

Taking a New Direction in Educational Reform



The current efforts aimed at improving education appear to reflect Einstein's definition of insanity – doing the same thing over and over again hoping for different results – than truly creating sustainable change. Until, we begin at square one, sustainable educational achievement will not happen and the limited resources of time, people and taxpayer's dollars will continue to be depleted.

A closer examination of the facts that are rarely discussed needs to be reviewed.

FACT #1 – No one looks good in a bad system.

We live in a 24/7 global economy and continue an agrarian school structure. We recognize that many school buildings built 40 years ago are not conducive to be energy efficient and technology friendly. However, we continue to embrace a school structure that is both inefficient and ineffective.

Many teachers know that their students begin to shutdown after spring break because they are looking forward to summer vacation. Parents will take their children out of school during the school year to accommodate the parents' vacation schedules. To build long-term cognitive memory which is the foundation for measurable performance requires multiple exposures such as rote memorization or spaced repetition to a learning event. With today's students having more to learn, every minute needs to be leveraged to optimize performance. The current system makes everyone look bad.

FACT #2 – The initial desire for learning is innate, but needs ongoing development.

Young children are always asking why. Their innate curiosity to explore their world fuels their desire for ongoing learning. A review of national test scores shows a general increase in cognitive gains from K-3, but then a decline happens from 4th through 6th with an upward swing in 7th and 8th.

Benjamin Bloom and his colleagues recognized that learning affects three domains – the cognitive, the psychomotor and the affective. Yet most adults, especially teachers, have very little training in developing the affective learning domain and some of their actions either intentionally or unintentionally actually diminish the desire to learn. We need to build both cognitive growth and attitudinal desire. The standard question of "Can they learn?" should always be partnered with a second question: "**Do they want to learn?**"

FACT #3 – What is, is.

Today's neighborhoods are not yesterday's homogenous, farming communities. The one-room schoolhouse was successful for 4 factors:

- Schools were homogenous
- Communities reinforced shared values
- Many learning objectives such as fractions, geometry, physics were continually applied within the day to day farming activities
- With multiple grades per classroom, older students faced continual repetition of earlier learned facts

The never ending blame game needs to stop! Negativity energy consumes time when time is at an absolute premium! Our schools are filled with diverse populations of students, parents and teachers. Many parents, like those from the Depression, are working two jobs and may lack a strong formal education as well. Teachers are overwhelmed with the additional curriculum mandates. Administrators juggle new regulations and community expectations with limited resources. Focusing the blame on one group or one law such as *No Child Left Behind* drains the energy away and keeps the real problems from being addressed. We need to accept "What is, is" and move forward.

FACT #4 – Processes exist for one reason only to secure the desired results.

With the emphasis on processes, a presumption exists that the results will follow. Yet, the results for educational achievement are not where they should be given the amount of resources being spent. For example, recent research indicates that the U.S. is still graduating the same percentage of college students that graduated in the early 1950's. Processes need to be reviewed and all waste removed. Removing the waste would add instruction time to the daily schedule and possibly enhance the attitudes of all involved.

FACT #5 – Alignment of strategies, systems and people must be focused on creating loyal internal customers who will drive loyal external customers.

This alignment works to discover the "Moments of Truth" necessary for sustainable change. Today's schools are big business even if they have only 1500 students. By embracing a continuous improvement plan, such as *Baldrige* where everyone is in agreement both in words and actions, creates a high quality culture where "excellence is not an act, but a habit" (Aristotle).

FACT #6 – Learning and performance are two, distinct and separate behaviors.

Many of us have heard the following: "I can't believe you did that! I taught you better than that!" What is really being said is that I can't accept your sub-standard performance because I taught you to perform at a standard to above standard level. This paradigm that learning equates performance is probably the most damaging to educational reform initiatives. Learning must be viewed as one behavior that is the acquisition of knowledge. Performance is a separate behavior that is the application of knowledge. Individuals need numerous opportunities to apply knowledge because we all learn differently.

FACT #7 – Money will not solve the current problem and neither will more money.

Between 1992 and 2003, K-12 public education spending increased 92%, but

eighth grade reading scores only increased 1%. Ignoring this fact is much like the childhood story of the “Emperor’s New Clothes.”

The American public educational system has delivered outstanding contributors to our society. Before we can raise the bar of performance, we need to face, acknowledge and design truly sustainable solutions to overcome the real obstacles facing our system.

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