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Education - Reinvention

Reinventing Public Education

In this year's State of the Union, President Clinton challenged America to adopt tough new national education standards. This is critical to preparing our young men and women -- and therefore our country -- for the information age economy.

Our public schools must help students to reach these higher standards. But in order to do that most of the school systems in the country will have to begin the process of reinvention which is so familiar to local, state and federal governments.

In the coming months Vice President Gore will travel the country discussing ways in which school leaders can get the most out of their tax dollars. He will encourage everyone concerned about the education of children -- from parents to the administrators who run schools -- to ask some basic questions about their public school systems.

Seven Questions Parents need to ask about their Public Schools.

1) How much money is being spent on my child in his or her classroom?

A variation of this question has been - what percentage of every education dollar is spent directly on the education of a student? However, in many school districts the Federal government provides a large amount of money for children with special needs. Since it costs more per child to educate handicapped children and other children with special needs these dollars often make education spending per child look artificially high. So parents need to ask -- How much money is being spent on my child in his or her classroom? Until the question is asked in this way parents won't be able to figure out if the children in regular education need more money.

2) Is there a relationship between spending on education and on how much my children learn?

The broad statistical answer to that question is no. Between 1970 and 1990 education spending per student increased from \$3,269 per student to \$5,582 per student in constant dollars and yet student performance on a variety of tests remained stagnant. Stagnant student performance has been as common in school districts where there are

adequate resources serving relatively advantaged populations as it has been in poorer districts.

These broad statistics lead some to conclude that more money isn't the answer. But that is obviously not true. Many school districts in this country are underfunded and in desperate need of more money. But in those places where more money has been spent without improvements in student performance parents need to ask whether or not the money is being spent wisely.

3) What percentage of the people employed in my school district are teachers?

The United States spends a greater proportion of its education payroll on nonteachers than any of the other industrialized countries studied. In the last year for which statistics are available - 1993 - only 52% of those employed in public education in the United States were teachers. The percentage of teachers as a total of those employed in public education in the United States has ranged from 54% in 1983 to 52% in 1993 - a percentage lower than that in any of the 10 industrialized countries shown in the following table.

[OECD table here]

There may be legitimate reasons why there are so many nonteachers on the payroll in your district. But to get to that you need to ask the following question.

4) How does the money spent on "overhead" and administration contribute to what goes on with my child in the classroom?

We know management failure when we see it on colossal terms as we do, unfortunately, in some of our oldest and biggest cities. A few weeks ago, the Washington Post asked:

"What does a school system that has some of the lowest test scores in the nation do with \$594 million a year? How do D.C. schools allot \$7,389 per student -- among the nation's highest spending rates -- and still wind up short of books, crayons, toilet paper and, in some schools, even teachers?"

The answer was a tale of corruption and mismanagement, filled with stories of how, over a five year period, the D.C. school district had spent \$50 million more on administrative personnel than they had been authorized and how they had taken the money from funds that should

have been spent on textbooks, field trips, athletics and other things directly relevant to the student.

Stories of bureaucratic breakdown are all too common in many of our biggest school districts where inadequate planning, excessive numbers of nonteachers and perpetual mismanagement have only added to the problems that our poorest children face. Nevertheless, runaway bureaucracy is not limited to large urban school districts. And, as we have found in reinventing government at all levels, streamlining management can often lead to dollars that can be better put to use in other places such as the classroom.

5) What percentage of the school day does my child's teacher spend teaching and what percentage of the day does he or she spend on administrative and other paperwork?

We know from our work in reinventing government that bureaucracies that are too top heavy tend to generate rules and regulations that distract people from doing the real work of the organization. "Real work" at OSHA (the federal government's Occupational Health and Safety Administration) meant filling out forms not inspecting workplaces -- until they did some reinvention.

There are some schools that are so wrapped up in rules and regulations dictated from the management that teachers must spend more and more time on paperwork and less time on teaching. One study found teachers only spending 30% of their time on teaching. As one expert said - "Teachers spend most of their time 'complying' not teaching."

6) Does my school district allow me to choose the public school my child can go to?

Public school choice introduces the much needed element of competition into the public school system while strengthening the system. When parents are allowed to choose their child's public school the parent's are forced to learn more about the schools and the schools are forced to compete for the students.

7) Does my state have a law allowing for charter schools?

Charter schools are public schools that are chartered by the state or by a local Board of Education but that are run independently from the central bureaucracy governing most schools. Freed from bureaucracy and forced to be accountable for educating students, charter schools are valuable laboratories of education in public school systems and

they also spark innovation in the other public schools that must compete with them for students. they also spark innovation in the schools that must compete with them for students.

Some Examples of Reinventing Education

In New York City "site based reporting" showed that out of total spending of nearly \$8000 per student per year -- only \$44 was going to classroom materials. [BusWeek, 4/17/97]

In Texas auditors found \$640 million in inefficiencies in the state's public schools. In one Texas county there were 12 school systems with 12 school boards, 12 superintendents and so on. And only 5000 students. [US News 1/11/93]

When school districts take a long hard look at where their money goes they can often find unexpected sources of funds. In 1992 in Ohio, the 50,000 student school district of Cincinnati, slashed its administration by 51% and used the \$16 million windfall to invest in instructional projects. [US News 1/11/93]

In Durham County North Carolina, schools slashed administrative personnel costs by \$1.7 million by reinventing school food service, schools transportation and school facility management. They were able to spare their instructional program from cuts that needed to be made and scores went up and drop out rates went down. [Education Digest, 2/93]

When Nashville Tennessee schools crunched their numbers the discovered that they were spending 24% of their budget on operations such as maintenance, compared with 18% for a typical large school district. That resulted in a program to bring down operating costs and

a goal of increasing the percentage of the operational budget that goes directing into instructional spending every year, according to Edward Taylor, Assistant Superintendent of Metro Nashville. [BusWeek, 4/17/95]

In Seattle, the school district shrunk its central administrative staff and is working to cut red tape. They hope to replace 300 pages of documents with a 25 page contract. Teachers unions and the school district recently agreed to an innovative 8 page "trust agreement" that commits to partnership and to school based decision making. [Dept. of Education, ACE program, 11/5/96]

In Omaha, Nebraska, the school Board reviewed its expenditures and found it was spending too little on direct instruction. They committed to raise the percentage of spending on direct instruction in one year. [Speakman, 3/11/97]