

NONE OF OUR
BUSINESS

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Why Business Models Don't Work *in Schools*

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To Mom, Dad, and Alexander . . . for always believing



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INTRODUCTION

I was freezing. Temperature controlled. Dressed in sterile white from gloves to gown. I wore earplugs for my protection against the grind and the whir and the buzz of productivity in motion. And the evenly round pizza crusts went by me with military efficiency, even the droplets of sauce that fell did so in uniform repetition. At the rate of 7000 an hour, the production manager proudly told me. I was impressed by the clean efficiency, the measures taken to secure against contamination, the way the standards could be enforced time and again and again and again.

Another day. Another tour. But a very different type of plant. Noisy still, but the young workers were unprotected from the fray. Harried production managers with chalk dust on their hands were still trying to account for missing ingredients from the day before. The temperature was controlled by the sun and today the creativity centers were laden with the stench of sweat. The broken fan did little to stimulate air flow. Eyelids drooped and the supervisor watched in dismay as production rates declined. Workers slumped in their chairs, the straight rows of their seats the only indicator of orderliness that remained. Slowly the hands on the clock ticked until suddenly lights flickered and bells rang. And the doors opened with a modicum of efficiency. The products abandoned their desks and flooded the hallways. Laughing, talking, cursing, crying. Contaminants asserted their “right” to be present. Loudspeakers bleated directions and controls, thwarting communication. The product was tangled, in a chaos so typical that it had become status quo. At the rate of 700 an hour.

For some years now, advocates for public school reform, like Martin Gross, Myron Lieberman, and even President George W. Bush have been likening public schools to businesses. They pull their analogies out of their pockets and gaze at them fondly, tucking them carefully away and getting on with the business of rhetoric and impracticality, satisfied that at last they have told us what we needed to know. If only we in the trenches would use quality principles, sound marketing, and other basic tenets of big business to mold our product, perhaps American schools would not be trailing so far behind other nations of comparable socioeconomic status. The assertion has been that with more front-end management and an increasingly open market, that schools could indeed experience the success of a corporation. This book examines this assumption at its core and leaves the reader to decide . . . is education an art or an industry? Which matters more . . . product or process?

NO ONE IS LEFT BEHIND THE CHILD

The No Child Left Behind plan implemented by George W. Bush's administration will have long-term and detrimental effects on the American public school system. This chapter examines those effects.

BUILD IT, AND THEY WILL COME

My clothes dryer broke the other day. It was in midcycle with a load of heavy jeans and sweatshirts and it just quit working. I hauled my still-damp clothes out and placed them in a heap on the kitchen counter, wondering what to do. Accountability and standards, I told myself and I rushed to my dryer to explain. At first, I spoke in an even tone, gently making clear that there were quality standards to be met and a certain level of performance that was expected. My dryer refused to cooperate, offering only its full lint trap as an indicator of what could have gone so terribly wrong. Words alone were not enough. I emptied the lint trap and still, nothing. There was no pleasing whir of sound to indicate that all was again as it should be. I began to rant and rave and threaten to withhold all laundry if my dryer wouldn't do as I bade. Still, my words were useless. Desperately, I used my wrenches and cunning to try to fix the dryer. And I was successful! I found and diagnosed the problem and once again had fresh, clean, and dry laundry.

My neighbor down the street wasn't so lucky. She cajoled and tried to bribe her dryer. She held the owner's manual over her dryer's metal exterior, hoping to make it see the error of its ways. She tweaked and prodded and cried and still her laundry lay in a sodden heap. Finally, in spite of living within an extremely tight budget, she called in a specialist. The solution, she was told, was costly and wouldn't come in time to save her current load of laundry. And there was no guarantee that the system simply wouldn't fail again.

It was in this state of confusion and frustration that she arrived on my doorstep, her wet laundry in a needy heap by her side. The best advice she had been given, she said, was to find a dryer that worked. I welcomed her in and together we made her laundry accountable to meet its goal of being useable and dry.

It was easy and rewarding to help her. I even felt a bit smug at my ability to have created a system that someone else wanted and needed. It didn't really matter that I had a better machine to start with or that I had more money to invest in keeping my machine running; it only mattered that I had somehow managed to maintain a system that worked. I was flattered and a little bit arrogant as we tossed in dryer sheets and pressed the "start" button.

Until the doorbell rang again. And again. People started coming from all over the place, neighbors from down the street and strangers from across the city. They all were burdened with cumbersome unfinished business. My dryer began to have to work day and night to keep up with the demand. The windows in my house steamed with the moisture in the air and the sound of the nasal buzz of the machine was never far away. My dryer became overworked, poorly maintained, and underfunded. When I heard the gears grind to a raucous, screaming halt, I knew that there would be no revival of my system. I knew that I would be forced to join the rest of the wrinkled and hapless on a pilgrimage to find a better system somewhere else.

So it is with the educational policies enacted by the Bush administration. Touted as a plan to promote equity and high standards and highlighted as a display of governmental bipartisan

support, the plan calls for schools, like clothes dryers, to operate at maximum efficiency. It offers some monies toward the maintenance of those dryers . . . but only enough to offset the initial fixes. The plan encourages the public to be consumers of their education, seeking better clothes dryers outside of their local neighborhoods if necessary. Strangely, it doesn't address the many problems that are inherent in the vision or the enactment of the plan.

There is an old cartoon that depicts a leather clad Viking standing at the helm of an ancient sailing vessel. The crew is obviously beleaguered and weary. The Viking is wearing a scowl and holding a whip. The caption on the picture reads, "The beatings will continue until morale improves."

Thus it seems to be with the morale of public education. The No Child Left Behind policy states that if schools are to be held to high standards, they must have the freedom to meet those standards. The freedom to do as commanded is an oxymoron. It is not so much an invitation to excel as an acknowledgement that there will be failure. In fact, the plan further states, . . . "students that fail to make sufficient progress should receive special assistance. Students should not be forced to attend persistently failing schools and must, at some point, be freed to attend adequate schools. Under this plan, disadvantaged students will not be required to sacrifice their education and future for the sake of preserving the status quo."¹

Consider the words *adequate*, *disadvantaged*, *sacrifice*, and *status quo*. Nowhere are there good schools. Nowhere are there unmotivated and apathetic students. Like the wet laundry in the analogy, students under the President's plan are perceived to be passive and powerless recipients of the educational process. The students in the President's vision are innately resilient and eager to learn. A low-quality curriculum and a lack of professionalism on behalf of their teachers consistently thwart their efforts. They are forced to become educational nomads in search of schools that will provide the quality that has been out-of-reach for them for so long.

There is not a school in our nation that wants its students to maintain a status quo of ignorance, poverty, or disillusionment.

It defies common sense to imagine that teachers head to disadvantaged schools each day to make no difference. Painting a picture of classrooms filled with disappointed eager learners and oppressive, ignorant, apathetic teachers does little to assuage the wounds already inflicted on education by a misinformed public.

In a comprehensive plan that eerily resembles a corporate manifesto, there is a written expectation of yearly progress for disadvantaged youth, corrective action for low-functioning schools, fiscal rewards for schools with satisfactory test scores, and monetary and job-related consequences for failure. Perhaps if the product were pizza, these mandates would be realistic. Even then, however, one should consider the work of Dr. W. Edward Deming, a leader in total quality management (TQM). Author John Bonstingl has applied Deming's Fourteen Points of TQM to the public school setting and has reached the following conclusions:

- Maximization of test scores and assessment symbols is less important than the progress inherent in continuous learning.
- Cynical application of the new philosophy, with the sole intent of improving district-wide test scores, destroys the interpersonal trust essential to success.
- **Reliance on tests as the major means of assessment of student production is inherently wasteful** and often neither reliable nor authentic. (emphasis added)
- Learning is best shown through student performance in applying information and skills to real life challenges.
- **Fear is counterproductive in schools.** It is destructive of the school culture and everything good that is intended to take place within it. (emphasis added)
- When educational goals are not met, [one should] fix the system instead of fixing blame on individuals.

- When grades [and subsequently test scores] becomes the bottom line product, short-term gains replace student investment in long-term learning.
- **Leading is helping, not threatening or punishing.** (emphasis added)²

THE CARROT OR THE STICK?

As part of their public school improvement efforts, the Bush administration put into place a consolidation of the Eisenhower Professional Development funds and the monies available for the Class Size Reduction program. The assumption was made that there would be more flexibility available for teacher training and improvement with the combined funds. It is a good idea. Ongoing continuing education opportunities are vital to the professionalism of teachers. But teacher education comes at a cost. First, it generally means time out of the classroom. With the substitute teacher crisis that public schools currently face, allowing teachers time away from school to do professional development is an impossibility for many districts. Secondly, true quality reform efforts are not maintainable from “shot in the arm” inservices or generalized trainings that provide basic information only. Without a prescriptive means for follow-through, most new programs, even good ones, are lost to the other demands on a teacher’s time. Finally, and most seriously, the plan calls for “disclosing to parents information about the quality of their child’s teacher, as defined by the state.” Will quality mean adequate test scores within a classroom? If so, there will be an even greater strain on those teachers who consistently receive the disenfranchised and special education students in their classrooms because they are “good” with them. Will quality mean good student attendance? Newspaper recognition? A reduction in incidents of violence? An increase in English-speaking abilities among students? Notable acts of character from children

in a particular class? Shouldn't quality, which is at best a subjective adjective in the pen of the beholder, be as differentiated among teachers as the instructional abilities we expect of these teachers? Efforts to quantify the spirit of educators will result in a cookie-cutter curriculum delivered by a uniform staff of gingerbread teachers. And that's the way the cookie crumbles.

I BEFORE E, EXCEPT AFTER C

My fifth-grade son, who is not a natural speller, had to learn seventeen of the states for his last spelling test. He also had to know their locations and postal abbreviations. The abbreviations and locations were mastered readily and then the questions started. "But Mom, why does Vermont have an 'er' and Virginia have an 'ir' and why does Georgia start with a 'G' and Jersey start with a 'J'?" I didn't have an answer, save for the fact that the English language has derived from the melting pot that is the American heritage. Imagine how it must be for students from another culture who are suddenly immersed in the English language in their schools. There is a vast amount for them to learn. The No Child Left Behind plan attempts to address this issue. The reasons for the concern on behalf of the federal government are astounding. The policy states, "Research has shown that English language learners, when compared to their English-fluent peers, tend to receive lower grades and often score below the average on standardized math and reading assessments." First of all, it is incredible that this finding comes as a surprise to anyone. If we sent American students to Mexico and gave them standardized tests in Spanish, would they not be at a significant disadvantage? Secondly, it is implausible to think that increased, higher-stakes testing can improve this condition. One begins to wonder if we want students to learn the English language or only the language as it applies to test taking.

Advocates of the standardized testing process might argue that testing students on the concepts taught in their native

language is the answer. Realistically, however, this solution also has some serious drawbacks. Many foreign-born students arrive at American schools not only not conversant in English, but functionally illiterate in their native languages as well. It was extremely frustrating as a principal to experience communication with families only when a verbal translator was available. Families could not read any of the information required to enroll their children in school and could not keep advised of their children's progress *even when communiqués were sent in their native language.*

Many immigrant children have undergone serious hardships in their migration to the United States. Not only do they have a lack of early learning experiences, they have little school readiness and often must be taught basic social skills (cultural norms) while being taught the English language. Expecting public schools to increase English fluency is appropriate. Providing and removing funds based on the perceived success of that teaching is shortsighted. There are simply too many unforeseen loopholes. At a minimum, it should be realized that students with Limited English Proficiency tend to have higher rates of transition to other geographic areas than their peers. In addition, there are cultural mores present in families that may directly inhibit school success. It must be remembered that parents, too, may just be in the early stages of learning the English language and becoming familiar with the often subtle cultural norms in the United States.

NO INTEREST UNTIL 2005

“Systems are often resistant to change—no matter how good the intentions of those who lead them. Competition can be the stimulus a bureaucracy needs in order to change. . . . Parents, armed with data, are the best forces of accountability in education, and parents, armed with options and choice, can assure that their children get the best, most effective education possible.”³

Perhaps more than any other statement in the No Child Left Behind policy, this statement is demoralizing and detrimental to the hard work that is happening each day in America's classrooms. People take up arms when their security is threatened. In the Bush plan, parents are presumed to be virtual Don Quixotes, rescuing their victimized learners from the cruel hands of low-quality professionals and failing, dangerous schools. Parents are encouraged to take an active role in slaying the impersonal institutions that have harbored ill will towards their child. Providing a competitive educational market is seen as a key factor in delivering increasingly effective curriculum to students. Viewed with corporate vision, there is a tacit understanding that when the producers of a service or product must vie for customers, consumers will get better products at lower prices with more efficient delivery and better service. However, even in a model of pure consumerism, this is not the case. Products can be made more eye-catching. They can be streamlined. They can be better packaged and delivered more rapidly. They can even be made more cost effective. However, none of these factors is an indicator of their quality . . . only of their popularity.

SEE YOUR DEALER FOR DETAILS

Remember those student council elections from your high school days? How often did the best candidate get elected to the executive board? How often did the election results simply boil down to a popularity contest? Movies are made about the triumph of the "have-nots" over the "haves." Movies are made because it is the unexpected ideal and not the status quo. Forcing competition between schools will procure the same slanted and unfair results. Schools with good athletic programs will attract students first, those with a quality drama and music program will attract still others, and as with real estate, there is always the matter of location, location, location. Given a choice between attending the school with the new auditorium and the natatorium and health center, how many parents will choose the

school across town that is alleged to have a more well-developed curriculum? Decisions, even major life decisions, are not guided merely on intellect. Aesthetics, emotion, and practicality play important roles in the decision-making process. A measurable, standardized, test-worthy curriculum is not going to make a public school located on the “wrong side of the tracks” attractive enough to students out of wealthier, safer neighborhoods. In the case of public education, competition will not spur improvement; it will increase enrollments at affluent schools and heighten tension for those students left behind.

The negative impacts of educational competition will not end with an increase in underachieving inner-city schools. As with the star-bellied sneeches of Sues lore, soon there will be a glut on the market that will result in pandemonium and chaos for children. Schools that garner public favor will not be able to keep up with demand, especially when they start receiving high numbers of troubled students from neighboring schools. Like other societal trends, education will begin to reflect an odd combination of whimsy and rhetoric and schools will begin to segregate themselves unwittingly. A right-wing conservative fundamentalist? PS 21 has the program for you. A left-wing free thinker? PS 34 will be more to your liking. Undecided? Try PS 53. For a short time only, they are giving a free textbook with every enrollment to qualified applicants. See dealer for details.

ARE YOU A GOOD WITCH OR A BAD WITCH?

“... This title ensures that parents know whether their child attends a safe school and frees students from those that are dangerous.”⁴

I know my son’s teachers. All of them. I know where his classroom is, what he is currently studying, who his friends are, and what the cafeteria serves for lunch each day. I know how safe he feels, emotionally and physically, in his classroom. I know which students he doesn’t like to sit near because they are

disruptive or are bullies. I know these things because it is my job as a responsible parent to know them. I don't know them because of a mandate that schools communicate with parents.

Schools have always communicated with parents. Overtly, schools send newsletters, permission slips, handbooks, pamphlets, and the literature of a thousand trees home each year. Covertly, our children bring us messages about the work and the play that goes on in their world for eight or more hours each day. Responsible parents actively listen to their children, inquire about their classrooms, and keep tabs on their learning. A mandate that schools report their "safety" to parents using state-defined standards does little to enhance the efforts of already responsible parents; instead, it reflects the negativism that the federal government is harboring towards American's public schools.

How does a school become "persistently dangerous"? The most frequent aims of student violence in schools are retribution for a perceived wrong, seeking to make another student desist from a course of action, self-defense, and promotion of one's image or reputation.⁵

Adapting a curriculum that focuses on civic values and conflict resolution is only one of the steps recommended by the Task Force on School Violence.⁶ This report also calls for tougher weapon laws, improvement in juvenile codes, strong partnerships between community social work agencies and schools, more early education, increased partnerships between schools and law enforcement agencies, and more funding for Student Assistance Programs and alternative schools.

School safety is not an issue exclusively owned by America's public schools. Will allowing students to migrate to schools deemed "safe" make the media more responsible? Parents more involved? Gangs less prevalent? And what if the parents of the students who participate in acts of violence want their child to have the option of a safer school environment? Is it likely that being in a classroom across town will make a bully see the error of his ways?

We live in a country in which segregation is viewed as a negative phenomenon. Yet, we also live in a culture where discrimination is evident in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. School

systems that espouse “zero tolerance” as is mandated by the President’s plan, need to be able to enforce that policy. However, tighter controls have never been the sole motivation behind behavioral change. There will be students that test the system. Some of them will be students that the school system is able to expel, although this causes a whole new set of societal problems. Others, will be special education students who the District must educate differently or elsewhere, because expulsion would be in conflict with their exceptional needs. Where will these students go? Separate facilities? Separate but equal? It is not likely.

Schools are a microcosm of society. The intent of a school is to be safe, healthy, and productive. A multitude of societal factors (discussed in Chapter Four) break down that intent. The No Child Left Behind plan seems to contradict itself. Schools will get funding for providing a safe and drug-free environment for students to become good test takers. The picture is painted of students held captive by schools that do not reflect these conditions. These students, it is purported, need to be “freed” from the dangerous conditions of their educational system. So far, so good. It seems that the “good guys” are going to be given increased monies to welcome more “good guys” to their fold. But what about the students left behind?

I’ve talked with many parents who did not know their child’s teacher. I met some parents for the first time at their child’s eighth-grade graduation. Still others, I never met at all. There are many factors behind parental apathy. Under the Bush plan, that apathy will extend itself to irresponsibility. Unfortunately, the victims of that irresponsibility will be the children who are left behind in underfunded, underachieving schools.

This is where the Bush plan seems to contradict itself. The plan calls for achievement without really giving schools in poverty a fighting chance. The velvet atop the iron fist does little to assuage the blow that the federal government is dealing inner-city schools. Students with responsible parents will leave for more affluent options, leaving behind the nonperformers and the children whose parents do not wish to make school choices. Predictably, the pool of students remaining at schools-in-need will do poorly on standardized tests and even more funding will be lost.

In fact, it is my prediction that such schools will become the “alternative schools” of the future, meant to house the lowest common denominators in all classrooms. It will be easier for districts to have one or two underachieving schools filled with poor test takers than it will be to have those students spread out among schools. In the pizza factory mentioned in the introduction to this book, unwanted product was turned into dog food. What does America plan to do with the students who can’t or won’t receive an assembly line education?

FORCED ELECTIVES

When I first became a middle school principal, the students had several elective choices within their school day. They were able to take courses that appealed to their imaginations, interests, and creativity. However, as the pressure of meeting a host of educational standards increased, those electives dwindled down to a set of electives so narrow that they became “forced.” That is, they were really requirements with little room for flexibility.

Title VII of the No Child Left Behind plan⁷ states that “school districts will be granted unprecedented flexibility by this proposal in how they spend federal education funds. Accountability for student results is expected in return. States and schools that make significant progress will be honored with rewards. The Secretary of Education will be authorized to withhold administrative funds from states that fail to make adequate progress.”

When there is intense and direct pressure to perform well on standardized tests, there is not flexibility. When a school knows that its “report card” will be on display each year, and that the crux of that report card will be standardized test performance, there is no flexibility. There is not even any comfort in the fact that the test scores of a school will be reflected based on factors such as poverty, English proficiency, and numbers of students with disabilities. There is not any comfort because both the media and the American people have proven themselves to be

“bottom liners” over and over again. No one wants to read the small print, and the large print of the headlines is sure to be the sole testimony of most public schools.

In *Punished By Rewards*, Alfie Kohn says, “The aggressive attempt to ‘make’ children do something—and even more absurd to ‘make’ them care about what they were made to do—is a recipe for failure.”⁸

I am getting a picture in my mind of the high-achieving school of the twenty-first century. There will be smiling politicians shaking hands with beaming school administrators. They will be surrounded by the tomes of curricular standards that school staffs have created and recreated over the past five years. Test results will be emblazoned on a large colorful banner over their heads. In the background, there will be stacks of test preparation materials, towers of manuals, scores of answer sheets, and a sea of No. 2 pencils. All of that will be there in sharp focus. There will be only one thing missing. There will be no child left behind them.