

# Bitter Seduction

*Gambling proponents proclaim that lotteries and casinos are a boon for education. Don't bet on it.*

*By Ronald Reno*

It's not unusual for students to be pushed toward immoral activities. It is noteworthy, however, when that encouragement comes from the governor of their state.

Last fall, Alabama's newly elected Gov. Don Siegelman set his sights on a state lottery. As part of his efforts, Siegelman urged young people--who, by law, are prohibited from gambling--to become "soldiers" and "warriors" for bringing more gambling to the state.

Promising lottery-funded college scholarships, he encouraged students to stump for the lottery in their homes and churches. He even took his message into several elementary schools--orchestrating a photo-op at one where a group of first-graders surrounding the governor were instructed to shout "Lottery!" at the camera.

Like many other gambling advocates, Siegelman attempted to stake out the moral high ground. He invoked "God's blessing" on his plan, and said those who opposed the lottery should be "ashamed of themselves." But despite the lofty rhetoric--and the endorsement of the Alabama Education Association--the lottery proposal met stiff resistance from Alabama's pastors and churches, and the once-heavily-favored referendum failed.

Alabama, however, is the exception. Sixteen states now designate some portion of lottery revenues for education. And in recent years the mantra of "more dollars for the classroom" has also been used to introduce casinos into new areas.

This gambling-for-education pitch is attractive: a promise of more money for cash-strapped schools, a voluntary means of raising revenue, all via a form of "harmless entertainment."

For Christian teachers, however, the trade-off raises serious questions. Does gambling really bring *more* money to education? Is *any* money worth the family and community problems that always follow gambling? And, ultimately, will these proposals be good for kids?

Both Scripture and research are clear: The answer on all counts is no.

As new gambling proposals arise, here are some points for you and your colleagues to consider.

## **Gambling violates the law of love.**

The second greatest command in all of Scripture is to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31).

## **Spending on education actually stagnates, or even declines, after states adopt a lottery.**

Gambling violates that law by pitting us against our neighbor and encouraging us to desire another's misfortune. For one individual to claim a \$10 million lottery prize, others must be lured into buying close to 20 million losing tickets.

In fact, gambling operations thrive by creating an ever-expanding pool of losers, many of whom suffer considerable pain due to their gambling losses. The recently concluded National Gambling Impact Study Commission (NGISC) reported that more than 15 million Americans already struggle with a gambling problem, and the number continues to grow.

But the victimization doesn't stop there. Families of addicted gamblers are at greatly increased risk for divorce, bankruptcy and domestic violence. The children--perhaps some of your own students--are more likely to be abused and neglected in the home, participate in delinquent activities and perform poorly in school.

Further, teens are highly vulnerable to gambling addiction themselves. The NGISC reported that 85 percent of adolescents have gambled, and up to 20 percent may already be experiencing some level of gambling problems. A study of Massachusetts high school students found that 5 percent had been arrested for a gambling-related offense, 10 percent experienced family problems due to gambling, and 8 percent had gotten into trouble at school or work as a result of gambling.

### **Gambling exploits the poor.**

As a corollary of the law of love, we are to have a special regard for the poor. Proverbs 14:31 reminds us that "he who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker."

Gambling preys on the desperation of the disadvantaged--and lotteries are perhaps the worst culprit.

The NGISC study reported that "lottery players with incomes below \$10,000 spend more than any other income group, an estimated \$597 per capita. Further, high school dropouts spend four times as much as college graduates. Blacks spend five times as much as whites. In addition, the lotteries rely on a small group of heavy players who are disproportionately poor, black and have failed to complete a high school education."

Such statistics are no coincidence. Many lotteries purposely saturate impoverished neighborhoods with lottery outlets. The heralded Georgia lottery, which funds college scholarships and other educational efforts, sells twice as many lottery tickets per capita in poor neighborhoods than more affluent ones.

But it's not the poorest students who are reaping the benefits: The average lottery-funded scholarship recipient comes from a home with an income \$13,000 higher than the state average.

### **Gambling is steeped in deception.**

Scripture tells us that God abhors lying and deception. Yet casinos--from their fantasy-laden architecture to "near-miss" slot machines to the absence of windows and clocks, disguising the passage of time--have made deception an art form.

Lottery advertisers, as well, love to highlight multi-million-dollar top prizes while stating the odds of winning only the lowest prize--in many cases, just another lottery ticket.

The greatest deception, however, is the oft-trumpeted lie that lottery revenues aid education. Various studies have shown that spending on education actually stagnates or even declines after states adopt a lottery. Lottery monies frequently replace--rather than augment--current educational funding as legislators shift existing education funds to other pet projects.

For example, in 1998, when Florida adopted its lottery, the state spent 60 percent of its budget on education. Five years later, the figure had dropped to only 51 percent. Further, Florida residents became far more reluctant to pass educational bond issues. In the years preceding the lottery, voters passed 21 of 22 bond issues. After the lottery, they passed only three of 15 bond issues and sales tax increases for education.

### **Gambling cultivates greed.**

The Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Tim. 6:9-10a: "People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil."

Gambling advocates attempt to sell their product as "entertainment." Clearly, though--and surveys validate this fact--it is the prospect of winning large sums of money that drives gamblers to participate. State-run lotteries spend nearly a half billion dollars each year on advertising designed to induce citizens to gamble on games like "Easy Street," "Megabucks" and "Instant Riches."

### **Gambling undermines the work ethic.**

Scripture teaches that work is an integral part of God's design for humanity, beginning with God's directive to Adam to tend the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:15). We should work to support not only ourselves and our families, but others as well (Prov. 31, 2 Thess. 3:10, 1 Tim. 5:8, Eph. 4:28). Proverbs repeatedly exhorts us toward industriousness while reproofing laziness.

Gambling, however, promises "something for nothing," and its marketing often disdains the work ethic. For example, a Massachusetts lottery advertisement, entitled "How to Make Millions," describes work in this manner: "Plan A: Flatter boss. Crush competition ruthlessly. Climb over backs of coworkers. Be the last one to leave every night. Squirrel away every cent. Avoid having a nervous breakdown. Avoid having a premature heart attack. ... Do this every day for 30 years, holidays and weekends included. By the time you're ready to retire you should have your money." The ad then offered Plan B: Buy lottery tickets.

Louisiana lottery billboards encourage citizens to "call in sick next year" and "take a 365-day weekend."

Students exposed to this are forced to reconcile such alluring messages with the much less glamorous concepts of study, perseverance and diligence.

### **Gambling is poor stewardship.**

Christians are instructed to use their material resources in a wise and productive manner, as Jesus' parable of the talents makes clear (Matt. 25:14-30). In many cases, money spent on gambling is money that should have gone to provide for one's family or a worthy cause.

As a child-abuse investigator, social worker Rachel Caine witnessed many cases of such neglect. Testifying before the NGISC, she told the panel that when she visited families and went over their

finances, time and again she found that "most of the money was being spent on gambling and there was no money to provide proper clothing for the weather and so forth."

If nothing else, gambling is always an unwise investment with an almost-certain negative return, and such spending propagates an immoral, predatory and exploitative industry.

**Gambling perverts the God-ordained role of government.**

Romans 13 states that the purpose of government is to protect its citizen's welfare and suppress evil.

State-sanctioned gambling does the opposite. It victimizes many, especially the most vulnerable, and condones--even promotes--a vice that is inherently destructive.

It is especially harmful for students when school officials tacitly--and sometimes explicitly--endorse gambling. In some states, officials have become active partners with gambling operations, allowing them to participate in job fairs and hand out gambling paraphernalia to students. One Louisiana school superintendent went so far as to appear in a television commercial for a casino.

These ties reinforce students' perceptions that gambling is not only harmless entertainment, but may be their ticket to success.

Gambling operators want to inject their "product" into ever more communities. They realize that long-term success hinges on capturing the hearts and minds of the next generation, and they'll use any Trojan horse--including empty promises for education--to achieve that goal.

As an educator, though, you can teach about gambling's dangers, and in so doing, spare your students immeasurable grief and heartache for years to come.

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