

Ten Commandments for Education Reform in Oklahoma

by Richard Vedder, Ph.D.

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education issued its famous report, *A Nation at Risk*, and education became the country's most talked about public policy issue. Throughout the land, the 50 states began experimenting with a vast number of proposals to change the nation's public schools. It was the "laboratory of democracy" that Justice Louis Brandeis once spoke about in action.

Now, some 18 years later, there is a sense that the moves towards reform have not lived up to the high expectations of their original proponents. In part, it is because many of the reforms were modest, piecemeal attempts to tinker with the system rather than try bold new approaches to educational delivery. In part, it was because some of the so-called reforms were ill-conceived, or were changes that were made in the name of reform but which were designed to meet objectives of members of the school establishment rather than improve the academic performance of students.

Before proceeding to discuss what sorts of changes should be a part of Oklahoma's efforts to improve student learning, let us briefly review what has happened in the name of reform, and what has happened to student performance in the past couple of decades. Turning to the latter issue first, there is some evidence of very modest improvement in student performance nationally. Scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills are on average a bit higher than two decades ago. SAT scores, particularly in mathematics, are up a little. The results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress tests are somewhat mixed, but show modest improvement in some areas.

The improvements on the whole, however, are disappointing. The average SAT score today is below what it was in 1970. A large proportion of our students have poor skill levels, with limited literacy and numeracy achievement. I would bet that most 17-year-old Oklahomans do not know in which half century the Civil War took place, who Woodrow Wilson was, or could name a novel written by John Steinbeck or even Ernest Hemingway, much less having read one. I bet that a significant percentage of those students would not know what the capital of Louisiana is, or even Texas. In short, there is a low level of what University of Virginia English professor and educational reformer E.D. Hirsch calls "cultural literacy."

At Ohio State University a few years ago, a majority of surveyed students could not tell you how to equally divide three pizzas among four people—something, incidently, college kids have to do all the time. On international tests, American students typically rank below students from a majority of developed nations, below such countries as Hungary where resources are far less than in the United States. And that brings us to another disappointment: the mediocre performance of American students has not resulted from financial neglect of our schools. We spend two to three times as much per pupil than we did in, say, 1960, and spending has risen faster than inflation fairly consistently in the era since *A Nation at Risk*. Countless studies show no relationship between per pupil spending and student achievement.

What kinds of reforms have occurred since 1983? Let us speak of three areas of reform: changing educational inputs, changing educational outcomes, and changing the method of delivering public educational services.

Changing Educational Inputs

Some reforms have concentrated on changing the quantity or quality of educational inputs – teachers, technology used in teaching, non-teaching support personnel, etc. A reform popular with teacher unions and parents alike has been class size reduction, and the ratio of school personnel to students has risen dramatically in the past four decades. This is true here in Oklahoma. Unions also have argued for higher salaries, and on average the salaries of teachers have risen faster in real terms than that of the entire labor force in the years since 1983. Some states have instituted testing of teachers to assure minimum levels of competency. A few states have experimented with merit pay schemes. Others have insisted that teachers

get master's degrees or do extensive continuing education training. Most states have at least paid lip service to allowing persons to enter teaching in nontraditional ways through what is usually called alternative certification. More recently, states have jumped on the technology bandwagon, with the favorite political cry in some states being that every classroom is going to be wired with one or more computers. Meanwhile, in general the number of non-teaching personnel has continued to rise, as schools take on more guidance counselors, curriculum coordinators, teacher aides, tutors, and so forth.

Modifying Educational Outcomes

Another trend has been to try to measure educational outputs, most notably by instituting standardized testing of students. While practices vary considerably by state, in many states students must pass some standardized tests or face some consequences. President Bush apparently will get his wish to institute national testing for the first time. States have upped their graduation requirements on average, insisting that students have more work in major academic subjects. Some states have lengthened the school year. More summer programs are occurring in a few states, particularly emphasizing remediation for those students doing poorly on standardized tests. More pre-kindergarten programs are being offered, and some states are promoting reading before first grade in order to enhance student outcomes. Nationally, enrollments in Advanced Placement high school courses have increased dramatically, and the number of high school students taking college courses has grown significantly in some states. Some curricular reforms are content-oriented, such as the Core Knowledge movement led by E.D. Hirsch, which aims to emphasize the teaching of information and facts rather than purporting to prompt self-esteem, critical learning skills, and other concepts that are rather hard to measure and define.

New Forms of Educational Delivery

The reforms discussed thus far do not involve dramatic changes in how we offer educational services, excepting some use of distance learning implicit in new technology initiatives. In most states, nearly everyone going to public school still attends the school assigned by the school district. Choice as to schools is still largely limited. Yet the boldest forms of educational reform have emphasized offering alternative forms of educational delivery.

The most controversial of these is public voucher programs, where parents receive a scholarship from the state usable at any certified school in the state. This involves giving educational resources to the consumers rather than the producers of education. While there has been much talk about vouchers, their use to date has been very limited, in large part because of fierce opposition from teacher unions such as affiliates of the National Educational Association. Actually, the most extensive use of this approach to date has been financed by private entrepreneurs, such as John Walton and Ted Forstmann.

A less radical but more important change has been the charter school movement. True charter schools are free of virtually all of the rules and regulations faced by public schools. The belief is that centralized bureaucracy and regulation stifles productive entrepreneurial efforts by local principals and teachers to offer attractive programs. While most advanced in Arizona, the charter school movement has reached most states, including Oklahoma.

A third development regarding reform of educational delivery has been movement towards privatization of some or all educational functions. Some districts have contracted out more operations to private companies. Originally confined largely to transportation, food and maintenance services, increasingly private companies are managing whole schools.

A fourth effort has been to offer tax credits to parents providing private educational services for students. In some instances, this involves a tax credit or deduction for private educational tuition payments, up to some limit, usually one thousand dollars or less. In other instances, it involves tax subsidization of supplemental educational expenditures, including such things as after school enrichment training at private centers, such as those operated by Sylvan Learning Systems.

A fifth factor is the ultimate reaction: students leaving public schools for alternative forms of education. For years, private schools attracted about 11 percent of students of primary and secondary school age. Over

time, enrollment in Catholic parochial schools declined as a percent of total enrollment, offset by a growth in other forms of private education. In the past decade, there is some indication that the private share of the total is increasing. The decline in Catholic enrollments has stopped, and there has been a tremendous growth in home schooling. It is possible that private and home schools are educating close to 15 percent of all students now, and others attending public schools are getting supplemental instruction at private firms or institutions, many of them operating on a for-profit basis.

Educational Research

Lastly, before proceeding to the “ten commandments” for reform, a word about what research on schools has been telling us. I should say that in my judgment virtually all the truly outstanding research has been done not by professors of education, but by economists, political scientists, psychologists, historians and other social scientists and specialists in the humanities. The education schools are viewed by most in academia as vast wastelands of mediocrity. They are viewed as part of the problem, not the solution, as they often promote training for potential teachers of questionable value and limited intellectual content.

A vast amount of research does point out that much learning occurs outside the school setting, and that family background and encouragement is important. The decline in traditional two-parent families very well may be one important reason for the disappointing evidence regarding educational improvements, but often it is used to excuse mediocre performance.

A second body of research shows that schools with effective leadership and well-defined goals are more likely to succeed than those without, and that excessive central office control of schools tends to stifle creativity and entrepreneurship at the school level.

A third body of research, more limited and tentative, but still impressive, suggests that competition in general promotes better educational outcomes. That holds for both public and private school competition. Other research deals with more specific aspects of education; the evidence in general favors those advocating reduced barriers of entry into the teaching profession. For example, there is little solid evidence that increasing degree requirements leads to improved student performance.

Ten Commandments For Reform

1. Set realistic educational goals and be single-minded in your efforts to achieve them. Schools now typically try to fulfill a hodgepodge of ill-defined academic objectives, while in sports the goal is clear: win, win, win. Schools with a 60 percent passage rate on a given test should try to raise that to, say, 85 percent within five years. High schools should aim to increase the moving average of the number of National Merit Semi-Finalists and Finalists they produce. Set one, two, or at most three goals, and make all decisions with the objective of meeting those primary goals. In setting goals, aim to improve student learning – the basic purpose of education – and downplay such secondary matters as student self-esteem, sex education, affirmative action, fluoride treatments and meal programs for students, offering first-rate sports teams, and providing day care to accommodate parents.

2. Explicitly state that the primary responsibility for educational decision-making and performance rests with parents and guardians, not with the state. Who loves children more, their parents or paid workers who look after them? While there are obvious exceptions, most parents would make nearly any sacrifice that would promote their child’s welfare. That cannot be said for all school personnel. Study after study shows that differences in learning between students, or even between schools, is more powerfully explained by family influences than by such things as spending per pupil. The children of college graduates, for example, learn more than the children of high school graduates, holding all else equal. Obviously schools provide a mechanism of overcoming some of the inequity associated with being born to parents with lesser education, lesser interest in instilling learning in their children, and so forth. Yet it is still the parents who are their children’s biggest advocates, and governmental educational policy should recognize that from the beginning. This also argues that parents should have considerable rights in determining the educational experience that their children will have.

3. Give parents and students choices. Following from number two above, different people have different

tastes and preferences, and one-size-fits-all is not a good recipe for educational success. Thus parents should have many choices as to the type of schooling available to their children, and public policy should aim to expand, not limit, those choices. Thus, within traditional public schools, parents should be allowed much leeway in selecting the school that their children attend. They should be given financial assistance in seeking alternatives to conventional public schooling, be it private schools, home schooling, or publicly owned and chartered but truly independent schools.

4. Evaluate success by achieving outcomes, not by measuring inputs used. Often schools will state that they need to lower class sizes, or hire more teacher aides, or buy more computer equipment. They will evaluate the success of a given year by their ability to acquire new inputs or resources used in creating the educational enterprise. Yet success should be measured in meeting the outcome goals stated in number one above. Indeed, the expansion of outcomes relative to resources used to achieve those outcomes is the ultimate measure of educational productivity.

5. Reward good behavior and punish bad behavior, be it by students or staff. Too often, there are few rewards for excellence in public education, and too few consequences for poor performance. Thus school districts must be allowed to give financial rewards for teaching excellence, and collective bargaining agreements banning such rewards must be prohibited. Similarly, the provision of tenure is abused, and either tenure should be abolished, or it should be granted after several years of service at the discretion of the school district, not automatically.

Good administrators are valuable, particularly superintendents and principals, and generous use of merit pay should be used to reward excellence, perhaps giving bonuses for success in meeting academic goals. Similarly, students who excel in their studies should be given a boost by the administration, perhaps awarded with special privileges or given generous scholarships by the state legislature. We need to treat good scholars with the same respect and admiration that we show good football players. Similarly, we need to get tough on unruly behavior by students in the classroom. The removal of driving privileges for disruptive high school students, for example, may be a good idea.

6. Decentralize school decision-making, reducing state regulations and giving schools greater autonomy. Successful schools usually are ones that have a strong sense of school community, where the school itself has much control over its own destiny. Private schools often outdistance public ones in part by ignoring the bureaucratic restrictions placed on their public school counterparts. True charter schools exist precisely to show respect for this concept. Schools should be given more freedom with respect to issues like class size, collective bargaining, teacher standards, hiring decisions and the like.

7. Provide consumers with information on school performance. If parents are going to make intelligent choices as to the schools that their children attend, they need information. While I oppose imposing lots of onerous requirements on the schools, some standardized testing provides information on student progress, and also information allowing interschool comparisons. Most states have already achieved much of this objective, but more can be done. National testing under new federal legislation may provide a vehicle to allow for not only interdistrict but also interstate educational comparisons.

8. Make it easy to enter the education profession. I have taught 10,000 students, most of them 18- or 19-year-old individuals, economics over the past 36 years. I have won many teaching awards, one as recently as two weeks ago. I often lecture to teachers on how to effectively teach economics. Yet it is illegal to hire me on a permanent basis to teach economics in a high school in my state. I have not taken the myriad of education courses required for certification as a teacher.

There are many college graduates with considerable academic skills who might become teachers if we simply gave them a chance. If they succeeded, they should be hired permanently, without completing the many education courses that are currently an obstacle to getting a license. There is virtually no scholarly evidence that all these teaching requirements improve effectiveness. Relieve the teacher shortage by hiring non-certificated college graduates, and by paying teachers in high-demand fields more than areas where there are plenty of teachers. In short, let markets work in teaching like they do in nearly every other profession.

9. Reduce the role of education colleges. At virtually any major university in the country, the college held in the least esteem by most of the university community is the college of education. Students in education are challenged less, typically have lower entering qualifications, and so forth. As Diane Ravitch has so beautifully illustrated in her latest book, the education colleges have been profoundly anti-intellectual, anti-knowledge, and promoters of amorphous progressive concepts, such as promoting self-esteem. They decry the teaching of fundamental facts, such as the multiplication tables or the names of the state capitals. Anyone with a college degree should be allowed to teach at the secondary level without courses in pedagogy, or at the minimum the process of certifying and selecting teachers should be turned over to local control.

10. Pass a paycheck protection law to reduce the flow of money to unions to be used to fight educational reform. In most states, the teachers unions are powerful lobbies, in large part because they have vast amounts of funds. Many union members would prefer to pay lower dues and not finance lobbying and political efforts that are often inconsistent with their own political philosophy. Paycheck protection laws prohibit governmental units from deducting union dues for purposes other than strict collective bargaining expenses without the explicit written permission of each individual member. Opposition to such promising ideas as charter schools, voucher experiments, and the like by teacher unions has often stifled meaningful reform. By reducing the financial clout of unions and restoring to individuals the right to use money as they see fit rather than being coerced by union bosses to spend it for political action is certainly a step in the right direction.

Conclusions

American public education is delivering too little bang for the buck. American students are falling behind their counterparts in many other nations, putting America's economic leadership at risk in this knowledge-based economy of modern times. Oklahoma is not isolated from this phenomenon. To be sure, part of the problem with our education lies at home, where children watch too much TV, play too many video games, and do too little homework. The decline in traditional family values has not helped either. Yet part of the problem is that our educational delivery system is based on the old Soviet industrial model, where government monopoly schools make decisions without much regard to quality considerations, the feelings of their customers, or any regard for efficiency. Educational reforms such as outlined above will give Oklahoma a start in providing an educational system that will over time help revitalize your economy, and allow you to better perform the most sacred duty you have as parents, namely to pass on the knowledge and heritage accumulated over the generations onto your children. Thank you. 🌟

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