



MONEY, MYSTERY, AND THE NUMBER 65

Everyone's an expert on education. Although how the educational "system" works can be something of a mystery. Yet we've all suffered through it. The memories are all too vivid. Get people talking about their school days – and good luck getting them to stop. We remember what we hated about school and what we liked. We know which classes and subjects and teachers confused or bored the heck out of us, and which ones taught us stuff we actually remember – and maybe even use now and then. And, of course, we remember the crazy characters we had for teachers and other assorted high jinks.

Counting my college training, I've been thinking about and talking about and researching education, and inflicting it upon children, for almost a quarter of a century now. It's been my life. I like it. I like talking about it. Most people do. If I ask someone at a dinner party, or at a soccer game, or at an Easter egg hunt, no matter from what walk of life he or she may be, that person is sure to have a foolproof plan for educational reform. "Back to basics!" "Merit pay for teachers!" "Year-round school!" "Internships. That's the answer. Give 'em a taste of the working world!" "Get rid of calculators." "Do what they do in Germany (or insert the name of any country that is currently kicking our rear-ends economically)." "Use the internet more!" "Get 'em off the computers." "Less sports, more homework." "Less homework, mandatory sports." It goes on and on. I've heard 'em all.

Now, I've spent time in another profession besides education. I managed a textile plant for several years. I love industrial processes and manufacturing. The

part that intrigues me most is industrial engineering. Time and motion studies. Take a factory tour. Successful companies have researched every movement their workers make. Successful companies employ their resources to produce high quality products as efficiently as possible. The ones that don't go belly up. Why, you may ask, hasn't someone applied these principles to education? Well, someone has. His name is Ted Sizer, and he is the foremost educational researcher of the last three decades. Until you've read everything he's written, you probably shouldn't be talking about educational reform. Ted Sizer's retiring now. Last year, his farewell book came out. It's called "The Red Pencil: Convictions from Experience in Education."

You want to save yourself the trouble of reading the book? Here is the bottom line. Bad news: education is labor intensive. The internet has not yet proven effective in teaching our children. It still takes a trained, caring human interacting, face-to-face, on a daily basis, with younger humans. A high school teacher can most effectively teach no more than 65 students per day. Sizer spent years watching them, in and out of class, even following them home and watching them grade papers at night – essentially doing time and motion studies on teachers. Give a teacher more than 65 students and kids don't get their questions answered, they don't get much homework assigned, what does get assigned may not get meaningfully graded. They don't get well observed doing labs, taking notes, don't get papers back with meaningful, helpful comments written on them, don't get to engage in worthwhile academic discussions. In short, they don't really learn effectively. No matter how good the teacher, a normal human can't keep up with a public school teaching load, which in our neck of the woods is 160- 200 students per teacher. Maybe that's why a recent and much publicized Johns Hopkins

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study* called American high schools “Drop-out Factories.” Or why colleges have been complaining ever more loudly that freshman year, and increasingly sophomore year too, has become high school remediation time for the students that the system does produce. You want to fix American education? Triple the workforce and give teachers humane teaching loads. “Are you out of your mind,” you say. “That’d cost money. We can’t fund the schools adequately now.” Precisely – which gets me to the point of my column.

St. Mary’s teachers have average loads of 85 students. It’s not perfect, but it’s the best we can afford. The best independent schools do have 65-student, or less, teaching loads. But they also charge \$20,000 - \$30,000 per year. We try to keep tuition affordable, but it actually costs money to produce the kind of students we do. And we produce great graduates. When you read this magazine, you can see that we profile alumni every issue. We have an endless supply of success stories to tell because St. Mary’s graduates tend to do extremely well in life. The tuition dollars you pay actually produce a high quality product. We have it pretty close to right. But, as you all know, the tuition we charge

does not cover the cost of the education we deliver. We rely upon the generosity of our donors to deliver the kind of education we do. All of our students, past and present, owe great thanks to those of you who have contributed to St. Mary’s and who have supported the St. Mary’s Fund and the work we do here year after year. But, in gauging St. Mary’s against other independent schools, we compare poorly in this area: our current parents, our alumni and our alumni parents do not support St. Mary’s at anywhere near the rate of parents, alumni, and alumni parents at other independent schools.

For those of you who may think fondly of what St. Mary’s has done for you or your children, let me suggest a gift that will make an impact this Christmas season: a donation of any size to this year’s St. Mary’s Fund. Our current students and a solid corps of veteran teachers, many of whom have been plugging away here for a decade or two, will make sure your contributions continue to produce St. Mary’s graduates who will make the world a better place.

*http://www.csos.jhu.edu/tdhs/rsch/Locating_Dropouts.pdf

