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Meeting high court's 'educationally relevant' test

By Rob Natelson

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The courts say the state Legislature should apply "educationally-relevant factors" to our public schools. An "educationally-relevant factor" is something that works to improve education.

This is important. A lot of people have pet theories about how to make schools better. People talk about more cash, more teacher pay, fewer bureaucrats, smaller class size, changes in curriculum, etc. But are any of these "educationally-relevant factors?"

Only if you can prove they help kids learn.

Is there any proof on the subject? Yes, there is. If you really want to separate the beef from the blubber, head for the Internet homepage of Stanford University's Eric Hanushek. He's a universally respected researcher who collects information on what does – and doesn't – work in education. He's been at this for decades.

Dr. Hanushek's research covers schools in America and around the world. Particularly revealing are his meta-studies. A meta-study is a "study-of-studies" that brings together research from dozens of sources and many different perspectives.

Some of Hanushek's conclusions make people very uncomfortable. For example, here in Montana when we talk about school quality we focus almost completely on money. Hanushek shows this focus is almost completely wrong.

In 1997, Hanushek looked at whether more cash means more learning. He collected 168 studies on the subject. That's quite a chunk of info, by any measure. Nearly three-fourths of those 168 studies found no firm link – and in some cases a negative link – between money spent and learning. (Remember that a basic minimum is spent everywhere in America.) And remember that most researchers are pretty sympathetic to the public schools. They are not looking for reasons to under-fund them.

There's more: Hanushek also gathered 118 studies on whether raising teacher pay helped school quality. Overwhelmingly, the answer was NO. Eighty percent of the studies showed no firm connection between teacher pay and student performance. In fact, some showed the reverse.

That's strange. Why shouldn't raising pay give us better teachers? I think there are at least three reasons. First, when public schools get more money, most don't use it to reward the better instructors; they just sprinkle the cash along the pay scale. Second, some teacher hiring comes from personal connections or favoritism. This can happen even in private business, and most government schools don't face the competitive discipline private businesses face. Third, outdated state mandates can prevent principals from hiring the best person.

Hanushek found that (within typical ranges) making classes bigger or smaller doesn't make much difference in student learning. He collected an astounding 276 studies on the point. Some studies

showed that cutting average class size helps students, but just as many showed that it HURTS students! Most studies found no firm connection either way. In a more recent paper, Hanushek points out that even if cutting class size were found to help, it's usually a waste of money because it's very expensive and there are cheaper ways to improve schools.

Why doesn't it help to cut average class size? Because "averages" usually don't make much difference. Some subjects are better taught in small classes, some in large, and for some it makes no difference. What teachers need is flexibility, not necessarily smaller "averages" (again, within typical ranges).

Hanushek also found that sending teachers back for more education school courses is usually a waste of money.

Hanushek collected 75 studies on administration and 91 on facilities. They showed that more administration or more lavish facilities usually don't help learning. You may need to build a new school for safety reasons, but don't expect the kids to do any better academically than they did in the old building.

Over 70 percent of the 206 studies Hanusek collected on teacher experience showed that being in the system longer didn't necessarily make one a better teacher.

On the brighter side:

• Many studies – although still not a majority – showed that good scores on teacher tests can help us predict quality. Some other states already use special tests to help screen new teachers.

• Hanushek found that competition among schools raises both the quality of teachers and the quality of schools. However, he is less enthusiastic than I am about the usefulness of public charter schools.

• Hanushek found – to no one's surprise – that putting Johnny in a classroom with higher-achieving classmates generally improves Johnny's learning.

These are only a few examples of the wealth of information available at Dr. Hanushek's web site. You'll find it at http://edpro.stanford.edu/eah/eah.htm.

Rob Natelson, an educator for many years, is professor of law at the University of Montana and president of Montana Conservatives. This is the second of a two-part series.