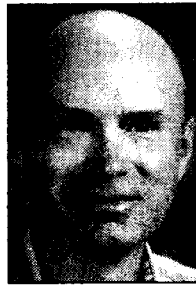


Schools: Complicated problems and simple strategies

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and set the budget. Parents will participate in the decisions. The school day will be longer. Teachers will be held accountable for results. In fact, teachers even offered to surrender tenure, but the DPS didn't take them up on the offer.

Of course, this relates to the role families (parents) must play if children are to be successful in school. Sometimes it's as

basic as breakfast. A USA Today article called giving kids breakfast "a simple way to improve our society." The article stated: "Studies indicate that children learn better when they aren't hungry. Kids who eat breakfast right before taking tests score higher ... serving breakfast results in less tardiness, less disruptive behavior, and fewer visits to the nurse."

I know, I know, since when did it become the responsibility of schools to feed their students? Why should the schools be doing the parents' job? But there are 17 million U.S. households that can't consistently put food on the table (Department of Agriculture). That's why both political parties support school lunch programs.

Now you can debate the political theories behind providing or not providing school sponsored breakfasts and you can assign fault to whomever you want. But one thing is clear, it's not the child's fault he/she is hungry. If this country wants to improve education and a bowl of Rice Krispies with a banana can do that for mere pennies, it's a cost-effective thing to do (if you want to create productive citizens and future taxpayers).

ever, children with lead poisoning may never catch up with their peers.

By no means should this be a call to throw up our hands and write off Detroit. We know what to do. We just need to cut through the red tape and get it done. Every \$1 spent on an affected child saves \$220 over a lifetime on educational and medical costs. It's what Free Press editorial writer Stephen Henderson calls "rebuilding schools from the child up."

This "child up" theory is cause for hope because it's playing out all over the country. At the same time, some "adult down" ideas that have proven to have limited success are being rethought. For example, a Harvard study found that paying students cash for successes doesn't really work (even if the money comes from private donations). Paying students does increase performance for things like attendance and reading more books but does not translate to better test scores.

Same thing for giving teachers merit pay. A Vanderbilt University study concluded that "pay for performance is not the magic bullet that so often the policy world is looking for."

What is intriguing are various "child up" experiments. Oddly enough, a major one is happening at Barbara Jordan Elementary School in Detroit this year. This is the first school in the state to be totally run by teachers, school staff, and parents — complete local control with no interference by the DPS bureaucracy. Teachers will run the school, hire and fire,

OK, enough is enough. For the past several weeks I've been on a mission to illustrate that there is no such thing as "the schools." The term means different things to different people. I've received e-mails from liberals criticizing me for selling out to the right wingnuts and from conservatives complaining that I'm a typical left-leaning idiot. That's O.K. At least people are thinking, which is the point of all this.

Let's wind this up by watching some television. NBC News will be featuring what it calls Education Nation next week. The website for this, educationnation.com, states: "Education Nation is a nationally broadcast, in-depth conversation about improving education in America." During an interactive summit on Rockefeller Plaza, parents, teachers, and students will come together with leaders in politics, business, and technology to discuss the challenges and opportunities in education today. In addition, NBC News will turn Rockefeller Plaza into a "Learning Plaza," a series of five galleries, open to the public, which will allow visitors to explore America's educational ecosystem. During the entire week of Sept. 26, NBC News will highlight education stories as well as broadcast live from the Plaza." There will be a live town hall meeting at noon on Sunday, Sept. 26 on MSNBC.

Check out all the information on the website, pay attention to the exchange of ideas, and then see if anything comes of this. Let's see if America can at least agree on what is meant by "the schools."

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When it comes to finding a poster child for failing schools, all we Michigan residents have to do is travel down I-75 to Detroit. The Detroit Public Schools is a mess, from its bloated bureaucracy populated by political appointees and rife with nepotism to crumbling buildings with scant security to elementary schools that can't even get supplies like toilet paper. You've all heard the litany.

But what if all that magically disappeared tomorrow? Would things be all sweetness and light in the Big D? Well, things would be better, no doubt. However, you'd still have to get the lead out if you expected test scores to rise.

What I'm talking about is a study reported in the Detroit Free Press that found 58 percent of all DPS students tested had a history of lead poisoning. More troubling is that out of 39,199 students tested only 23 had no lead in their bodies. With a lead level of 5 micrograms or higher per deciliter of blood considered harmful, 27 percent of DPS students had 5 to 9, 13 percent had 10 to 19, and 4 percent had levels of 20 or higher.

High lead levels in children can permanently disrupt growing brain connections resulting in decreased intelligence, learning disabilities and behavior problems. The study noted: "There is a clear connection between lead poisoning and academic problems ... the higher the lead level, the worse the student's scores on the MEAP exam."

This study's findings are similar to those conducted in Chicago, Massachusetts and Connecticut.

Now, there are programs in place for lead abatement, and strategies exist to help children overcome the effects of lead poisoning. The Children's Hospital of Michigan is working on this. Without specific interventions, how-