

No Free Lunch

By

William A. Palmer, Jr.

My Grandfather Palmer used to tell me how he helped his father during a childhood spent in Brooklyn, New York. He recalled setting out platters of sandwiches for customers of the tavern where my great-grandfather was the proprietor. The sandwiches were complimentary for purchasers of beer, a practice common at the close of the nineteenth century. The offer of a “free lunch,” however, wasn’t cost effective when patrons’ appetites proved bigger than their thirsts. This short-lived custom left our language with an expression by which we continue to remind ourselves that nothing of value comes without cost. There really is no “free lunch.”

Public education in the United States is free only in the sense that counties and municipalities do not charge tuition for children to attend school. It is not free for taxpayers whose local, state, and federal obligations build and maintain schoolhouses; provide salaries for teachers and administrators; and purchase textbooks, desks, and equipment. Almost everyone complains about his or her tax burden. Yet everyone expects services. We want someone to come if we dial 9-1-1 for help; we want clean water to flow when we open the tap and trash to be picked up from the streets; we want children to receive an education that will prepare them to live independently and successfully as adults.

Head Start, begun forty-five years ago as part of President Johnson's war on poverty, is a publicly funded program that prepares children from disadvantaged families for success in kindergarten and subsequent schooling. Federal grants to the school divisions and nonprofit agencies that offer Head Start programs do not provide one hundred percent of funding, however. Washington pays eighty percent of the cost, while local communities are expected to come up with the remaining twenty percent. This means that community-based Head Start grantees such as the Parent-Child Development Corporation (PCDC) are compelled, each year, to generate local sources of revenue.

PCDC's Bridges Head Start program, which this fall is operating two classrooms in West Point, is only part of the picture. To the extent that funding is available, we also offer, through our Growing Together component, a variety of initiatives designed to empower families and enhance their quality of life. Our Preschool Scholarship Fund, mothers' networking group, adult literacy classes, and family counseling programs require the support of local contributors.

People welcome these programs and praise the good they do for our community, but such initiatives do not come without cost. As a nonprofit agency, PCDC is utterly dependent upon the generosity of neighbors to continue its outreach to those who need it most. Our own employees establish a model for such giving. Every one of the professionals who teaches in our classrooms earns less than those in public schools with comparable skills and credentials. They make such a sacrifice largely because of their commitment to our mission: strengthening families to strengthen the community.

Benjamin Franklin wrote that “The only thing more expensive than education is ignorance.” This Founding Father would be astonished, I think, to see the price Americans are paying for ignorance today. At PCDC we believe that early childhood education and the ancillary programs we provide do more than make kids ready for kindergarten. We are conscious that, to a great extent, we are influencing the fate of our nation. In an age when self-centeredness and ignorance threaten our existence as a free people, we acknowledge that there is no “free lunch.” Your investment in the lives of children and the empowerment of families is an investment in your own future, in the future of America.

William A. Palmer, Jr. is Community Development Coordinator for the Parent–Child

Development Corporation. Contributions to PCDC may be sent to P.O. Box 799, West Point, VA 23181. The author may be reached at (804) 843-2289 or wpalmer@pcdcva.org.