

**Phil Power: Invest more in  
early education**

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Whenever things are complicated or confusing, it's always much easier to believe there is some "silver bullet" that will miraculously cure everything. Our political system regularly falls prey to this kind of magical thinking. Today, on the right, it's the notion that cutting taxes will automatically result in a prosperous economy. On the left, it's the idea that there is always one more government program that will make everything better.

But the subject that seems to call forth the most silver bullets is our troubled schools. A quick list:

- Our public schools are monopolistic and therefore bad. The silver-bullet solution? Lots and lots more charters.
- Our schools are underfunded. The solution? Lots and lots more money.
- Our schools are badly governed. The solution (especially in Detroit)? Mayoral control.
- Our schools are bad because teachers are poorly trained. The solution? (a) abolish or (b) improve colleges of education.

- Our schools are bad because we don't have a good way of measuring what kids learn. The solution? More standardized tests.
- Or conversely: Our schools are bad because teachers are teaching to the test. The solution: Fewer standardized tests.
- One silver-bullet proposal particularly in fashion now — merit pay for teachers. In other words, teachers should get bonuses if their students can be shown to be learning a lot. However, that's not as simple as it seems. There are lots of complications. For example: Should it be just one teacher or the entire school? How do we measure what "learn a lot" really means? Can we really sort out the impact of one teacher from the rich trove of variables within any given school? (It might be far easier for a teacher in education-rich Ann Arbor, say, than in poor Kalkaska.) But the core of the notion seems sensible. Teachers teach, and good teachers should be rewarded. For years, teachers' unions were crazy with hostility toward the idea. But one measure of the general acceptance of merit pay is that the American Federation of Teachers seems to be gradually becoming reconciled to it.

Yet does it work? We now have some hard data, courtesy of the National Center on Performance Incentives at Vanderbilt University. It has just announced the results of a study that looked at the hypothesis that large monetary incentives would cause teachers to find ways to be more effective and boost student scores.

The conclusion: In the case of 300 middle school math teachers in Nashville, the pay program "did not set off significant negative reactions of the kind that have attended the introduction of merit pay elsewhere. But neither did it yield consistent and lasting gains in test scores. It simply did not do much of anything."

Sigh. Another silver blank, evidently.

One other commonsense idea also keeps coming up: prekindergarten exposure to education. Without any doubt, scientific research has demonstrated that kids learn best from birth to age 5.

Sadly, given the usual disconnect between what we know and what we do, we start kindergarten in America ... at age 5. There is now a movement to get kids into prekindergarten programs, on the grounds that the programs help them prepare for regular school.

The theory is that "pre-K" programs are one of the best ways to improve schools. Much research has been done on these programs, and here, we do have definitive and encouraging numbers. Financially,

the return on investment — counting academic performance, as well as reduced criminality, mental illness and alcoholism and lots of other factors — ranges from eight to 17 times.

Michigan saved \$1.1 billion last year alone because of school-readiness efforts since 1984, according to the Early Childhood Investment Corp. Its survey of Michigan kindergarten teachers found that on average, 35 percent of the approximately 150,000 Michigan children entering kindergarten each year are not ready to learn. The main culprit?

That's right. Teachers believe that the lack of opportunity to attend a preschool program is the main reason so many start school trailing their peers. According to the newly formed Children's Leadership Council of Michigan, approximately 40,000 Michigan children don't receive publicly subsidized preschool education — even though they qualify for it. The National Institution of Early Education Research says it costs nearly \$4,300 per child enrolled in preschool.

Do the math, and you find that enrolling those 40,000 kids would cost around \$173 million. That's

a lot of money, but compared to the \$13 billion or so we spend on K-12 schools, it's a pittance.

When you think of the billions we are likely to get back, it sounds criminal not to make this investment.

The Center for Michigan's meeting on schools drew 300 people. We asked them this: If we had an extra \$100 million to spend on our schools, what should we do with it?

A majority favored putting it into "pre-K" programs.

But since we don't have much extra money now, a simpler idea might be to take \$200 million out of the \$13 billion budget for our public schools — a drop in the bucket, really — and reallocate it to prekindergarten programs. Silver bullet? Not at all.

But better than anything else in our ammunition pouch.

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*think-and-do tank that is sponsoring Michigan's Defining Moment, a public engagement outreach campaign for citizens. The opinions expressed here are Power's own and do not represent the official views of the center.*