

The Cost and Value of Education

Lake County's Original Citizen dropped by the other day, his eldest son Junior in tow. The reason for their visit was two-fold: one to drop off a graduation announcement replete with an invitation to Junior's open house; the second was to inquire about the possibility of summer employment at my sawmill.

I decided that getting the job interview out of the way would be best, and so I asked Junior the standard list of questions I use in this situation:

"Do you know your math facts – as in multiplication tables?" It's not an empty question – the ability to calculate lumber footage, pile sizes and dimensions is a rather essential skill. From him I received the fairly standard "well, I know most of them... can I use a calculator?"

"Can you convert fractions to decimals, and back? For example, what is the decimal equivalent of three fourths?"

Pained silence and grim smile met me as Junior worked on an acceptable answer.

"Is nine-sixteens larger or smaller than five-eighths?"

Shuffling feet, and a glare from his father – at me, not his son.

"Can you divide three quarters in half?"

Clearly Junior was under the impression that manual labor jobs primarily require bodily attendance; simple functional knowledge isn't required. He isn't the first, nor will he be the last, with that misguided notion.

"Well, Junior, I can see we've got some things to work on if you come to work here. What are your plans after the summer?" Glad to have the disturbing questions come to an end, he enthusiastically began to tell me about his plans to attend community college this fall, taking his general education classes, while he explored the vast potential that was about to be opened to him as a high school graduate.

"Here's another question for either of you" I said. "What does it cost to educate a student in our school district for one year?"

This is a fairly straightforward question. Funny part is how hard I had to work to get the answer to it myself. I've asked it of our school district administrators, teachers, school district employees, as well as current and former school board members. There were many answers given, most vague and full of explanations that had no substance. A few years ago, I knew that the average in Minnesota was about \$6,000 per student per year. Finally, over a cup of coffee, a person in a position to know, told me that in the

Lake Superior School District, the cost for a Two Harbors student is \$8,200, while one in Silver Bay is \$8,500.

At the risk of over-simplifying (not figuring in the increases in educational funding, inflation, assuming each student only attended for 12 years, granting that the \$8,200 is a reasonably accurate figure, and so on) we can look at it this way: for **every** high school diploma that will be awarded this year, our community has invested \$98,400. Every time a name is called at commencement, every time a diploma is handed over, it will represent almost one hundred thousand dollars that we as taxpayers have invested in that person.

Makes me wonder if we're getting our money's worth.

When I go to a doctor's office and see on his wall diploma's from colleges and medical schools, I assume they mean something: that he has mastered the fundamental facts and techniques necessary to being a doctor. Same with an attorney, an accountant, and the mechanic who works on my car.

So what basic skills does the acquisition of a high school diploma represent? For dozens of people I have encountered over the past decade and a half in this area, clearly math facts, reading skills and historical perspective are not among them.

For a hundred grand investment, I think it's worth wondering if we as a community are getting our money's worth – even without the inevitable request for more money that is certain to come to the voters in the near future.

I explained this to OC and Junior, pointing out that it had cost \$8,200 a year to send him to school. He looked at me for a minute, and then a broad smile broke out over his handsome face, as he laughed and slapped me on the shoulder. "That's a good one" he exclaimed. "You almost had me there, but then I remembered: education is FREE in this country, it don't cost NOTHING to go to school here!"

Well now. Nothing may be close to what his diploma is worth, but it certainly isn't what it cost.

Still laughing, OC and Junior left. I was glad to see them go in such good humor. From my place he went on to explore another opportunity for summer employment.

I hope he gets it.

Greg Hull owns and operates Hull's Sawmill, providing custom lumber products for customers and educational enhancement for many employees.