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Education remedies: Look to alternative schools



The serious shortcomings of the American K-12 education system have received significant media focus over the past year following the release of several [documentaries](#) that spotlight its failures — most notably the recent movie aptly titled "Waiting for [Superman](#)."

America has doubled its spending on public education in the preceding 35 years and has nothing to show for it except more teachers, a smaller number of students in each classroom and less-educated students.

Despite being near the top of the list in terms of what we spend on education, American kids do poorly when compared to their counterparts around the world. For example, data from the Organization

for Economic Cooperation and Development, or OECD, shows that our 15 year-olds trail nearly every other developed country in math and science, ranking 25th in math and 24th in science out of 30 OECD countries. One can't help but think what this means for the future of American competitiveness in a global knowledge economy that will rely heavily on being well educated.

In our inner cities, things are even worse. The high-school graduation rates in many urban areas barely break 50 percent and those who actually graduate have basic skills far below grade level. Many of these kids will likely end up in jail or as teenage single parents, and the cycle will continue.

We can't excuse ourselves by saying it's just a problem for the parents who have school-age children. From a fiscal standpoint, taxpayers are paying a fortune for this system, and it is delivering a substandard product. And on a more

fundamental level, this outcome shouldn't fit with any version of how we see ourselves as Americans.

No silver-bullet solution exists, but there are things that are working.

If you watch "Waiting for Superman," you will hear about high-performing public charter schools. What gets less exposure is the system of low-cost private and parochial schools doing a good job of educating in the inner cities for half to a third of the cost of the traditional public system — yet their graduation rates and test scores are generally much higher than nearby public schools serving similar populations.

Many of these schools have empty seats and could provide a good education for a needy child now if their families could afford the tuition. Given the budget deficits faced by our state and local governments, common sense dictates considering tax-credit scholarships or some other publicly funded vehicle to take advantage of these

low-cost seats for providing our children with good education.

For now, these schools are saving taxpayers billions of dollars, and they do so operating on tuition paid by parents whose incomes put them at or near the poverty line with the deficit made up by charitable contributions. And with more students, they could save taxpayers billions more while actually educating children.

(Note to readers: For the record, I proudly serve on the board of the Children's Scholarship Fund, which provides partial scholarships for thousands of children to get a good education today. Check them out at <http://www.scholarshipfund.org> and become part of the solution.)

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