

Paying for Public Education

By Bill Hobby

Recent controversy about public schools in Texas has been about who should pay how much, and whether the current or proposed legislation satisfies the judicial whims of the moment. Important as those matters may be, they ignore what schools are all about: quality education. Recent research casts light on the factors that produce it.

Professor Ronald Ferguson, a Texan on the Harvard faculty, shows that:

- Higher salaries produce better teachers.
- Better teachers produce better students.
- Smaller classes produce better students.
- Better students make more money after they graduate.

These results seem obvious, but they contradict the earlier Coleman results and have something to say about how Texans should spend their tax dollars to buy better education in our public schools. Ferguson's study is titled "Paying for Public Education: New Evidence on How and Why Money Matters."

In 1986, Texas required all teachers and administrators to take a standardized test (TECAT) to be recertified. Ninety-seven percent passed the test (including this columnist). The test may not have screened out many teachers, but it provided a lot of information about the influence that teachers' literacy has on student test scores.

At the same time, Texas began testing students every two years. These tests (TEAMS) measured the students' educational progress through the school system.

The Ferguson study compared, district-by-district, the TECAT results with changes in the TEAMS results. The study also cited a Michigan study that showed that higher salaries lead teachers to stay in the profession longer.

The study used information gathered from student and teacher tests in Texas in the late 1980s. The data covered more than 2,400,000 students in almost 900 of Texas' 1,063 school districts. The sample is over four times as large as that used in the largest previous study, the "Coleman Report" of 25 years ago.

The statements that follow are all drawn from the Ferguson study.

- It includes the effects of average income in a district, the level of education among adults, poverty rates in households with children, percent of female-headed households, and percent of households in which English is the second language.
- Good teachers are the most important factors in good education.
- After taking all those social and economic factors into account, the teachers' test scores and years of experience are the most important factors in student test scores. Higher salaries draw smarter people into the teaching profession and keep them there longer.
- In primary schools, teachers with five or more years of experience get the best results. In high schools, teachers take nine years to reach their best performance.
- For every 10% increase in the number of experienced high school teachers, the dropout rate goes down four percent and the number of students taking the Scholastic Aptitude Test to qualify for college goes up by three.
- Class size in elementary school is important. The study shows significant test score gains when class size is reduced to 18, but not much improvement below that level. The average size of the

current elementary school class is in the low twenties. Class size does not seem to matter as much in high schools.

But, ignoring class size and teacher experience, TECAT scores alone explain 20-25 per cent of the differences in students' test scores from district to district.

Alternative certification programs (such as those used to qualify military veterans as teachers) can attract academically stronger minorities into the profession, according to studies in Texas and New Jersey.

What conclusions and recommendations does Ferguson make?

- Higher salaries are needed to attract able teachers from other districts and professions.
- Teachers need to improve their skills. Talented and experienced teachers ought to be rewarded for staying in the profession. Academically stronger candidates need to be recruited.
- Equalizing salaries among districts is not enough to produce equal quality of education. Salary differentials should be mandated so that less attractive school districts pay more than the attractive districts, says Dr. Ferguson.

The doctor's prescription does not make as much sense as his diagnosis. Recommending higher salaries for teachers on the one hand and salary ceilings on the other doesn't make much sense. How would a law limiting what school districts could pay a teacher be enforced? Laws that try to make people to work for less than they are worth don't work very well.

Would wealthy alumni, interested in academic excellence, offer teachers summer jobs? Phantom jobs? Cars? "Clothing allowances"? Vacations? Jobs for spouses? Would they set up private foundations to do these things?

Districts who hire good teachers would, of course, have to be penalized. They might have to fire a football coach or two. In somewhat more serious cases, schools might be banned from competing in spelling bees.

The "death penalty" would of course, be reserved for the most serious offenders. School districts that flagrantly, deliberately, repeatedly, and persistently try to hire good teachers could be closed for several years. That would certainly equalize educational opportunity.

No doubt former Governor Bill Clements could draw on his experience as the chairman of the SMU board to tell us how such a law should be drafted.

For 18 years, I listened to people who call themselves "conservatives" argue that you can't solve the problems of education by throwing money at them.

It's a good thing none of them are teachers. If they're no smarter than that, they probably wouldn't have scored very well on the TECAT.

Written June 1992.