

There is an old story, apparently true, about the ubermen and women who, during the war years, worked on the Manhattan Project, the goal of which was to build a workable atomic weapon. Some of the scientists working on the device put forth the view that detonating such a device held the very small chance of igniting the Earth's atmosphere and thereby destroying all interesting life on the planet. I was reminded of this recently because of the long-awaited start-up of the CERN large hadron collider in Europe. Some scientists have posited the notion that part of their research could create mini-black holes which would then quickly expand, consuming the Earth and our solar system and packing it so tight the whole thing would rattle around like a BB in thimble. Which, other than the instantaneous elimination of that paunch I've been trying to get rid of, would be a really bad thing.

And this always leaves me wondering. When you shoot the proton beams at CERN or shoot subatomic particles at an atom's nucleus at Los Alamos, how can you not find your attention hopelessly divided between the research you are doing and even the miniscule chance that you are about to destroy the world? (The best physicists, of course, pooh-pooh the notion that their research could really lead to such destruction but, then again, it's not as if they could really be held responsible for it if it did. It's a bit like betting somebody that the world will end tomorrow. Always bet against it.) We all have to multi-task but trying to focus on research data while contemplating that your next button-push might wipe out everybody and everything has got to be a bit distracting.

South Dakota educators, these opening days of schools, are distinctly aware of what it is like to be distracted. We are all concentrating hard on making sure that the new school opens without a hitch and that formal education begins anew. But our attention is, it must be admitted, drawn likewise to the lawsuit underway in Pierre. This is, of course, the adequacy lawsuit, arguing that South Dakota schools are so underfunded as to make it impossible to adequately educate the children of South Dakota.

My views on the adequacy lawsuit are sufficiently well-known as to not bear repeating. But, win or lose, I suspect we will essentially be back in the same place, trying to figure out how to provide more dollars for our state's public schools.

If I am disappointed at all by my educational community's work in this area it is in the fact that while we have regularly asked for more money, we've never really provided any means by which to find it. Our stance seems to be 'give us more money and you (the Governor and state legislature) figure out where it comes from. Oh, yeah, and don't tell us how to spend it either.' While such an outcome may seem ideal from the educators' perspective, I've never been convinced it has any chance of working with those who have to implement it.

I wonder what would happen if, instead of just demanding more resources, we offered a plan for finding them? If we think the state should just have more dollars to give us, then it is incumbent upon us to tell them what tax to initiate or increase. If we want more

money, we should have the guts to propose an income tax or a higher sales tax (neither of which, by the way, I am in favor of personally).

Or perhaps we could instead propose ways to save schools money so that we could redirect some of the dollars we currently spend. Part of the plan could be to end the requirement that we publish our board minutes in the newspaper. In the state's largest school district, this savings alone would fund two teaching positions. The schools could still be required to provide the minutes to the papers and publish them themselves on a district website but simply not pay to print them. The resulting savings could be redirected to other school purposes. Or we could propose a decrease in the amount of money schools are required to pay into the South Dakota Retirement System. This would, of course, mean lowered benefits for retirees in order to keep the system actuarially sound which lots of people, like all educators in the future, wouldn't like one bit.

Alternately, we could also recommend budget cuts at the state level which could then free up dollars for use by the schools. Shall we delete the still developing education service agencies and redirect the money to schools? Shall we end subsidies to Northern State University for the virtual courses it provides? Is it time, in the day of more cable channels than I can click through in a half-hour, to cease subsidizing South Dakota Public Broadcasting? We all now what political heat a recent legislative attempt to simply reduce that subsidy caused in Pierre.

But the fact that something creates controversy or is hard to do or makes us get our hands dirty is really beside the point. If we in the educational community can find ways to increase the amount of resources available to schools rather than just sticking the legislators with the friendless task, then it is probably not asking too much of us to do so. After all, if we don't feel we are adequately funded now, perhaps it is time to take another approach. Besides, even if it fails, hey, it won't be the end of the world.