Why Can't We Solve Our Education Problems?


Maybe our obsession with those topics is getting in the way of our attempts to bring excellence to the classrooms.

By James Edmunds

Lottery. Politics. Business. Jobs. Diversification of industry. Executive leadership. Homestead exemption. That's a large part of the current vocabulary in Louisiana. That vocabulary includes a sprinkling of other terms that we more readily associate with schools, teachers and the like—merit pay, career ladder, vo-tech—but it is a Louisiana flavored peculiarity of the battle over the state's education crisis that there is a greater sense of urgency about passing laws than passing exams.

The zest for education reform that marks the mid-1980s in Louisiana was not born of a sudden pre-occupation with academia. It has to do with money. When the state and its citizens were awash with cash that accrued for little other reason than that there was oil in the ground, it seemed hard to make a compelling argument for the relationship between quality of education and quality of life.

"We've had it pretty easy," explains Rep. Kevin Reilly of Baton Rouge, who chairs the House Appropriations Committee. "When I say easy, I mean that during the heyday of the 50s, 60s, and 70s petrochemicals was king. From here to Lake Charles all you had to do was drop out of school, get yourself a job with one of the plants or in the oil patch or in the construction business around the oil patch because it was all booming and it almost got so ridiculous as they were hiring any warm body. And good pay. And by the time you were 21 or 22 years old you had yourself $25-30 thousand a year and you were laughing like hell at the guy who stayed in the college of education and got his degree and went to work for 14 (thousand)."

But then in 1982, the oil industry hit a slump from which it has hardly recovered. The thousands of jobs lost in energy rippled through the rest of the economy. A strong dollar overseas crimped the export volume of the state's ports—and also made the state's own agricultural products a tough sale. Softness in the national construction sector hurt the Louisiana timber industry, Louisiana, which had basked in good fortune that was not of its own creation, was suddenly suffering because of conditions that were not of its own creation.

Diversification of industry went from something we ought to do someday to something we ought to have done long ago. It never stopped on something we ought to do now long enough to keep us from having to play catch-up. Industry-hunters and the state's business leaders soon started getting a strong message from the companies they were courting—and failing to win. The state's educational system is inadequate.

The importance of education to the overall economic scene—everything from the basic skills competence of rank and file workers to the specialized research facilities that make higher education a complement to hi-tech industry—shouldn't be a mystery to Louisiana. In fact, many other Southern states, most notably Arkansas, Tennessee and North Carolina, have won high marks in business circles for stressing education reform. Even Texans seem to be willing to sacrifice their cherished high school football to strengthen academics.

But in Louisiana, business leaders in the state, with only lip service has given to education. One result, they say, is that Louisiana gained only 4,000 new manufacturing jobs in 1984, placing it securely in last place among Sunbelt states.

(Interestingly, 10 years ago, those same leaders were blaming our lack of manufacturing growth on a pro-union legal structure: since then, we have changed our unemployment and workers' compensation systems, as promoted by business lobbyists, and passed a right-to-work law. Now the new frontier is the classroom.)

How Louisiana spends its money

Is there a correlation between education expenditures and educational performance? From figures like these: Louisiana ranks 43 among the states in average salary of classroom teachers and 34 in state and local expenditures per pupil. Of 28 states measuring student performance of its secondary school students, the average composite score of students from Louisiana ranks 27 (giving longevity to the traditional grim solace of the Louisiana educator, "Thank God for Mississippi"). And, what is perhaps most appalling of all, the state ranks 50 in the number of its ninth graders that actually graduate from high school—almost 43 percent of the state's high-schoolers never get a diploma. In the field of higher education, Louisiana consistently ranks in the bottom third of the 13 Southern states in which it is grouped. For instance, Louisiana spends $3,615 of state money per college student, making it 12th of those 13 states. North Carolina, by contrast, spends $5,153 per student.

Those figures assume an even more ominous tone when given their place in Louisiana's budgetary conundrum. The state's overall per capita spending is unusually high. In fact, says Public Affairs Research Council president Earl Ryan, "we're high in just about every category but education."

The state's habit of financing so many capital projects with bonds gives it a big interest bill; the state's bayou-laced geography makes transportation costs high; and Louisiana supports a huge...
The vocabulary of education reform: jobs, business, executive leadership, public schools, privatization.

Politics, money. Many of those now serving in the Louisiana Legislature can remember—vividly—the days when huge windfalls of mineral wealth left them scrambling to find the money to spend it all. But where there once was an embarrassment of riches, there is now just embarrassment. Education is clamoring for more money in a climate where fewer and fewer dollars are being chased by the same large number of outstretched palms.

One of education’s few triumphs of the 1985 legislative session—along with its change of the Superintendent of Schools’ job from elective to appointive—was legislation dedicating the bulk of 8g revenue from offshore drilling to an education trust fund. The 8g settlement, which could total over $8 billion, was a key topic of discussion at that meeting this week in Baton Rouge. Commerce for a stint under former Governor James, a member of a wealthy Cretin family, was Secretary of Commerce for a stint under former Gov. Dave Treen.

According to James, the problem of reconciling the state’s spending priorities might be more than Louisianans’ legislators can be expected to handle on their own. They will need a leader to provide the impetus for change—and he and many other business leaders in Louisiana doubt that Edwin Edwards is inclined to fulfill that role. “It would be great if it did come from the governor,” James says. “That’s where it has come from in other states. The executive leadership of the state is the best shot we have. But we may have to be looking to 1987 to have some change.”

LABI president Ed Steinel has characterized Edwards’ performance in the most recent legislative session as being a summer of concession to special interests and pork-barrel politics and abandonment of education reform. Steinel would like someone else to be governor, someone like Tennessee Gov. Lamar Alexander or Texas Gov. Mark White. Each of those governors lead their states in the private sector.

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PRIVATEIZED EDUCATION?

The state’s two major teacher groups, the Louisiana Federation of Teachers and the Louisiana Association of Educators, displayed some of the education spotlight for their profession with statements issued from their Thanksgiving holiday meetings last week. The LFT went on record as favoring a lottery to raise money for education. The AETC issued a constitutional amendment squirelling away 8g money for an education trust fund, and batted about talk of a rollback of the state’s cherished homestead exemption.

Education’s job from elective to appointive—was legislation dedicating the bulk of 8g revenue from offshore drilling to an education trust fund. The 8g settlement, which could total over $8 billion, is, in essence, the state’s last windfall. But there is growing concern that 8g money currently headed for education may not get there intact.

“I don’t feel any consensus at all for raising taxes,” says Lafayette Sen. Allen Bobier. “There are reports that we might have huge deficits this year. When the Legislature convenes its special session this January, the options will be to raise taxes or to cut 8g. I don’t think any one will want to raise taxes; I think the 8g money will be there and will be too tempting a target. I don’t like the idea, and I wish it weren’t that way, but I’m afraid that’s what is going to happen. If that happens, it makes the 8g revenue into such a tempting plum also causes Barre to caution limiting expectations about increased money for education in the near term. "There are things we can do to make education more appealing to him, says, “but most of them cost money. There’s not much chance of passing any new taxes, so that means that the money would have to come at the expense of other programs. We have so many sacred cows in Louisiana."

One of those sacred cows, the charity hospital system, takes up over 10 percent of the state budget. According to LABI. In any event, the thousands of employees of the hospital system itself, constituents of the program include suppliers, contractors, and the like. It would be very hard to cut money from the charity hospital system without causing a major uprising. In fact, it would be hard to cut money from just any program in Louisiana without causing a major uprising. The problem of moving funds from one area of the state budget to the other is amplified by the looming threat of across the board cuts for all programs.

If it would be hard to raise new taxes and hard to remove money from other state programs, who where could money for education come from? Some of the state’s teachers think they have at least one answer: a state lottery.

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Because so many in Louisiana look to state government—and the state budget—to coddle them, making education a priority in the state will take a major change in thinking and attitudes. In other states where such a change has taken place, it was the governor who led the charge. In Louisiana, where the governorship is an almost imperial position, that would seem to be even more the case.

Why? Because business leaders and the public education establishment have been on a collision course for years and both have painted themselves into corners which makes meeting on common ground a sticky procedure. Teacher leaders resent Steimel’s years of talking about incompetence in their ranks and his veiled suggestions that they are only interested in unionizing into corners which makes meeting on common ground a tricky procedure. Teacher leaders resent Steimel’s years of talking about incompetence in their ranks and his veiled suggestions that they are only interested in unionizing. Whatever the outcome of the trial, education reformers may be facing a no-win situation. If he’s convicted, the faculty lounges will be in political chaos for two years as various sides jockey for position. Should he assume the office of governor, Lt. Gov. Bobby Freeman is unlikely to take the leadership necessary to force a plan through the Legislature and then cut the budget to fund it. An exonerated Edwin Edwards, considering re-election to a fourth term, would face similar political handicaps. It all comes back to 1987 at the earliest before meaningful change can take place.

Politics. Money. Executive leadership. That’s the heart of the vocabulary of education reform in Louisiana, as much a part of any argument as ACT scores and dropout rates. For education to improve in Louisiana, there certainly must be changes in the classroom—but there must be changes in how things are done in the capital as well.
have come just in time to forestall an emerging strategy on the part of business leaders which is considered totally unacceptable by most public education leaders. One of the few ideas to spring from the LABI summit with any degree of cachet was LSU professor Loren Scott’s proposal to issue education vouchers that students could spend at any school they wished—essentially privatizing education. In terms of political reality, the Legislature is about as likely to go for the voucher system as it is to shut down the charity hospitals and turn them in-

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evaluation as part of a program to give significant raises to teachers. The issue of merit pay or career ladder—any kind of program that distinguished between good and bad teachers and pays good ones more—has in the past divided teachers and the business lobby. Legislators like Bares say that it will be virtually impossible to fund any sizable teacher pay raise without some kind of merit pay scheme.

The LAE announcement marked a major shift in educators’ attitudes about merit pay. And that shift may...