

Fix schools by paying teachers more

With a better-than-living wage follows some greater degree of status. Like it or not, money talks.

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The U.S. public school system seems broken to me. North Carolina is an example of many of the things that are wrong with public education today.



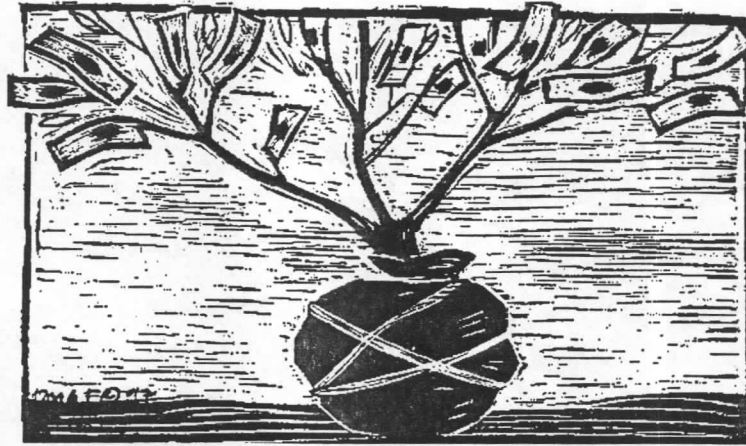
Adolph

Children today are endangered in classrooms by other children wielding guns and by drug pushers, while usually ill-paid and sometimes poorly trained and occasionally apathetic teachers endanger this nation's future because the best teachers cannot afford to teach.

Teachers are abysmally underpaid in America, and in North Carolina in particular. It is past time for the people of this nation to wake up, face facts and act. I am not engaging in hyperbole when I say that ultimately, our children's futures are on the line. If we fail to act soon, we have nobody to blame but ourselves for the eventual outcome. Both my and my wife's experiences with American public education are not unique; we have met many parents who tell similar tales.

My wife and I started taking a hard look at my son's prospective schools after being transferred to North Carolina in 1991. After speaking to other parents, teachers, and school officials, we decided that the local public schools were inadequate.

Some public schools appeared to us to be downright dangerous. Gangs roamed the school hallways and drugs appeared common. Graduates of local high schools lacked what I considered rudimentary reading and writing skills. Unfortunately, we also met a number of public school teachers who appeared to be poor role models. Their own basic skills seemed lacking. Some appeared overworked. A few were, at least in our minds, incompetent and uncaring. We saw in some schools that just maintaining discipline was almost a full-time job —



never mind teaching.

That is not all. The teachers' union appeared completely absorbed with issues of tenure, benefits packages and racial and gender equity — not our son's education. We weren't particularly surprised. We had seen similar conditions elsewhere in the United States.

Ultimately, we enrolled our son in what we think is the best private school in the region. It certainly is the most expensive school in the area. This was no easy decision. Private school costs are high, but our son's future must be worth the investment. We have totally lost faith in our public schools. Our federal and state tax dollars spent in education appear to be largely misspent.

My wife and I have read dozens of articles on the subject of the crisis in American education. Those pieces were written by practitioners, government education specialists and academics, but few by parents. Based on our reading, the crisis appears to be nationwide.

It seems to us that most "experts" have lost sight of what is truly important: delivering the best education possible for our children.

For us, the answer is simple: You get what you pay for! Teachers across the country are outrageously underpaid.

Many truly talented people cannot afford to teach, even if they love the profession. Higher-quality people often seek better-paying and more prestigious jobs elsewhere. "Higher-quality" in this context

means those who not only have a desire to teach, but those who possess both the caring attitude and the intellectual ability as well.

We are familiar with those who claim that a lack of discipline in our public schools is the real culprit.

Children of abusive parents or shattered homes often are discipline problems for teachers. Good teachers, though, have an opportunity to affect this situation positively, despite poor parenting.

However, if both parents and teachers are bad, the child hardly stands a chance. This child could be a future Nobel Prize winner, or an occupant of our nation's most overburdened prison system. The choice is ours to make.

My wife and I are political conservatives, but we both agree that only the federal government has a chance at turning this situation around. There is no more important profession to current and future generations of Americans than teaching. Rectifying the sad state of affairs we find in many American public schools today starts with improving teacher pay.

We ought to pay teachers according to their national importance. With better pay comes the status associated with those who make enough money to support their families in reasonable comfort. Increased pay and status equal better teachers.

Higher-quality teachers who possess a desire to teach, a caring attitude and intellectual ability are better able to help troubled students, engage in a meaningful dia-

logue with parents and together fight with them for better instructional materials and facilities from local, state and federal officials.

We believe that a program of large block grants to states designed to significantly augment teacher salaries is a positive start. These grants must be specifically targeted at salaries for teachers, not administrators. From our perspective, school administrators are already well paid. This program's goal is to entice some of the best and brightest of our nation to become teachers. A better-than-living wage is required. With a better-than-living wage follows some greater degree of status. Like it or not, money talks.

There are other important programs to implement — like vouchers. Parents have a right to abandon public schools that don't work for their kids. They should have a right to see their tax dollars spent where those dollars will best benefit their children. Education voucher programs, which permit parents to spend their tax dollars where they see fit, work. Today, my wife and I bear the burden of paying for our son's education with no help from the state.

There is one thing we don't like about our son's school. There are few people of color in attendance. When I asked about this, I was assured by a school official that the nearly uniform sea of white faces I observed in classrooms was a result of no racial discriminatory policy, but simple finances. In other words, people of color in this region of the United States, for the most part, can't afford the tuition.

When touring the private school that my wife and I ultimately chose, I remember asking a question that clinched our final decision. I asked, "How many of your graduating seniors go on to college?"

"Why, all of our seniors go on to college," our guide responded. My wife and I made up our mind on the spot, despite the cost and despite whatever other concerns or questions we might have had.

In an ever more competitive and technological world, Americans need to hear this refrain more often. Those currently running for high state and federal office could perhaps win our votes by embracing this key issue. Fixing education in America begins with paying teachers better.

Adolph is a retired Army officer and free-lance writer.