



180

Returning to first principles

State focus should be on core curriculum

By Richard Vedder and Joshua Hall

Texas is embroiled in a debate about schools; the education of children and the financing of public education. Many people are focused solely on the question of changing the amounts and forms of taxation, implicitly assuming the basic method of delivering services is essentially a good one.

This is an assumption that poses considerable risk for Texans concerned with academic achievement.

The most solemn responsibility of each generation is to pass on the accumulated wisdom, truth and beauty of past generations to the youth who will lead the state and nation in future years. The younger generation must be "taught" those things that make up what we broadly term "civilization."

Moreover, if civilization is to grow and progress, we must expand the frontiers of knowledge and artistic accomplishments by forming new "cultural capital" through research and creative endeavors. For scores of generations, since the beginning of recorded history, the process of replacing and creating cultural capital has continued. The current debate in Texas is merely a continuation of a discussion that has raged for literally thousands of years.

In the 19th century, many communities established government schools largely funded by local property taxes. These schools offered instruction to further the cultural heritage. The common core of knowledge, it is argued, helps bind us together as a people.

At the same time, education provided the general population with the

education is associated with reduction in crime and less reliance on government-subsidized services.

Besides the core curriculum, there are other subjects of value, but they are not necessarily universally vital. The nature and extent of that training (such as the study of French, or the operation of a drill press) is beyond the core curriculum, and will vary by individual academic interests and strengths, vocational considerations, and costs.

That Texas has a moral and constitutional obligation to provide access to the core curriculum at no charge to the student is well recognized, but the same would seem to be less true of secondary subjects.

While the core curriculum helps prepare individuals to cope with the obligations of citizenship and basic employment, the secondary curriculum gives students the tools needed to improve their economic lot and to obtain higher paying jobs.

As the benefits of additional training accrue to the individual student, it makes sense in many cases for those students to incur at least a part of the cost of this "investment." The notion of doing so at the university level has been accepted for many years, and perhaps should be extended to lower grades.

At the same time, it is important to ensure family income does not serve as a barrier to good education. One goal of publicly funded education is to provide opportunities for the disadvantaged members of society to achieve economic advancement. College graduates, for example, on average earn more than double the wages of those with less than a high school education; it does make sense to subsidize the education of

Sudan Beacon-
News
Sudan, TX
Circ. 449
From Page:
2
3/12/2004
91327





tools necessary to perform the tasks of basic citizenship and employment. Thus is the rationale for requiring that students learn to read, spell, write, and know the rudiments of English grammar, while possessing basic mathematical skills; both are critical to functioning in society and the marketplace.

With the passage of time, additional forms of knowledge were deemed sufficiently important for meeting minimal goals of citizenship and binding us together as a people, such as history, political science and a rudimentary understanding of the natural sciences.

For instruction of the core curriculum – the knowledge and skills people commonly agree are imperative for high school graduates to acquire – it would seem government has a reasonable obligation to guarantee access to all students. And it seems reasonable funding for this instruction should be guaranteed by the state.

After all, educated people are more likely to be involved in their communities and to vote; increased edu-

poor children to help them to climb the economic ladder.

It makes far less sense for low-income taxpayers to subsidize the non-core curriculum of students from highly wealthy backgrounds. More to the point: Texans, regardless of wealth, should be taxed only to provide instruction in the core curriculum of knowledge.

Texas would do well to return to the first principles of public education. State expenditures should assure universal access to the core curriculum, encouraging families and local communities to pay for “extras,” while assisting economically disadvantaged students in their educational pursuits.

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Sudan Beacon-
News
Sudan, TX
Circ. 449
From Page:
2
3/12/2004
91327