

EDUCATING BLUEBERRIES

By David A. Watson, Ph.D.

Have you ever heard the blueberry story? That was the question recently put to several thousand school board members from around the state of Texas by Jamie Vollmer, luncheon speaker and former ice cream company CEO. Short of retelling his wonderful tale, I'll briefly summarize for you. As Mr. Vollmer recounted it, he found himself on one occasion speaking to a group of public school teachers, and delivering what was at that time his standard homily on the topic of education; namely, that it really ought to be managed like a business. At the conclusion of his remarks, a veteran teacher challenged Jamie by asking him what his approach would be were he to receive an inferior batch of blueberries for use in his acclaimed ice cream. Mr. Vollmer replied straightaway that he would most assuredly send them back. The teacher's unstinting rebuttal was that educators never reject the blueberries. They teach them all--large, small, gifted, physically challenged. None are turned away. Hence, the difference between a business and a school. What is the state of public education in Texas and where are we headed? Let's briefly examine a few of the facts.

Although much room remains for improvement, public education is arguably better now than it has been in the past. SAT scores are higher, with a larger and more diverse group of students now taking the test. Dropout rates are down as well. In a recent Gallup poll, greater than 70 % of parents awarded their child's school a grade of A or B. Another recent survey indicates that nearly 90 % of Americans believe a college degree is now as important as a high school diploma used to be; moreover, the value placed on completing college is inversely related to socioeconomic status. That is, the least affluent among us value education the highest. It would therefore appear that the

dream of climbing the ladder of success in America by way of education remains alive and well. At the same time, it is clear that the nature of our economy itself is changing. No less a luminary than Harvard president Lawrence H. Summers has said that "...value derives less in physical assets and more in knowledge than it did a decade or two decades ago."

Texans, however, are facing changes in the mechanisms for funding public education, not only K-12, but also higher education. This is ironic, since Comptroller of Public Accounts Carole Keeton Strayhorn wrote some time ago in a special report titled The Impact of the State Higher Education System on the Texas Economy that "Every dollar invested in our state's higher education system pumps more than five dollars into our Texas economy. It is a remarkable return on our money for Texans today and a vital stake in the future for successful generations of Texans tomorrow...[yet] state higher education funding is losing ground to other services...spending on public safety and corrections increased 256 percent in the last 15 years, while real higher education expenditures grew only 31 percent during the same period." The impact of this investment in teaching and learning is (at least) two-fold. First, many of those dollars entering our economy come from outside the state, thereby injecting new monies into Texas. Second, and more important, is the major long-term effect of a better-educated workforce, namely increased productivity. A study by economists at Ohio State University examining the impact of spending for a variety of improvements to that state's infrastructure (education, road improvements, healthcare services, police and fire protection, and water and sewer physical plants) found that the only infusion of capital that led to measurable growth in the Gross State Product was in fact education. The state

of Kentucky has instituted a marketing campaign known as “Education Pays” in an attempt to change minds about the importance of education. Their promotional materials point out that nearly 60 % of the surfeit in per capita income of Kentuckians relative to residents of other states can be explained simply by the state’s dismal level of educational attainment.

The question put before us by our political leaders in Texas is whether we can afford to spend for education. Indeed, the rationale for the changes to education funding being pondering in Austin even as I write this is that there simply isn’t enough revenue to pay for all those budget line items that are worthy of consideration. We have been assured that the goal is to provide the citizenry with “government at a price we can afford,” or to state it another way, only that amount of government that the current revenue stream will purchase (this too is ironic, since Ms. Strayhorn also reports we have the second-lowest per capita state tax burden in the nation). Part of the reasoning for not utilizing reserve, or “rainy day,” funds for education is that some of this stockpile needed to be used to create the “Texas Enterprise Fund” for the purpose of economic development. Given that no clear data point to a better return on investment for funds invested in such a way compared to Ms. Strayhorn’s figure of five dollars returned for each dollar invested in education, maybe the better question is whether we can afford not to fully fund public and higher education in Texas. It may well turn out that educating all those precious little blueberries isn’t just the right thing to do--perhaps its good business besides.