

B429. "Shift Money from the Colleges to K-12" Los Angeles Times (September 2, 2003) p. B11.

There may be a faint silver lining in the sharply higher tuition fees that state colleges are charging students this year. The pain they cause may force us to reconsider how we are spending public education money, especially when it comes to over-investing in colleges and under investing in primary and secondary schools.

The educational system in America is top-heavy and irrational. Why do we subsidize expensive world-class colleges with hundreds of millions of dollars when we are unable to create adequate lower schools?

California spends just over \$6,000 per student a year in K-12 schools. For the California State University system, the per student figure is about \$11,000, and for the University of California, more than \$16,000. Yet most studies show that skills students need to succeed are set at an early age, and systems in Japan and many European countries show that an excellent education through high school is all that's required.

American primary and secondary schools leave too much of the responsibility for educating and training students to colleges. In many cases, the first two years American students spend in colleges are devoted to remedial education -- fixing what grade and high schools did poorly or not at all.

Studies show that Japanese high school graduates, for example, match the skill level of Americans after their sophomore year in college. As a result, Japan, for example, sends fewer than half of its high school graduates to college, while we send two-thirds or more. The savings amounts to scores of billions of tax dollars -- a good elementary and high school education costs much less than a good college education to subsidize.

As state budgets tighten, it's particularly important to ask how we can best distribute education dollars. My answer is a massive shift in resources from the upper levels of the American educational structure to the lower ones. Although such a shift would primarily involve public expenditures on public schools, in the new educational order we would also pull public money back from the private colleges, where tax dollars fund student loans, work-study money, grants and the like.

As money moved from one level to the other, secondary and primary schools would be able to attract better-prepared teachers, such as those who now work at junior colleges, who can equip these schools to take on a bigger share of the states' educational mission.

Ultimately, primary schools and even nursery schools should be favored in the new educational world. That's because elementary school is the fail-safe for teaching self-discipline, concentration skills and impulse control, all prerequisites for learning and future success. Recent grade school reforms have focused on pumping more math, science and foreign languages into students. But those efforts achieve little if students are unable or unwilling to learn. The price we would pay for such an improved system wouldn't be an easy one to absorb: We would have to slow down enrollment in colleges and stop thinking that college education must be made available to all students.

It may seem that the new system would discriminate against poor or minority students, but in fact they are among those most likely to feel alienated by our impoverished K-12 schools and drop out before high school graduation and before reaching college and remedial help.

Improving primary and secondary schools should serve the most vulnerable members of society more than any other and allow them to better compete to get into college.

Don't expect members of the California Assembly to take the lead when it comes to such a paradigm shift, even though it could mean spending fewer tax dollars for better results. My approach constitutes such a radical departure from current practice -- and the notion that Americans are entitled to a college education -- that politicians will fear touching it.

For the suggested reforms to have a prayer, we first need an honest and open grass-roots debate about what matters in education. Then perhaps educational associations from the American Federation of Teachers to the PTA could launch an initiative to require the shift.

Direct democracy isn't getting good press right now, but it is probably the only way to move this sort of reform along, and it's a sure way to intensify the much-needed dialogue.