

COMMENTARY

Civic Investment and the 'Skyboxing' of Education

By Richard W. Riley

Sadly, the public education your child gets often is only as good as the public education you and your community can afford. When state funding cuts put a popular program or teacher or even a planned building at risk, parents and boosters sometimes are asked to step in, reach out, and come up with money to fill the gap.

Depending upon the wealth of the community, parents, boosters, and organizations often can offset some of the lost funding. However, no amount of private capital can replace the public funds and civic support lost through budget cuts.

Of course, not every community is able to raise private funds to help. And the level of need varies from school to school and community to community. A wealthy school district may need only new landscaping. Many districts, however, particularly those with significant populations of low-income families, don't have enough textbooks or well-trained teachers.

In recent years, we've been witnessing the "skyboxing" of American education. Like their socioeconomic peers at ballgames, students in education skyboxes are buffered from realities most students face by their well-appointed educational accommodations: *"Need an extra AP program? Right away, sir. Would you like an International Baccalaureate with that?"* Meanwhile, the vast majority of students sit in the equivalent of bleacher seats, or they are stuck behind a pillar, squinting to see their teachers in overcrowded classrooms.

Given the magnitude of the current budget shortfalls that states and school districts face, no amount of boosterism or checkbook philanthropy can close the skybox-bleachers gap. More than ever, we need strong public advocacy to help resolve our schools' fiscal woes.

The National Commission on Civic Investment in Public Education, which I co-chaired with Linda Darling-Hammond of Stanford University, last month [called on Americans](#) and community organizations to bolster public will in the service of policies and resources that support educational opportunities for all young people—not just their own. The commission is calling on citizens to hold political leaders and school officials at all levels accountable for ensuring equal opportunity and outcomes for all public school children. And the commission has developed a series of standards for

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civic organizations to be managed well and keep schools and political leaders on track.

These civic groups—the nation's 19,000 booster clubs, parent-teacher organizations, local and public education funds, scholarship funds, and high school alumni associations—provide \$4.3 billion annually for public education, according to a [recent study](#) conducted for the commission by the Urban Institute. The most effective operations advocate for better public education and help communities not only raise money, but also raise standards for schools and implement strategies to help all young people meet more rigorous requirements.

"Democracy thrives when communities work together to build public interest in education."

Local education funds and other groups are champions for parent and community involvement in the civic enterprise and school system. Because public schools are governed democratically, community organizations are healthy monitors of and guardians of doing public business. They encourage robust involvement, foster a diversity of viewpoints, and are part of democratic governance.

Democracy thrives when communities work together to build public interest in education, and our public education system may be our nation's most treasured invention. It was designed to provide what Horace Mann called "the engine of opportunity" and "the balance wheel of society" to ensure that there is no entrenched elite, and that all those who live in our communities can achieve the American Dream.

Our public schools help ensure that young people develop the skills and values they need to create opportunity and become effective citizens in a democracy. They have cultivated the entrepreneurs, artists, and engineers who create—and re-create—the American industrial, commercial, artistic, and civic landscape. Our nation has no greater task than to maintain our public schools at the highest standard and to ensure that all of our children can and do take full advantage of them.

In the worst of times, it is all the more important that our public schools remain public and that we judge elected officials by their commitment to funding public education as a priority. We must strengthen our schools so that young people have the college- and career-ready skills they need to get ahead and have faith in their own futures. According to a recent Gallup [poll](#), for the first time in the past 50 years, a majority of Americans do not believe that today's young people will have better lives than their parents.

Our public schools are crucial institutions that lie at the heart of their communities. The schoolhouse is a community house. Schools are devoted to ensuring academic success and the growth and development of all children. But schools also are community hubs for civic engagement and services. Schools are where good citizenship gets practiced and people meet to address collective problems and do the business of democracy.

The schoolhouse is the place where we prepare young people for the future, but it also is a present-time embodiment of the democratic experience for the adults involved. Our schools and the young people they serve deserve nothing less than the most significant civic investment we can provide.

Richard W. Riley served as the U.S. secretary of education in the Clinton administration, was a two-term governor of South Carolina, and co-chaired the National Commission on Civic Investment in Public Education. He works as a senior partner in the Washington office of the law firm of Nelson Mullins Riley & Scarborough and its affiliate, EducationCounsel LLC, also in Washington.

