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Baton Rouge, Louisiana

AFTER THE PAY RAISE FOR TEACHERS, WHAT NEXT?

Although no final voting has taken place yet, it seems to be almost a fait accompli that the Louisiana Legislature will give teachers in the state a significant raise in the weeks to come. The state coffers have gone from famine to feast in just a few short weeks thanks to the amazing discovery of the Revenue Estimating Conference. They just happened to stumble on some \$300 million laying around that nobody had previously noticed. So is that all there is? Will a pay raise solve the state's educational problems? Where do we go from here?

There is no doubt that school teachers, particularly those at the elementary and secondary level, need a pay raise. And even with the new amount proposed, Louisiana teachers will still lag below the southern states' average. But what can taxpayers expect in return? Will student test scores rise and academic levels be significantly improved? Hardly. What the governor and the Legislature hopefully are trying to do is to firm up the foundation. Attract more competent, creative teachers, and motivate qualified existing teachers to try a little harder and "hang in there." But to see bottom-line results and better student academic performance is going to require more. A lot more!

The chairman of Microsoft had a few words of wisdom about the general status of high schools throughout the country recently. Bill Gates observed:

"Our high schools are obsolete. By obsolete, I don't just mean that they're broken, flawed and underfunded -- although I can't argue with any of those descriptions. What I mean is that they were designed 50 years ago to meet the needs of another age. Today, even when they work exactly as designed, a high school cannot teach our kids what they need to know. Until we design high schools to meet the needs of the 21st century, we will keep limiting -- even ruining -- the lives of millions of Americans every year. Frankly, I am terrified for our workforce of tomorrow."

His message is pretty clear. What he is saying is that "if we don't fix our present American educational system, I will not be able to hire your kids." Pretty tough words from the richest man in the world. Gates is calling for a major restructuring of our high schools. Now Louisiana is not noted for leading the pack in educational reform. So what better time could one find to experiment a little, and try a different approach compared to how we have been operating in the educational trenches year after year? What can be lost by being creative and trying a few new things?

How about starting with the following suggestions:

- 1) Begin by focusing on the problem. In the current session of the Louisiana Legislature, there is no discussion or any significant proposal to restructure the present educational system. Whether you can smoke in a public location and stem cell research (a national problem) dominate the legislative agenda. There's no "focus" on educational problems. The same can be said on the national level. Look at the attention Congress is focusing on steroids in Major League Baseball, then compare that to the attention it has focused on science education in our schools. There is a legacy to leave by forward thinking elected officials. And it begins with educating our kids. But they need to focus.
- 2) Calling on the business community to help. There's a huge reservoir of talent, from the ranks of retired businessmen and women throughout the state that could be used. Remember Jack Welch who was the hard-bitten executive who turned around General Electric? They call him Neutron Jack for his tough management style, and he is applying a take-no-prisoners corporate strategy to training high school principals in New York City. He makes no bones about his plans. "Identify the bottom 10% of your staff and make them leave. Then start motivating the rest to produce more and do a better job." No holding back in New York.

And what about the obsolete requirement in Louisiana that one must have a teaching certificate to teach in

a Louisiana public school? In this day and age, what's the point? Eminent scholar and Huey Long biographer T. Harry Williams would not be qualified to teach a ninth grade history class in a Louisiana high school if he were alive today. There are hundreds of retired executives throughout the state from the chemical and oil industry who would be well qualified to be science teachers. If offered, there are no doubt a number of these retirees who would love to come to a public high school several times a week and teach a science course. But that would not be legal under the present educational entanglements. Pick just about any field, and there are dynamic, qualified men and women who would be willing to get their time to stimulate bright young minds. But the bureaucracy is standing in their way.

3) Experiment with vouchers-Whatever your preconceived notions, vouchers seem to be working in other parts of the country. Those who are opposed often raise the specter that if a student takes a voucher and transfers, his classmates will be left behind in a public school made worse by the loss of resources and students. Maybe and maybe not. But when you look at the low ranking of public schools in Louisiana compared to the rest the country, it's hard to argue that too much harm will occur. There is a lesser percentage of kids in Louisiana schools than in any other state in the country. And for good reason.

With such a heavy concentration of parochial schools, and the large number of private schools, particularly in the northern part of the state, Louisiana has three separate school systems. So why not give vouchers a try?

Our public schools are now being rated. If a student is located in a failing public school, give the child the opportunity to transfer to another other public school or get a voucher (in the \$4400 range) good at any private school willing to accept it as full tuition. What happens to the public school? Well, the \$4400 the public system lost is actually somewhat less than the cost of educating the average student there now. And as the enrollment drops somewhat, the student-to-teacher ratio will improve.

Implementing a program like this on a trial basis will give researchers a chance to study what happens to schools facing the threat of vouchers. Our public officials and educators can then begin to make some decisions based on facts, and not just on conjecture like we seem to be doing now.

4.) Reevaluate what subjects are emphasized. - Go ahead. Try your best to answer the following question correctly.

$\int (x - 1)^2 dx$ is equal to:

- a) $2(x - 1) + c$
- b) $\frac{1}{2}(x - 1)^2 + c$
- c) $\frac{1}{3}(x - 1)^3 + c$
- d) $\frac{1}{3}(x^3 - 1) + c$
- e) $\frac{(x - 1)^3}{x} + c$

So how did you do? 83% of Japanese high school seniors got it right. Only 30% of American seniors found the right answer. By the way, the correct answer is (c).

So what's my point? Well, the number one best-selling book in America today is Thomas Friedman's "The World is Flat." He agrees with Bill Gates that our students need dramatic improvement in core areas. Now, as Gates says: "In math and science, our fourth-graders ranked among the top students in the world, but our 12th graders are near the bottom. China has six times as many college graduates in engineering as our country does. This will be an economic disaster."

(And a side note about China. The world's largest populated and fast growing country economically offers both major competition and opportunities for Louisiana businesses. Yet not one high school in Louisiana teaches Chinese.)

Another good reading suggestion for our state's educational and political leaders. Check out "The Only Sustainable Edge." The two authors convincingly argue that a country's comparable advantage today is moving faster than ever from structural factors, like natural resources, to how quickly a country builds its distinctive talents for innovation and entrepreneurship, which they call the only sustainable edge. Does Louisiana, with its continuing reliance on oil and gas, come to mind?

Just last month, a Baton Rouge student won a national mathematics title. His name is Neal Wu, and his parents came to Baton Rouge from China. He was fortunate to have parents who pushed him toward success. His teacher is Claudia Allums, who for years has run the gifted mathematics program at Glasgow Middle School in Baton Rouge.

"We don't have the money in our school system to compete in these national competitions like Texas and other states do. Other states budget for such competition. **We do well, but I to about everything myself,**" Ms. Allums told me. "A lot of our kids go off around the country, to Stanford, MIT even Harvard. Bobby Jindal was one of my students."

She also told me her classes last 90 minutes long, rare for most Louisiana schools. "You can't fit in all there is to teach in 55 minutes," she said. "I have varied activities in the class, and change the focus after about 20 minutes. This keeps the kids were interested."

Unfortunately, such gifted programs are the exception. Newsweek magazine just ranked the top 1000 public high schools in America. One came from Louisiana-University Lab School in Baton Rouge. Only one. And even here, students are cut too much slack. When testing time comes around, the brighter kids are "exempt" from final exams. But why? The better students are the few who have a chance of getting in to top colleges throughout the country, and have the opportunity to obtain the best paying jobs when they graduate. And they will be tested at every step of the way. More tests, not fewer. So for goodness sake, don't give our brightest a "pass" when they need to be competitive at every level.

At the entrance of Plato's academy in Greece, there was a sign that reads: "Let no one ignorant of geometry entry here." Speaking today, he could have added the sciences and Chinese. There's an opportunity here. But just raising teacher's salaries is not enough. How do we in Louisiana develop a comprehensive plan that offers the best and fastest way to develop, attract and hold our most talented? Don't get distracted by the small stuff.

And most of what we watch and read about is, unfortunately, small stuff.

Education is not the filling of a bucket, but the lighting of a fire.

-- W. B. Yeats

We're going to have the best-educated American people in the world.

-- Dan Quayle.

Peace and Justice.

Jim Brown

