

Let's Not Waste Our Most Valuable Resource

One of the basic building blocks of our economy is the level of preparedness of young people to enter the workforce with relevant skills, a good attitude toward continuous learning and some basic interpersonal abilities. Most of the professionals that I know who are in education believe that our public education systems are under funded and overextended. They almost unanimously dismiss the efficacy of the government's testing requirements under the "No Child Left Behind" Act. Few feel that a system that judges performance based on standardized tests is appropriate and that in many ways it precludes them from providing other kinds of highly needed instruction for young students. Our nation's future business competitiveness is at risk.

It is well known that most very young children are eager students. From extremely early ages, children are able to absorb language, math and interpersonal skills if they are exposed to challenging and individualized curriculums. We know that many problems that afflict America which exact a high economic as well as social cost, such as crime, drug use, and violence, come at least partially from a lack of love, care and attention during early childhood. Good teachers know these things, but the lack of financial support makes it almost impossible to give real personalized attention, except in exclusive private school settings.

The human and financial cost of our improper focus and lack of funding cannot be overstated. It is hard to understand how teachers can receive so much less compensation than that available to people working at similar levels in business or government. What makes us place such a low value on the development of our most precious resource? What would it take to adequately develop our young people to meet our country's present and future needs?

It seems to me that young people between the ages of 13 and 18 exhibit little patience or interest in formal classroom settings. Matching up the various stages of physiological and brain development of children with their educational environment might mean that middle and high school instruction doesn't begin before 10:00 a.m. My daughter sure likes this idea! Doesn't it make sense to start middle and high schools classes and programs later so as to not waste time and effort on the part of students and educators?

Many young people finish school feeling directionless because they have had little hands on experience in the world. Middle and high school students might serve and be served better by being out of formal classrooms for a good part of the day. Young people are active and exploratory. They would benefit by participating in building projects, nature studies, and community service work. The money we spend "babysitting" capable teenagers is a waste. Boys and girls from the age of 12 or 13 can and should do real

work. The kind of learning that takes place through kinetic engagement is much needed by fast growing bodies and minds.

I believe this is one of the reasons that charter schools have taken off. Our tax dollars have traditionally not been put to good use in middle and high schools, but we have grown accustomed to a bad situation. In response to this, many charter schools provide personalized, focused instruction and involve young adults in active learning. The threat to centralized bureaucratic control is real but healthy. It is competition in the educational marketplace.

I do not believe that the central issue here is that more money is needed. If we could figure out how to get the system off the backs of teachers and administrators who now have to spend inordinate amounts of time and energy ensuring compliance with government regulations, more hands on time with the kids and more creative programming for their benefit could materialize. Skill testing ought to take place not to penalize or reward the schools, teachers, or students, but so that individualized instruction can be directed where it is needed with no shame or blame attached.

In Europe, young students are introduced to various trades and technical areas in their early teenage years. We have learned from this example because it is quite common for motivated high school students to take classes at community colleges. Our system of community colleges is quite strong, and it provides the opportunity for teenagers in many communities to expand their horizons with high quality instruction at low cost to taxpayers.

As I look at our nation's shrinking natural resource and industrial base, and note that cutbacks in public funding of education seems to go along with an increasing need for services, I wonder about the ways our tax and political systems have failed us. Schools are primarily funded from revenue and taxation on property. Over the last several decades, widespread real estate investment activity has brought much wealth into the hands of a fairly small segment of the population. This, in my opinion, ought to translate into increased funding for public education. There are many committed and talented teachers who would welcome the opportunity to work in an environment where their skills could be put to work in active learning programs.

The reorganization of schools and appropriate funding of educational programs through revamped taxes are political issues. Where is the leadership needed to take the steps required? That is a question begging to be answered. If we could transform our schools into environments where students can learn at their own pace, be challenged in ways that match their development needs, and ultimately become productive and creative employees, everyone would benefit. It is a question of having the courage to make some bold changes upfront in exchange for a real monetary payoff later.

The fostering of entrepreneurial activities in America depends on students who are better rounded, more experienced in real life work situations and who are confident in their ability to learn on the job. I don't believe we can afford not to look creatively at

alternative structures for our young people. Teachers are the best source of ideas about appropriate venues for their student's learning so let's start listening. It would be worth the effort, time and yes, even money in order to enable our collective future work force in these ways.

Rob Rikoon manages multi-generational family wealth with the help of his associates at Rikoon Carret Wealth Management Group, located at 510 Don Gaspar in Santa Fe. He can be reached via email at rrikoon@aol.com. This is the third to last article of his seven year tenure as a monthly columnist for the New Mexican.