

Value for Money

When we pay directly for schooling, we expect more than if we get that same service “free”.

By Andrew Coulson

One hundred and fifty years ago, the Honourable Robert Spence raised a red flag about the creation of tax-funded public schools in Upper Canada, now the province of Ontario. He worried that if the government gave away education free of charge, it would undermine parental responsibility.

Once parents ceased to pay for their children’s schooling, Spence warned, a crucial link between themselves and teachers would be severed, “and a gradual decline in family interest in the schools would take place.”

Spence was right. A pattern of evidence winds its way through the entire 2500-year history of schooling, and that pattern reveals a consistent link between educational quality and the direct payment of tuition by parents.

Systems in which education has been given away for “free” have suffered from a lack of parental involvement, declining efficiency, and a growing rift between what schools teach and what parents want their children to learn.

According to statistics from the U.S. Department of Education, teachers in public schools are seven times more likely to cite lack of parental involvement as a serious problem than are their colleagues in tuition-charging schools. The data also show that, while the situation is getting worse over time in public schools, it is improving in independent ones.

Even the strongest supporters of tax-funded schooling commonly point to the payment of tuition by parents as an indication that they are more interested than parents of public school students in their children’s education, a fact that is used to explain the higher test scores often earned by students in independent schools.

It is a mistake, however, to think of parental involvement solely as the cause and paying tuition solely as the effect. The need to write tuition

cheques on a regular basis also motivates parents to remain involved over the long haul. When we pay directly for a service, we expect more from it than if we get that same service free.

The truth of this observation can be seen by studying the historical spread and centralization of public schooling. As governance and funding moved from individual schools to districts and the province, parents no longer paid for them directly, and the motivational benefits of having to make those recurring payments was lost.

Compounding this loss was a new-found independence on the part of public school teachers and officials. No longer beholden for their livelihood to the particular parents whose children they taught, the previously-compelling need for them to heed parents’ wishes diminished.

As a result, public schools grew less responsive to parents. The less schools responded to input from parents, the less point there was for parents to offer their input in the first place. Eliminating direct payment of tuition has contributed to a clear erosion in parental involvement, not to mention educational productivity.

Consider that, in Canada, roughly one 15-year-old in ten has little or no grasp of reading and writing. Canadians spend about \$84,000 on every child who passes through the public school system. Can you imagine paying out that much of your own money, over the course of a decade or more, with no evidence along the way that your child had even learned to read properly?

If you stop and think about it, it’s easy to understand the benefit of having parents directly assume the cost of their children’s education. Nevertheless, we avoid facing up to that reality because it appears to conflict with one of our fundamental educational goals: ensuring that all families have access to good schools, regardless of wealth.

The conflict is avoidable. By lowering the tax burden on families who pay tuition for their children, we would make it possible for many more parents to afford to do so. Further, low-income families who would not benefit from lower taxes could be given tuition subsidies so that they too could afford to become active participants in the educational marketplace.

But what about the social goals of public education? Wouldn’t a system driven by the individual choices of parents be more divisive?

Actually, no. Freedom and diversity in education have caused far less social friction historically than have centralization and coercion. When a single system of schools is elevated above all others and everyone is forced to pay for it, everyone wants it to embody his own particular set of values.

In pluralistic societies such as Canada, that is simply not possible. Instead, alternating political and ideological factions battle for control of the system, and the victors impose their values on their neighbours. That process can be seen today in the tension that exists over Ontario’s preferential funding of Catholic schools.

Parents of other faiths, lacking the political power to redress their unfairness, are often frustrated and embittered. We could defuse such tensions by making it easier for all families to pay for the schools of their choice, religious or secular.

If we care about the hundreds of thousands of Canadian children who are not currently receiving an effective education, we must make it possible for all parents to assume direct financial responsibility for their children’s schooling.

(Adapted with permission from “Putting a Price on Learning” in “Fraser Forum, Sept. 2002. Dr. Coulson is a senior fellow of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy and author of Market Education: The Unknown History.)