

WestEd_Mar09

Let them Eat Pie Crumbs! An Education Funding Fable

by Kathy Emery

Once upon a time, there was a rich valley in which several towns and villages nestled along a robust river fed by the snowy peaks of far distant mountains. The wealth of the valley, however, was not held equally among its people. Most small villages were poor and a few people in the largest towns owned most of the property, leaving the rest of the townspeople to depend on the kindness and generosity of the large property owners.

The villagers and landless townspeople sent their children to school telling them to work hard so they could someday be a property owner. The schools of the property-less, however, were overcrowded, run-down, and filled with students who would not stay quietly seated for 40 minutes at a time. The parents believed that when their children struggled to learn in school, it was the fault of lazy and bitter teachers. The teachers believed that when their students failed to learn, it was because of bad parenting.

The rich people decided to try to fix this situation before anyone started to blame them for the failure of schools to produce property-owners from amongst the non-rich. The first thing they did was to take control of all spending on schools. With such control, the rich increased funding and decided which textbooks teachers would use. But some of the rich got angry at having to spend their money on others and forced a decrease in funding of schools. Then the teachers and parents got mad and forced the rich to agree to always make the education pie bigger than the health care and prison pies.

Over the next 20 years, however, the money to make the pies got smaller and so all the pies got small except the prison pie. The rich people began to argue with one another as to how the shrinking education money pie should be cut in order to prevent the people in their respective towns from blaming the rich for the smaller slices. As a result, the rich cut the education pie so that each piece went to a specific type of student or for a specific school program. But the rich were promising their fellow townspeople that each slice of pie was bigger than it really was! Teachers and parents were mad when the slice they got was smaller than promised. So they threatened to sue to get a bigger piece.

The rich decided to borrow money from the next valley and to lend money (at interest) to the local pie baker so the education pie would stop shrinking. The interest payments, however, made the rich richer and the schools poorer. This went on for many years. The rich went to the teachers and said that the pie baker couldn't make bigger pies but perhaps the King would give some ingredients so at least the size of the pie wouldn't shrink. The teachers could not agree among themselves about whether or not this was an acceptable solution to the pie problem.

Meanwhile, the rich were telling parents that there actually was enough pie for their children but teachers and their bosses were hoarding slices. A few parents were able to organize and get some pie crumbs for their children but only at the expense of taking pie crumbs away from other children. Some schools got better, but most did not. Money for schools continued to disappear. Pie slices became smaller and recriminations among parents, and between parents and teachers increased. The rich sighed in relief.