLD SCHOOLS, NEW CHALLENGES: Will more money alone produce better results?

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Last fall Minnesota voters approved new public school taxes of nearly \$150 million dollars a year to improve their children's schools. Polls report that, nationwide, 75 percent of Americans are willing to raise their taxes by \$200 to \$500 per year to improve their schools. Americans agree to tax themselves because they continuously hear that schools could be improved if only there were more money.

Over the last 30 years, per-pupil spending in the United States doubled, from \$3,272 in 1969-70 to \$6,508 in 1998-99 (measured in constant 1998-99 dollars). In Minnesota, spending increased from \$3,724 per pupil to \$6,791.

Maybe we're afraid of what would happen if we *didn't* provide more money. The percentage of Americans who have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in our public schools has been falling steadily, from 58 percent in 1973 to 36 percent in 1999.

Let's look at what our willingness to spend has accomplished so far.

On the most recent national assessment tests, only 17 percent of America's 12th graders tested proficient or better in math, 18 percent in science, 26 percent in civics and 40 percent in reading.

Many of us like to believe that the problems are not with our school, but with someone else's school. But if so many children are performing poorly on proficiency tests, chances are that some of these kids are in our schools, too.

It is true that Minnesota students outperform the national average on proficiency tests. Even so, only around 40 percent of all Minnesota eight-graders perform at a proficient level on achievement tests in reading, science and math. Central city and rural students perform less well.

What do students report about school? Seventy-one percent say that most students do the bare minimum to get by and 45 percent report that some kids graduate even though they haven't learned what they're supposed to.

Employers? Roughly two-thirds to three-quarters say that recent high school graduates' skills are fair or poor, depending on the skill.

Teachers? One-half of new teachers quit teaching within their first five years.

Compared to other developed countries, the United States also ranks high in per pupil spending. A survey of 24 developed countries showed that 1998 per pupil spending in secondary schools in the United States was surpassed only by Austria and Switzerland; add Denmark at the elementary school level. But many countries that spent significantly less — such as the Netherlands, Australia, the Czech Republic and Hungary — outscored the United States in math and science.

Americans can't necessarily conclude that they spend too much or that all expenditures are unwise. We want our teachers to be paid well, and our class sizes to be reasonably small. But perhaps we don't know *how* to spend money in the ways that will improve student achievement.

Kansas City is an example where too little money was regarded as the problem, but more money failed to bring the hoped for results. In 1985, a federal judge took over partial control of the school district. The school district responded by greatly increasing per pupil spending. It reduced student-teacher ratios to 12-1, increased teacher salaries and built state-of-the-art facilities.

Twenty years later, there is physical evidence of money: beautiful new schools with facilities that rival those of wealthy suburbs. But student achievement has remained stubbornly poor. The federal judge quit the case in frustration.

Among the largest 100 school districts in the nation, Minneapolis and St. Paul rank 4th and 7th, respectively, for per pupil spending — with Minneapolis spending \$9,625 in 1999 and St. Paul spending \$8,119.

Even with spending 50 percent higher than the national average, one-third to one-half of the students in the two districts fail to graduate in four years. In 1998, only five states ranked lower in average proficiency in reading for eighth graders in central city schools.

Because of results like this, many foundations that were long-time financial supporters of public schools — like the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation and the Heinz Endowments — have begun to withdraw from education funding. The foundations may be on to something here. Making "more money" the solution implies that "too little money" is the problem. Might there be another answer to fixing schools?

In many ways, our nation's greatness is a result of its public school system. We believe in the importance of our public school system. So when school administrators' make their election-time pleas, we respond by taxing ourselves in the best interest of our children and our country.

But perhaps it's time to ask ourselves: Will more money truly make a difference for our children this time around? Or should we be looking elsewhere for answers?

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