

The **Simple-Ideas Occasional**

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of common sense and repeatable experiments

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My Grandpa Would know . . .

Kansas Educators seek the 65% Solution.

Recent newsworthy stories concerning Kansas schools have chronicled the acts of judges who legislate from the bench for the purpose of steering the financing of state schools. Kansas taxpayers have financed lengthy debates over the teaching of biological sciences on several occasions spanning years. A recent “buzz-news” item suggests schools should be compelled to spend some minimum percentage of total budget on teachers and supplies (The 65% solution?, Wichita Eagle, 08/14/05). As the latest discussion heats up, we’ll no doubt read that some individuals champion a 68% level while others may suggest that 63% is “enough.” These discussions are classic examples of single issue decision making by committee and/or judicial dictate wherein the true mission is obscured in the emotional fog of no-value-added debate. Permit me to elaborate:

My grandfather moved to Kansas early in the last century and set up shop in Wichita as a carpenter. He later became a successful nurseryman, contractor and farmer and did quite well. I’ve often hypothesized about what my grandfather would say if he observed the endless bureaucratic agonizing over features in our state’s educational system. I think I know.

He would remind me that to build a house, you first lay a foundation. You add floor joists, and walls on top. Rafters and roofing goes on next along with siding, wallboard, windows and doors. These fundamental components of a house should be the very best you know how to do. The goal is to provide basic structure

that will stand the test of time and be serviceable perhaps 100 years hence. He would advise that decisions about carpet versus wood floors, plywood versus oak cabinets, central vacuum systems, swimming pools, and the like are not fundamental to the builder’s craft. These are features that will come and go over the lifetime of the house depending on will and ability of the owner to possess them. Grandpa would caution that compromise of the fundamentals in favor of transient options puts the entire project at risk. One can spend up to half the value of the house to replace a faulty foundation. A roof that collapses under a snow load will be expensive to repair in addition to destruction of contents by exposure to the elements.

These simple-ideas for success are equally applicable to taxpayer financed discussions by many that claim great concern for our children’s future. Their debates invariably move toward compromise – a “solution” that upsets the least number of debaters. My grandpa would be astounded at the idea of setting some arbitrary fraction a total budget to finance fundamentals of the task at hand. The funds you have are the funds you have. Grandpa would tell us that the mission is to first do the best you know how to do. Lay foundations having a promise of enduring service. You first assign ALL of those funds as needed to successfully achieve fundamental requirements. Fundamentals must come first and only then are you are free to spend the excess on transient amenities.

Suppose the latest deliberations by our esteemed public

educators set the “magic” allocation of teacher and supplies funds at 67%. What would this guarantee? Applying a similar “magic” number in the building of houses could mean that some houses have hot tubs but only three walls. Suppose the 67% compromise produces really nice looking brick houses that crumble in a few years because the foundations were too thin?

May I suggest that “compromise” is one of the ugliest words in the English language when it describes a sacrifice of fundamentals in favor of upsetting the least number of people. Nonetheless, every bureaucratic decision by committee has and will continue to offer up endless streams of compromises. It’s interesting to note that expenditures on U.S. schools continue to climb while producing students with declining stature among their peers worldwide. Too many of our children know how to put a condom on a banana, organize a letter writing crusade to protect the yellow-bellied tree frog, and express themselves with art . . . but are unable to read, write, or solve a elementary algebra problem.

My grandpa could tell us exactly how this happened. He would suggest that we’ve arrived at this sorry state because parents have lost control of the Prime Directive in child raising. It is the parent’s duty to educate their children for transition from a state of dependency and fear of punishment to a state of self-sufficiency and understanding with skills and attitudes that maximize probability of success as honorable citizens.

The endless parade of discussions to slice and dice every non-issue down to its most trivial components is a terrible distraction from the real mission, which is to bring capable teachers together with willing students so that fundamental understanding can be exchanged. The well-founded graduate will have both opportunity and capability to indulge themselves in the acquisition of solid oak cabinets and nice cars to store in attached, three-car garages. But lacking fundamentals, their lives will be a repeating experience of trying to recover from personal decay and collapse precipitated by compromised fundamentals. These goals are obviously not the focus of legislators, judges and administrators who have hijacked parental control over the education of our children.

When government steps in with seductive offers to take on the task of education, it’s easy to fall prey to the real

mission of government schools. 150 years ago, Frederic Bastiat wrote about his observations of the human condition and took special note of that bright star on the western Atlantic, the United States of America. In his pamphlet entitled, “The Law” he makes note of a long standing practice of legislators to take over the education of children when he wrote:

On an uncultivated island that you are populating with children, you need do nothing but let the seeds of truth germinate along with the development of reason.... But when you resettle a nation with a past into a new country, the skill of the legislator rests in the policy of permitting the people to retain no injurious opinions and customs which can possibly be cured and corrected. If you desire to prevent these opinions and customs from becoming permanent, you will secure the second generation by a general system of public education for the children. A prince or a legislator should never establish a colony without first arranging to send wise men along to instruct the youth...

A diligent student of history and skilled organizer of simple-ideas, Bastiat accurately identifies the risks of turning education of any citizen over to the will of the legislature. He points out over a century ago that the goal of a legislator is not to cultivate liberty-loving individuals disposed to honorable behavior and armed with understanding. He correctly suggests that it takes but a few generations to achieve the idealized state of public if one has command and control over the nation’s schools. He further suggests (and history demonstrates) that the legislator’s fondest wish is to mold society into docile, malleable subjects compliant with the law giver’s every whim.

My grandpa never made it past grade school but ultimately achieved his GED. If he were alive today, it’s a certainty that he would be disheartened by the present state of public education. He would be astounded that Congress finds it necessary to craft a law like “No Child Left Behind”. NCLB is equivalent to a law like “No Car Left Un-repaired”, or a “Healthy Foods in Restaurants Act”. It is a sad if not dangerous time when givers of law find it necessary or even useful to regulate both quantity and quality of any product.

When government inserts itself into the supplier/consumer relationships of honorable citizens the outcome is always fraught with failure and unintended consequences.

One cannot replace experience and common sense with policies and procedures. Further, one cannot replace the parent-student-teacher relationship with laws, judicial fiat, and boards of education. My under-educated, common-sense grandpa could and would offer high-value, no-charge advice that a room full of bickering compromisers will never understand - much less achieve.

Robert Heinlein, an astute observer and analyst of the human condition once wrote:

Throughout history, poverty is the normal condition of man. Advances which permit this norm to be exceeded -- here and there, now and then -- are the work of an extremely small minority, frequently despised, often condemned, and almost always opposed by all right-thinking people. Whenever this tiny minority is kept from creating, or (as sometimes happens) is driven out of a society, the people then slip back into abject poverty. This is known as "bad luck".

Whether one coaches basketball, builds houses, or raises children only those who understand and embrace liberty, honorable behavior and a knowledge of

fundamentals (simple-ideas) will be those who ones who succeed.

The greatest risk to our future is that the burdens imposed by future generations of those **who cannot** will become so great that those **who can** are unable to sustain the whole. That is the time we can look forward to total economic collapse of a once great society.

My grandpa would tell us that the blame rests totally in the laps of parents who brought new citizens into the world and then allowed them to become the clay from which legislators are molding a compliant nation. Those who agree with my grandpa's assessment will become targets of abuse and perhaps even force of law should their efforts to correct his horrible condition being to threaten the statist and law-givers.

But my grandpa's logic is unassailable. Houses and nations will not stand the test of time and human shortcomings unless they rest on good foundations. The future of our nation is dependent on our children's ability to overcome the evils of an honorless, self-serving government that possesses great power over our lives. If you are a parent and you would like for your children to be one of Heinlein's capable minority, then the way is clear. The solution is total divorce from public schools forever be mired in endless debate over percentages, processes, curriculum, social issues and union rules while remaining blissfully ignorant of the role of honorable and capable teachers.

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