

Santa Fe New Mexican : REAL MONEY

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Dismantling the Wasteful Machine: Part One

This must be some kind of cosmic joke. It seems like the harder we try to fix our health care and educational systems, the deeper we dig ourselves into a hole. Don't get me wrong, I'm as much a bleeding heart as anyone else in that I think everyone on the planet ought to have decent food to eat, clean water to drink, a safe place to live, books to read, and medicine to take when they get sick. From the looks of it, however, everything is going in the other direction.

President Obama clearly has good intentions in trying to extend health care to people who have been disenfranchised from or disqualified out of the system. However, he has been unable to implement a real solution which would be a universal single-payer system. It looks like some people who already had decent healthcare coverage through individual or company coverage are going to end up with a much more expensive, time-consuming, and burdensome paperwork process than before. This is the inevitable result of imposing a national political conundrum over and on top of what is essentially a local issue.

The same thing is true for the various educational testing and teacher evaluation movements being imposed on public schools throughout the country over the last decade. The No Children Left Behind Act of President Bush may have been well-intentioned, but it seems to have turned into a drag on both teachers and students. More national standards are on their way and no one is enthusiastic about their impact on how well our children will be prepared in public school settings. The costs of administering these programs in trying to make people from various cultures and regional traditions all look and act the same as far as test-taking ability is money down the tubes. Probably more important is the wasted energy and opportunity cost that children will be subjected to as centralized bureaucracies continue to gain power over local schools.

On the bright side, we may be rewarded with the feeling that the education provided to minorities in neglected school districts will improve or that sick people who used to end up in crowded lines at the emergency room in public hospitals across the country have a better chance at getting and staying healthy. It is too soon to know if there is any substance behind this feeling, but at least we are doing something. But are we? My take on both of these important sectors of our economy are that things are actually getting worse in terms of the value we receive for our dollars spent than ever before.

New Mexico ranks last among the 50 states in terms of child welfare. Our taxes are in the medium range relative to other states, so why is our actual performance in service delivery so poor? My answer is that we as a state have become too dependent on federal aid and are suffering the consequences of decades of relying on outside help. The people who settled our state and built homes and ranches here were able to raise and support generations of resilient and self-reliant people with multiple vocational skills.

This has mainly gone by the wayside as we have had to focus on complying with federal guidelines to qualify to receive outside funds. I believe we are seeing the same phenomena throughout the country when it comes to complying with the new Affordable Care Act, which is something that I support in concept, but am greatly disenchanted with in practice.

There are some people who need federal intervention to gain access to healthcare. A better interim solution would have been to create a national pool akin to the New Mexico one that provided an insurance option to those unable to get it elsewhere. The great majority of Americans are perfectly capable of determining on their own who to go to and how much to pay for their health care. In the same way, we know who the good teachers are and how to teach our kids to read and write and do arithmetic given the chance to hire and fire locally. Without going in to the issue of unions, I believe that freedom of choice and the obligation to pay as we go would serve ourselves and our children well, if applied to the education and health arenas.

New Mexicans rightfully pride themselves on our quality of life as we enjoy great expanses of nature and can recreate outdoors for much of the year. There are people and events here which are the envy of other states. They rightfully garner our state a proud reputation as home to artisans, musicians, and writers from multiple cultural traditions. While we have this to be proud of, large segments of our state's population remain mired in poverty with little hope of escape. A healthy dose of self-reliance, combined with the option to opt out of federal programs would go a long way towards alleviating our problems. Next month, I will explain how this can be done and the benefits that New Mexicans might receive from a totally new approach.

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