

Education

How much money does a government school monopoly need?

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In Oklahoma as elsewhere, there is no upper limit to demands for more money from a government school system that has consistently squandered regular spending increases. It's been the same story year after year, for decades. However much we spend, it's never enough; however big the spending increase is, it's still so small that expecting to see any results from it is unreasonable. "Adequate funding," like Neverland, is always somewhere far beyond the horizon, no matter how far we travel.

This January, the *Tulsa World* suggested a new year's resolution for Oklahoma's state legislature: "fund public schools adequately." The paper declares that "we've never actually tried it, or at least not for long enough to make a difference." So "let's make 2020 the year."

Apparently, they have some clear idea of just how much spending is enough. After all, they couldn't assert that Oklahoma has never funded public schools adequately if they didn't know how much funding was adequate. Curiously, they don't tell us what that funding level is.

How do you keep a new year's resolution if you don't define the goal?

"Generations of demanding more and still more funding, promising to deliver results as soon as they have 'enough' money, have slowly eroded the system's cultural prestige."
—Greg Forster

From 1970 to 2016, current spending per student in Oklahoma public schools shot up from \$3,637 to \$8,426, in today's dollars (adjusted for inflation). Are the schools twice as effective? Or let's make this even easier. As spending doubled, did educational outcomes improve at all—by any amount? No. And the *Tulsa World* would seem to agree, since it asserts that the spending increase from \$3,637 to \$8,426 was not "enough to make a difference."

The data agree with the *Tulsa World* that this huge spending increase was ineffective. According to The Nation's Report Card, the leading measurement of student achievement, only between a quarter and a third of Oklahoma students are "proficient" in reading and math, depending on which grade level you look at. The state's high school graduation rate is 79%.

Now, I don't doubt that there are individual schools and districts that really would benefit from more spending, if only they could get access to the funds. The issue is not that there are no possible ways in which more money could be used well. The issue is that we keep giving the system more money, yet it doesn't use the money in ways that produce improvements. Why is that? And why would we expect future spending increases not to be totally squandered, just as earlier spending increases have been totally squandered, unless we get radical reforms like school choice?

To think clearly about how much we spend on schools, we must recognize that the question of how much school spending is "enough" is not a question with a fixed, objective answer. Enough for what? What constitutes a properly educated person? What kind of education system is consistent with our national principles of freedom and community? These are political questions. They are decisions that have to be made by the body politic through the constitutional processes of democracy.

The fallacy is to treat "how much is enough" as a technical question, to which educational experts could give us an authoritative answer. Self-appointed newspaper nannies could then scold the voters and taxpayers if they fail to live up to the demands placed upon them by this standard. But no expert has a right to dictate what is "enough" spending on education, because no expert has a right to dictate what is a good education, or how education should be delivered. We all get a say on that.

When government funds medical research, it should ask doctors rather than voters which lines of research are promising and which are not. That question can only be answered through a doctor's technical knowledge. But voters are in charge of how much money to spend on medical research; that question is political, not technical, because it touches on issues of who we are as human beings, and what priorities we set for the kinds of lives we lead.

Unfortunately, special interests that profit from higher school spending invest a lot of effort in getting us to talk about it as if there really were a fixed, objective "right amount" that we should be spending. There's even a pseudo-scientific racket in which researchers crank out supposed "studies" that purport to show how far short of "adequate funding" a given state is falling. But these bogus studies rely on "expert judgment" to set their standards for what counts as adequate funding—that is, they go to the people who have a huge financial interest in higher spending and ask them whether spending should be higher.

This ongoing fallacy that we don't spend "enough" on education is closely related to the old saw that teachers are "underpaid." In fact, study after study has found that teachers'

salaries tend to be higher than the average salary for job categories that demand comparable credentials and competencies. Teacher salary numbers can sound low because they are only paid for nine months of work per year, not twelve (if they work in the summer, their summer pay isn't typically reported with their base "salary"). But the deeper problem is the tubthumping special interests that work hard to keep "teachers are underpaid!" at the center of our national consciousness, regardless of the facts. Ask the question "underpaid compared to what?" and the talking point vanishes.

Leo Tolstoy once wrote a short story called "How Much Land Does a Man Need?" Pahom, a peasant, is convinced that he would be completely happy and content with his life—and thus immune to temptations from the devil—if he only had enough land. But each time he acquires more land, he discovers that it isn't enough; he always needs more. His quest for "enough" land destroys him.

Something like that has happened to the government school monopoly. Generations of demanding more and still more funding, promising to deliver results as soon as they have "enough" money, have slowly eroded the system's cultural prestige and middle-class political support. The rising star of school choice can be traced, ultimately, to the monopoly's stubborn refusal to ask itself Tolstoy's question. How much money does a school system need?