

Tell Me, Tell Me, Tell Me- Please!**Derek L. Leslie**

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Abstract

This article is a personal essay by me, Derek L. Leslie, about the frustrations that occur in teaching. I am an educator in Economics at an urban high school in Omaha, Nebraska, and I have noticed after seven years of teaching that one thing is missing in the arena of public education and that is incentives. When you study economics you realize the market place has a lot of built in incentives to do well at your job and then you are able to be quite successful and are rewarded for this success. My essay will explain how incentives that are in the market place are missing in education and how that holds education back from accomplishing its goal of educating our children in the most productive and satisfactory approach.

As I sit in numerous graduate classes I wonder how this is going to change the overall direction that education seems to be going in America. I know I will use what I learn in the college classroom and apply it to the way I teach in order to become a better and more accomplished teacher. But one thing I know is that just because a teacher has a masters degree does not guarantee that he or she will be a better teacher and help their students to learn the material. A reason this is so is that the Economics concept of “incentives” is not in place in education. I love to teach my students about Economics and how incentives matter to the way we, as human beings, interact and coexist. In economics incentives are what push and prod an organization, business or person to become more successful. Do the parents of students have an incentive to take responsibility of their own children? Do the students have incentives to study harder at learning and taking control of their own education to be a successful citizen? Does the teacher have an incentive to work hard to be a better teacher so their students can learn more? Do the schools have incentives to hold students and teachers accountable? And finally does our American society have an incentive to hold everybody (parents to students) accountable to educate our children? I will explore each of these groups that have a huge role in how our children are educated.

Parents:

Do parents have an incentive to make sure their child is doing well in school? I have not seen anything that leads me to believe in my seven years of teaching Economics in an urban high school that parents have an incentive. If their child is not doing well in school what do they do? They will inevitably do one of two things: blame the school for their kid’s poor academic habits (or their own poor parenting) or they just push the kids (often after failing all of his/her classes) to the next grade level (social promotion). In our American society it is easier to just blame somebody else for your own faults. How is the parent affected by this? The parents are not affected by how well their child does in school. They do not get money or recognition for their children being successful in

academics. You get that in athletics in high school for being a successful athlete not for being a successful student. In most cases, parents do not have the opportunity to take their child out of a school that is academically poor and put them in another school. And because of this the parents have less incentive to be active in their child's learning. How can we have an incentive for the parents to be active in their child's education and that way the student will be academically successful?

Students:

Do students have any incentive to be successful in school? What happens if students are not doing very well in school? They can either blame their teachers (which then can be seconded by their parents) or take responsibility for their learning. But it is always easier and more expedient to blame the teacher. Their incentive for this is to feel better about themselves by not having to admit your own shortcomings. Students can then let their education slide and worry about accepting responsibility. They can always find a school that will let them coast to a high school degree. How can we have an incentive for students to take control and responsibility for their own education?

Teachers:

What incentives do they have to be really a competent educator? If a teacher does a poor job at educating his/her students by showing videos two or three days a week that have nothing to do with the curriculum or by skipping sections of the curriculum they can always blame their students for being poor learners or the teacher can just say "I do not get paid enough to do more." And besides if a teacher does a really good job and works hard at planning, grading or being accessible to students for help they will not be compensated for this in higher pay or better benefits. The successful and competent teacher will get paid the same as the lazy, unmotivated teacher; if they have the same number of teaching years. The incentive for better pay or benefits is not built into the current union negotiations. Why be the best when all it is going to get a teacher in return is the warm, fuzzy feeling of doing "good?" Teachers need incentives that will hold them accountable and allow them to be rewarded for success. How can these types of incentives be brought about in the teacher contracts?

Schools:

What incentive does a school have to try and be a better and more accomplished institution of learning? A school is set up where they are going to get a certain number of students and a certain amount of money for teaching and activities. The school will always have students to teach. The incentive to fire teachers, which is a very important ability, is not there since it takes too long with all the paperwork and union negotiations. And the other problem with a school firing a teacher is who knows what you will get in return (the incompetence you know in a teacher is better the incompetence that you don't know in another teacher). The schools need some type of incentive where they know they must be better or else they will not be educating students. But along with this must be the concept that schools can expel students out of their school for disciplinary infractions and that the school will not be penalized for holding students responsible their behaviors in either funding or number of students. Schools have no incentives to discipline students since they have all of the incumbent headaches of paperwork and meetings. Schools also

have the threat of lawsuits that go along with disciplining students and trying to get them expelled from school. What are the incentives to become a successful and dynamic school?

American Society:

What incentive does American society have to foster a climate of valuing education? If the students are not doing as well as we would like them to do whether through testing or other measures society places the blame only on the schools. American society does not want to say that what we prize or value has anything to do with how young people study or what they want to accomplish in life. The emphasis society places on material possessions attained without accomplishment (instant gratification) and how schools and teachers are belittled is like a self-fulfilling prophecy- schools/teacher are bad because I say they are bad. Schools, and the students they educate, do not operate in a vacuum where whatever they do can override the general societal influences. American society places a major emphasis on sports and entertainment which influences where schools place their money and resources. Why would it be different that is what American society desires? What incentive does American society have to push and help the schools and students to a better education and future when all it wants is to be entertained?

The incentives that would help parents, students, teachers, schools and American society to have better educated students are not present as previously stated. What are the incentives to be created? Are the incentives going to motivate the groups to become better at educating and valuing education? Are these incentives going to be just financial for the teachers and schools? These questions and others need to be answered if we as Americans want to have a well educated society that can operate in today's changing and more competitive global marketplace.