

The issue of teacher salaries seems to be something of a Gordian Knot in South Dakota. Like any knot, there must be at least two ends of the rope to form the resulting entanglement. Currently, those two ends consist of the state finance formula for schools and school fund balances. School boards argue that as soon as the state provides more money, local school districts will significantly increase teacher salaries. The Governor and/or state legislatures argue that giving schools more money won't necessarily increase teacher salaries. Schools counter with the 85% argument, i.e. that 85% of their budgets already go into personnel costs and so they can't increase teacher salaries without more money since the paltry remaining 15% is needed for bus fuel, textbooks, heat, electricity, paper, etc. The state counters with the argument that much of the new money given to schools last year went not into teacher salaries but into fund balances, the financial reserves schools keep to cash flow their operations and prepare for a rainy day.

The arguments continue from there, of course, eventually spiraling downward and nesting until they reach a critical mass of fibers which no mere mortal can untie other than the prophesied one who will rule all of Asia or, in this case I suppose, Pierre. Alexander the Great is said to have either cheated or, alternately, taken a bold stroke by casting aside the idea of untying it at all when he took his sword and just sliced through the Gordian Knot. Coming to cut South Dakota's Gordian Knot this year are a number of bills, including one championed by Representative Buckingham, which would evade the entire argument by slicing through it with a blade of a statewide minimum teacher salary. Just forget the whole argument and simply mandate higher teacher pay.

Yet no one can quite seem to come to agreement on that either. (Alexander had the advantage of an enormous army behind him which has the tendency to move people more quickly to consensus.) School boards and administrators don't like it because of the loss of local control. Many teachers don't seem to like it because it invariably seems to come with a fellow-traveler, the elimination or at least erosion of tenure, what is known in South Dakota as the 'continuing contract.' It is tenure, of course, that gives teachers property rights in their jobs after three successful years of teaching. That doesn't mean they can't be fired but it does mean it can only be done for just cause, which is a fairly steep legal obstacle to hurdle. The continuing contract provides a strong sense of job security.

Certainly unbeknownst to most currently arguing over these issues in Pierre, an English teacher from Flower Mound High School ( I wonder what their mascot is, the Fighting Philodendrons?) in Texas addressed this very issue last month with an editorial in *The Dallas Morning News*. The teacher, Susan Creighton, explains that she was writing an essay (proof positive that she is indeed an English teacher) when she had a revelation as enlightening as that of Archimedes when he leapt from his overflowing bathtub and ran naked into the streets of Syracuse, shouting "Eureka" at the top of his lungs. (I promise I'll lay off the ancient Greeks from here on out.) Creighton's epiphany was this: "I was halfway through writing an essay about leadership in America, unabashedly whining about how little teachers are paid in comparison to sports leaders or CEOs when

the ugly little truth about education revealed itself to me: It's our fault because somewhere along the line, we've settled for security over accountability."

In other words, there are some things that could be changed if we really want higher compensation levels for teachers. Administrators and school boards could give up local control to state institutions which would then set salary minimums. Teachers could give up tenure and work on the tightrope of 'at will' employees everywhere. Salary schedules could be abandoned in favor of allowing the market to select which teaching positions are harder to fill and thus which are paid more than others. All educators could accept the notion of merit pay and trade the possibility of unfairness for that of higher pay.

Teacher pay increases are within our grasp. Getting those pay increases without making any changes in tenure or merit pay or local control probably isn't. In the end, that really isn't a Gordian Knot at all. It is, instead, a matter of making a choice and then being satisfied with the choice you've made.