

ECONOMICS: IT'S EVERYBODY'S BUSINESS

by

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The Problem

In 1989, the Center for Economic Education at the University of Northern Iowa conducted a survey of Iowa's elementary and secondary teachers to determine the quantity and quality of economics instruction in Iowa's schools.¹ The survey revealed economics education at the elementary level was less than adequate. A majority of elementary teachers are aware of very little economics in the elementary curriculum. They have limited backgrounds in economics and few have participated in economic workshops for educators. In addition to limited background, a lack of materials is a major barrier to economics inclusion in the elementary classroom.

The survey also revealed that two-thirds of Iowa's high school economics teachers have completed no more than 12 hours of economics at the post-secondary level. While a large percentage of teachers have not consistently participated in economics workshops for educators, the survey also revealed a strong desire on the part of teachers for workshops to update their knowledge and to extend their repertoire of teaching strategies in the area of economics.

Studies conducted by the Joint Council on Economic Education reinforce these conclusions. At the elementary level, the already-crowded curriculum with its obligations to diverse topics ranging from dental hygiene to complex thinking skills, effectively ignores economics. At the secondary level, only 48% of Iowa's high schools require economics, while JCEE found that even one economics course will increase the student's economic literacy.

To compound this problem, the National Commission on Social Studies in the Schools recently recommended that history and geography provide the framework for social studies instruction at the elementary and secondary level. With this plan, concepts from the social sciences including economics, would be integrated at all levels. Given the fact that both elementary and secondary

teachers lack experience, knowledge, materials, and time to integrate economics into the curriculum, this recommendation, will in effect reinforce the status quo and do little to upgrade the level of economics instruction in the schools. Only those students fortunate enough to take an economics course in high school will develop any level of economic literacy.

Given these conditions, students at all levels are in need of foundational economic literacy. Because each student is a consumer, a future wage earner, and a potential voter, Iowa's students must be given a basic understanding of economic concepts in order to face the future with confidence and positively impact imminent economic complexities. Difficult problems such as a growing federal deficit, an inefficient transportation system, a rapidly changing international economic structure, massive federal farm programs, and the reform of welfare and health care can only be confronted with sound economic understandings.

A Solution

What can we as educators do? How can Iowa social studies teachers work together to help solve this problem? A limited number of teachers have presented workshops and sectionals at the ICSS annual conference. However, many excellent economics lessons remain confined to a single classroom reaching only one group of students. Throughout the state, social studies teachers at all levels develop and utilize exemplary economics lessons and activities. If each of these teachers would share just one idea, this small effort may be multiplied to increase the economic literacy of Iowa's students.

THE INSERTED PAGE PROVIDES A LESSON EXAMPLE. PLEASE TAKE A FEW MINUTES TO DESCRIBE AND SUBMIT YOUR FAVORITE ECONOMIC ACTIVITY. THESE LESSONS WILL THEN BE DISTRIBUTED AT THE REGISTRATION BOOTH IN OCTOBER AT THE ICSS CONFERENCE. A PAGE DETAILING A CALL FOR "ECONOMIC LESSONS WHICH REALLY WORK" IS INSERTED IN THE FRONT OF THIS JOURNAL.

¹The Economics Education in Iowa report was written by Dr. Charles Strein and Dr. Donald Cummings, University of Northern Iowa, Economics Department. Copies of their report are available through UNI's Center for Economics Education. The Center also has a wide variety of materials for all grade levels. Phone number: 1-319-273-2412.