

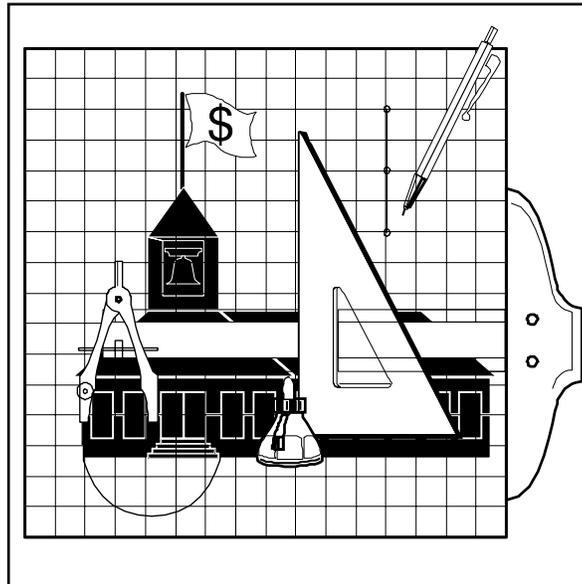
THE EDUCATION ESTABLISHMENT VS. CONSERVATIVES

SOME OBJECTS ARE CLOSER THAN THEY APPEAR

GEORGE LIGHTBOURN

There is a clear and deep gulf in Wisconsin over support for K-12 schools. Standing on one side of the gulf is the education establishment, one that has been accustomed to successfully defending the status quo for decades. Standing across the gulf are conservatives who, in recent years, have won significant victories over the status quo. Parental choice, charter schools and spending caps were made the law of the land largely due to a push from conservatives. Yet, are conservatives an anti-education pack as they are often painted by the educational community? The answer is a loud no. Until the education camp recognizes that conservatives value public education at least as much as they do, they will make little progress on issues they hold dear, including modifying the Qualified Economic Offer (QEO).

Observing the gulf between the education community and conservatives is perplexing, frustrating, but mostly disappointing. Each side, gazing across the gulf, thinks they see a combatant at odds with their own principles. In reality, they share a fundamental value supporting quality public education. This essay



will discuss how the education community has made it difficult for conservatives to support higher spending for public education.

There is nothing wrong with a healthy policy debate over education funding. Discourse over public policy is always for the better, for out of discourse comes understanding, knowledge, innovation and solutions to nagging problems.

However, the debate over funding education in Wisconsin has yet to move to the understanding stage. Problem-solving remains well over the horizon.

Support for education runs deep in Wisconsin

Quality education is a fundamental value of Wisconsin. Since its early days as a state, Wisconsin has supported education at all levels. Wisconsin is the birthplace of Kindergarten, has a strong technical college system, and lays claim to a public university system that is world-renowned.

So too Wisconsin values and supports quality K-12 education. It is understood that

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education yields better people and better citizens. Wisconsinites know that education instills values in our children, the values of learning and exploration. It also imparts the values of hard work, discipline, action and achievement. Wisconsin understands that people who hold these values are interesting, goal-oriented people who make the state a better place to live.

In recent years Wisconsin has also come to understand the economic value of education. It puts money in citizens' pockets. Studies have shown that the high school graduate will make 39% more than the dropout and the college graduate will earn \$20,000 per year more than the high school dropout. While it is intuitively known that educated people earn more, it is impressive to see it reduced to cold hard calculations.

Wisconsin also recognizes the value of education to its communities. Rural towns and villages are rightly concerned about the exodus of their bright young children. They know that their communities will not thrive without their energy and ideas.

Similarly, the economic prosperity of Wisconsin's cities is also dependent on education. A study by the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute documented the link between the decline of the Milwaukee economy and its educational profile. Statistical analysis in that study showed that the modern American city feeds its economy through the educational attainment of its citizens. Milwaukee is lagging in the number of college graduates living there and in the academic achievement of its public school children. Milwaukee's incomes have stagnated as a result.

So, it is understood that education makes for better, wealthier people. While quick to note the flaws and blemishes of Wisconsin's education system, it remains the envy of most of the world. By imparting ideas and values, education is one of the parents of American prosperity.

Of course there are a wide range of ideas about what works best in the classroom. Each person tends to favor the approach used by his

or her teachers. Why would a person whose education led to their success not advocate that all children benefit from similar educational grounding? People viscerally favor one type of learning over another. The intensity of feeling about phonics, new math, direct instruction, etc., is only in part due to the objective reading of empirical data (there is usually ample statistical ammunition for or against any innovation). It is largely borne of the high regard in which education is held. Only religion causes the same intense feelings among people.

Simplified debate

It is against this backdrop that so much of the debate over education funding seems remarkably shallow. It is an oversimplified debate carried on in black and white when shading of all colors is appropriate. Those who favor lifting the ten-year-old QEO and taking the lid off school spending see themselves as the sole champions for public education. They are quick to paint all others as being anti-education. They envision higher spending as magically yielding better, more energized teachers, better books and supplies and an up-to-date and safe learning environment.

Conservatives have also been mistakenly portrayed as caring only about school spending. Conservatives actually hold wide-ranging views on matters of pedagogy, testing, accountability and many other issues. They hold deep and complex attitudes toward public education that nearly always defy generalization. Those who suggest otherwise simply are not paying attention. For example, in Milwaukee it is the business community leading the charge to improve the performance of Milwaukee Public Schools. Frankly, without the support of the Milwaukee Metropolitan Association of Commerce, MPS is likely to continue to show disappointing results.

However, the skepticism with which most conservatives regard education spending is equally complex. Conservatives are concerned about the overall level of spending, placed at 12.6% above the national average by a recent study. They probe for evidence that more money will result in better performance, and

want to know how much education spending actually goes to the classroom. Yet their concerns are dismissed by the education establishment, which has synthesized the complexity of education debate into a single issue — the QEO (Qualified Economic Offer, a measure used to limit school spending). The QEO has become the litmus test for support for education. One's stance on that single issue crystallizes for the education establishment whether one is "pro" or "anti" education. They leave little room for discourse, the type of discourse that always strengthens our institutions.

What these people fail to recognize is the commonality of interest between educators and fiscal conservatives. Over and over research has shown the economic power of education. It puts money in the pockets of individuals and it makes communities wealthier. So, why on earth would conservatives not throw their full support behind public education? In large part it is because the education community over the years has distanced itself from conservatives and anyone else outside the world of education. It has become insular and has rudely stiff-armed anyone from outside that has the audacity either to question the effectiveness of Wisconsin's schools or to suggest a new twist on education.

Education as a closed community

Americans feel a deep kinship with education. The general public not only understands its value, they have devoted a large portion of their formative years to it. Education is not like vascular surgery or skyscraper architecture, professions we might be fascinated by but professions that only a handful will ever experience. Everyone has experienced education. Education is not unfamiliar territory. Rightly or wrongly people feel entitled to their opin-

ions on the subject of education. Yet, too often the education establishment seems threatened by input from outsiders.

Why does the education community exude an aura of exclusivity? One reason is the need for a license to practice in the field. Licensing of teachers is most generally accepted to ensure some minimal level of training before entering the classroom (although many home schooled children are performing well and are taught by teachers lacking traditional credentials). Credentialing has been extended to a long line of other school workers including principals, administrators and financial managers. It is rare for someone from outside to crack through the education shell. Credentialing in education has given education the exclusivity of a private country club and is partly responsible for the closed nature of the education establishment.

But even some closed societies are open to new ideas. How open has the education establishment been to ideas that germinate beyond the pale of education? Unfortunately, it has been open only to ideas that spring from within the circle of education.

One need look no further than the rapidity with which parental choice, charter schools and, most recently, virtual schools have been dismissed by the circle of education. All of these are ideas aimed at improving student performance, and all challenge traditional thinking.

The education community has resisted and even derided these initiatives, even though they enjoy strong support from groups of parents. The hyperbole from the education establishment has been particularly harsh with respect to Milwaukee's School Choice initiative, a program targeted at providing improved education options for poor minority

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families. Further, the resistance knows no bounds. Skirmishes have occurred in the courts, in the Legislature and on the campaign trail. The resistance is unrelenting and vitriolic.

The message broadcast from within the walls of the education circle is that only from within that circle can spring sound education ideas. What should be understood is that the arrogance of the resistance is enormously alienating to the parents who support these initiatives. Few things are more alienating than the rejection of one's closely held ideas.

But particularly curious is that the education community has made little effort to reach out to conservatives as part of a political strategy. The condition of the state budget would seem to argue for expanding education's circle of support. The current budget saw state government reduce its financial support for schools from 67% down to 63%. Given the competing demands from Medical Assistance and corrections, it is likely that another round of school aid cuts will be high on the list of budget fixes next time around. Yet, many in the education world stubbornly refuse to expand their circle of support.

Rather than reaching out to befriend new supporters, they tend to close ranks. Rather than reconsidering stances that have become outdated, the shrillness of the opposition to new education initiatives has intensified. This signals conservatives that the education establishment is not willing to discuss, much less accept fresh ideas. And the gulf between the education establishment and conservatives widens.

Effectiveness of Spending

If cost controls were lifted and more funding was made available, would it be used effectively? How would it improve the education of Wisconsin students? Unfortunately, because the discussion of school funding has been oversimplified, these questions are rarely considered. Yet, until they are addressed there will continue to be reluctance on the part of fiscal conservatives to support higher spending.

Wisconsin schools spend an average of just over \$10,000 per student according to the Department of Public Instruction. Taxpayers intuitively perceive this to be a good deal of money and are entitled to question the push for even more spending. More specifically they ask what would be done with additional spending? That simple question raises a number of fairly complex issues: how would the state funding be distributed, how much money would make it to the classroom, and does higher spending really improve learning? Let's consider these one at a time.

Distribution of state funds

Nineteen-ninety-five was a watershed year for school funding in Wisconsin. Not only did the state add \$1 billion to school aid that year, it imposed caps on school spending. Revenue caps, including the QEO (Qualified Economic Offer limiting compensation increases to 3.8%), made it clear that spending increases were to be reigned in. This was linked to the state's funding a greater share of school costs. This limited a spending increase, right? Well yes, but with three notable exceptions: TEACH, SAGE and school construction.

TEACH (Technology for Education Achievement), a \$500 million multi-year program initiated by Governor Thompson in 1997, gained support among both Democrats and Republicans. Its widespread support was largely because legislators on both sides of the aisle were able to understand, with some specificity, how the added money would be used to improve education in the classroom. (The program has been abandoned as a result of state budget constraints in 2003.)

Similarly, since the SAGE (Student Achievement Guarantee in Education) program was created in 1995, \$425 million has been made available to Wisconsin school districts to reduce class size in kindergarten through third grade. This initiative was pushed in two budgets primarily by Democrats in the Wisconsin Legislature. However, it has received begrudging support from several Republicans, in part because the

funding is directed toward a more tangible classroom purpose.

In addition to these two state programs, since 1994 no fewer than 617 local referenda to support debt for building projects have been approved in school districts across Wisconsin. Granted, the passage of the referenda was much easier with the prospect of the state paying an average of 2/3 of the cost of the building projects. However, the success of referenda for capital projects is another example of increased spending for a more specific, targeted purpose.

The lesson seems simple: the more specific and tangible spending initiatives are likely to garner broader support. However, the message isn't sinking in. The education establishment seems fixated on eliminating school spending caps and increasing in general school spending. Recalling an admonition from the ubiquitous fifth grade teacher, they're not listening and they're not learning.

Increasingly, education spending supports ancillary costs

Conservatives wonder, if additional dollars were made available, how much would actually wind up in Wisconsin's classrooms? In 1990 Michael Fischer, an elementary teacher in Milwaukee Public Schools, did a study for the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute showing that only 45% of the overall MPS budget was spent in the classroom. In times of tight budgets, there is a general expectation among the public that funding will be targeted as much as possible to the classroom.

There are more recent signs that additional funding would be diverted from classrooms. For example, 2001 census data showed that statewide administrative and overhead costs consume 38% of school spending.

Followers of education finance have also seen fringe benefits balloon to 48% of salary costs on average for all school districts. This means that for every dollar invested in salaries, on average, forty eight cents is added on for fringe benefits. Some districts are higher. These costs are driven largely by the escalating cost of health care and by pension requirements. (In addition, an emerging fringe benefit cost is the cost of providing benefits to retired workers. Several school districts implemented early retirement plans and are beginning to experience the costs related to them.) The level of administrative and fringe benefits seems to have become an accepted cost of doing business

for the education community. However, knowing how much of the education dollar these ancillary costs consume makes it increasingly unlikely that conservatives will support higher spending.

Does higher spending yield better performance?

An overlooked issue relates to the link between spending and learning. Does higher spending lead to better results? Conventional wisdom suggests a positive linkage, but the picture is far from clear.

Since Wisconsin now has ten years of standardized test results for students, we can begin to understand the relationship between spending and performance. While the definitive statistical analysis has not been done, there are a number of school districts spending far below the state average that show above average test results. For example the Burlington school district in Racine County spends \$8,200 on each student in the district, well below the state average of \$10,200. How do the students of Burlington fare? Actually quite well; the fourth, eighth and tenth grade students scored a bit higher than average in reading and either at, or just under the average in math. While the performance in Burlington

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and throughout Wisconsin could be improved, Burlington and several other low-spending districts demonstrate how tenuous the link is between spending and academic achievement.

This is not to suggest that there is no relationship between spending and performance, but rather that the relationship defies prediction. The recipe for student achievement is a complex one, consisting of student readiness, parental support, poverty, the quality of classroom instruction, the cleanliness and safety of the school building and many others. It is not possible to purchase student achievement by simply spending more on education. If other factors are wanting, additional spending should not be expected to result in better academic achievement.

Bridging the gap between educators and conservatives

The education community should expect that conservatives will continue to question the effectiveness of spending, they will expect ancillary expenses to be minimized, and they will look for a demonstrable link between spending and performance. Conservatives will resist efforts to increase school aid based on the fuzzy notion that more spending will raise all of the education boats. At the same time, educators should take a fresh look at conservatives and they will see thousands of people who are highly supportive of K-12 education. However, they will also see people that need assurance that any new funding will be targeted effectively. What follows are some suggestions of how the education community can connect with conservatives.

Be open to non-traditional ideas

The most significant step would be to become receptive to nontraditional educational initiatives such as parental choice and charter schools. These initiatives, which trace their roots to non-traditional thinking on improving education, should not be seen as threatening public education. They certainly threaten the status quo, but it is widely recognized that public schools will continue to be the backbone of education in America. However, the future of public education will include a more

informed consumer who expects a wider range of options and who demands that the educational experience will be a quality one. Wisconsin's State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Elizabeth Burmaster seems to understand this new paradigm and has been more supportive of non-traditional ideas about improving school performance.

Link funding and effectiveness

There is a need for more sophisticated methods of investment in education. Conservatives expect that state funding be used not just to equalize the spending capacity of districts, but that it also be used to improve student performance. It will not be sufficient to simply advocate for additional funding without linking it to increased effectiveness. To that end the information emanating from Wisconsin's standardized tests should be used as a guide as to where to invest additional funding to ensure it will have the greatest impact. However, that is impossible today due to a provision in the law that prohibits test data from being used in the distribution of state aid. The education community should encourage the elimination of this archaic provision.

Minimize ancillary costs

There needs to be movement to minimize the expenditure of funds on ancillary costs. Fiscal conservatives will need to be shown that the preponderance of dollars is spent in the classroom. While school districts have made efforts to minimize the cost of administrative and overhead items, a similar effort needs to be made to minimize the cost of fringe benefits. While most people recognize the impact of health insurance costs, most would find a 48% fringe benefit rate to be excessive. Efforts need to be made to bring that more in line with other Wisconsin industries, either by managing costs or by instituting co-pays and deductibles.

These steps will require substantially different thinking among the education community. However, until movement is made on these items, conservatives will continue to push ideas of education reform and be wary of increases in school spending.