

Remedial Remedy

Making school boards pay for private remedial programs would have many beneficial effects.

By Rodney A. Clifton

A truism in policy, as in life, is that it is better to fix problems sooner rather than later. In education, it is better to address the problems that children have in learning as soon as possible, rather than wait until they become serious.

And yet, thousands of parents often wait far too long, and then pay millions of dollars beyond what they already pay in educational taxes, for private tutors and educational agencies to do what public schools have already been paid to do.

To make parents, particularly poor parents, pay twice for the same schooling, once in the public system and then a second time in private agencies that provide remedial services, is simply unfair.

To end that unfairness, provincial governments should enact legislation that forces school boards to pay for the remedial education of any student assessed as being below standard (say, one or more grades below grade level). In other words, the cost of the remediation would be provided by school boards and not by parents, as is currently the case.

The remediation could be provided by any independent agency, including tutors and schools, or services such as Sylvan Learning Centre.

Why support private agencies with public money? Because they are the only ones that, at any time during the academic year, can provide the competition necessary to hold public schools accountable, particularly in rural areas.

Because the school boards would dislike having to pay for the remedial lessons, trustees, principals and teachers would try to ensure that the students spent as little time as possible on remediation — which is perfectly appropriate.

It is important that parents would be expected to pay for the initial assessments to be conducted by external professionals.

Making parents pay would have two important benefits. First, it would reaffirm parents' commitment to improving their children's educational performance. As well, it would ensure that these assessments were independent from both the schools and the agencies delivering the upgrading services.

Of course, nothing need prevent provincial governments, private foundations, churches, and other citizens from assisting poor families with these costs.

Another advantage to the remedial voucher would be that by making taxpayers liable for their school system's failing, it would force taxpayers to take school board elections and budgets more seriously than they do now.

In addition, taxpayers would become more interested in supporting the parents who are demanding that public schools change their educational policies and practices to ensure that all students become literate and numerate.

The proposed system would also encourage parents to pay more attention to their children's education, realizing that it is fundamentally their own responsibility. Parents would no longer be inclined to accept teachers' advice that they should not worry about their children's academic achievement because they are 'progressing at their own pace.'

And, as more and more parents realized that the school board would have to pay for remediation, they would have a strong incentive to determine the validity of the claims made by teachers about their children's progress.

Over time, principals and directors would be more careful in hiring and retaining good teachers. Likewise, there would be disincentives for shuffling incompetent teachers from school to school in the so-called 'turkey trot' that exists now.

Principals would also have strong incentives to ensure that their best teachers teach the most difficult students. No longer would excellent teachers be able to bargain with administrators to obtain the best classes of students, leaving the most difficult students for inexperienced teachers, as happens now.

Both teachers and principals would have good reason to reintroduce rigorous disciplinary programs for students who intentionally disrupt the education of others. They might also decide to provide remedial programs for borderline students.

Finally, there would be pressure on the faculties of education, the Trojan horses of the failed public education system, to ensure that all of their graduates can teach and evaluate basic literacy and numeracy at various grade levels.

Faculties that did not adequately educate their student-teachers would soon hear from graduates who failed to obtain teaching positions. In addition, they would hear from principals who inadvertently hired less-than-competent graduates.

Few politicians are so convinced of the necessity of improving education that they are willing to take on the powerful interest groups — teachers' unions, principals, trustees, superintendents, and professors of education — who are determined to protect the status quo.

But, if schools are to be reformed, politicians would need to empower parents and, at the same time, disempower these interest groups.

A remedial voucher would force the vested interest groups to become more accountable for what they do and how well they do it.

(Adapted with permission from "Policy Options, Oct. 2001. Dr. Clifton is Professor of Sociology of Education at St. John's College, University of Manitoba.)