



When Adopting a School is not Enough: Business Leadership in Reforming Public Education

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In attacking the problems of urban education and education reform today, the most pressing issues are not conceptual or analytic. They are managerial. We know what to do. We know why to do it. But we do not know how to get it done.

Because managerial issues are what American business knows best how to resolve, those are the issues in education upon which American business ought now to be focusing its energies and resources.

Over the past decade, business has become more and more involved in public education. It has done so because it has come to see the enormous stake it has in the quality of public education in our cities.

Poor public school education in the cities where businesses are located affects them now because it makes recruitment of managers difficult. Employees don't want to live where their children cannot be educated. Dysfunctional public education will affect businesses in the future because the products of the education system will enter the work force as inadequate human capital.

But even with that understanding of its stake in education, much of business's involvement has been on the periphery of education. It has consisted largely of traditional corporate philanthropy, ranging from cash and equipment donations, to such special business education projects as Junior Achievement and Project Business, to Adopt-A-School programs.

As valuable as this involvement has been, it has not put business, and the considerable skills of business persons, at the heart of education reform. And that is where business needs to be, for its own sake and for the sake of public educational America.

If reform were working, then the peripheral involvement of business in education would be fine. But it is not working. Despite the continuing efforts at reform, public education in our cities is still in miserable shape.

That lack of impact is not because there is disagreement about the problems of urban education or the programmatic solutions

to those problems. Today, there is broad consensus among educators, policy experts and public leaders of every hue in the political spectrum on what is wrong with public education in our cities.

**'Survival' Is
Not Enough**

All too often, students cannot learn and teachers cannot teach. In too many places they have to spend too much time simply trying to survive the day. And too frequently, schools do not have adequate resources, or the right resources – both human and capital – to succeed even at the minimal level of survival. Past sheer survival, too many teachers are uncertain what to teach and too many students are uncertain why they should learn. They feel adrift, isolated and abandoned.

The policy experts and educators also agree on many of the solutions to those problems.

Communities and parents need to be more deeply and legitimately involved in the schools, supportive of students and teachers. Educational purposes and goals need to be clear and adopted by teachers, parents and students alike. Teachers need to be more deeply involved in education policy decision making. The various functional disciplines of education need to be better integrated. Children need to have access to preschool education such as Project Head Start. Schools have to be safe.

Yet, despite this consensus on the problems and the cures, reform efforts in urban schools have largely been ineffective.

A major reason for the lack of success, as educators and policy makers are coming to see, is that the substantive problems usually have been examined – and their solutions proposed – piecemeal.

They have not been viewed in relation to a managerial system – beginning with individual departments within schools, and extending to the schools, district organizations and state systems – that can either advance reform or keep it from taking place (albeit often unintentionally; it is just the way the system operates).

The connection between substantive reform and managerial effectiveness is clear once we see reform as systemic change.

**The Imperatives
of Reform**

Reform means changing urban education so that it can more effusively carry out its mission. More fundamentally, reform means clarifying that mission and getting commitment to it from those who have a stake in ensuring its success.

Those are the classic strategic management imperatives of deciding what ought we do (“what business are we in?”) and why ought we do it (“why is this the right business?”).

Once those issues have been decided, then the organization must be structured in a way that will support its mission and not hinder it.

In the case of education reform, we need to understand from a systemic standpoint what is inhibiting change, what resources (human as well as capital) are required to make the change, how current resources are now being used, what systems are necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of the resources, to whom the entire system is accountable and how accountability will be enforced.

Again, all those items are classic management tasks.

In our experience, successful school systems carry out these tasks; unsuccessful ones do not.

For instance, there is now wide agreement that one of the most basic measures of school effectiveness is “time on task.” The principle is almost tautologically simple: whatever you spend your time doing, that is what will get done.

If “teaching” is the critical task – no matter what one’s particular philosophy of education and favorite methodology of teaching might be – then critical amounts of time in school have to be spend on that task.

A reform-minded administration and faculty could try to act on that principle by exhorting each other to “spend more time teaching”. But such exhortation is likely to be ineffective. This is cheerleading, not managing.

What is more likely to be effective is for the school to go through the management process of finding out, first, how time is actually spend by administrators, teachers and students.

The Public School Forum of North Carolina undertook such a study when teams of educators and business leaders analyzed working conditions in the public schools. The teams interviewed school personnel and reviewed the detailed logs of some 450 teachers, principals and office staff to see how they actually spent their time.

They found that teachers spent only about half their time actually instructing and counseling students, and principals spent less than 30 percent of their time planning instructional goals and

observing and evaluating staff. Clearly, both teachers and administrators were spending insufficient “time on task.”

That is not a moral judgment on the individual faculty and administrators. It is an observation about a management system. The organizational system that had been allowed to develop in the schools had so structured faculty time that teachers and principals could not spend enough of its time on instructional tasks and spent too much on noninstructional matters.

The management task in the schools was not to exhort faculty to spend more time teaching. The management task was to redesign the system so that teachers and administrators could spend the time where they need to – in support of the mission of the schools.

To those familiar with business manager, all this is old hat. They know that organizations don't work unless they are systemically structured to work. They know that managing means paying attention to, and working on, those systems.

But for many people within school systems, this is not old hat. Very few of them, even experienced and well-education administrators, have been trained in modern management theory and practice. It is simply not the natural way for them to look at what is going on in their schools.

Furthermore there is little likelihood that the “Governance system” of school policy-making, as it presently exists in most cities, will foster an examination of the management structure of schools.

School policy is largely determined by school boards made up of local citizens. While this system ought to encourage community involvement in schools (and often actually does), it does have difficulty dealing with issues of school effectiveness.

In part, the difficulties come from the political nature of school boards and community boards. As power centers – though the power is often not great compared with that of other political bodies – school boards may sometimes make policy that is based more on the power distribution within a community than the desire for education improvement. Administrative positions, for instance, may be awarded for political reasons, rather than on the basis of the most effective deployment of human resources.

Such policies are a continuing concern in regard to the community school boards in New York City (separate from the

concern over allegations of out-and-out corruption in some of those boards).

But even when local boards remain focused on education issues, they seldom address the management aspects of public education. That is because, as in the case of school administrators, the people who serve on school boards rarely have management training or experience. They simply do not look at schools from a management perspective.

The one constituency of schools who could help the most in addressing this central, systemic problem of management effectiveness – business leaders – has, in the main, stayed away from involvement in school policy. Ironically, more often than not they have felt unqualified to take a direct part in running our urban school systems.

**Business Leaders
Must Become
Involved**

But if education reform is to work, then business leaders need to do more than just get involved. They need to take a leading role in helping their communities address the management issues of urban education.

Involvement could take many forms – from current programs of volunteerism to seeking election to school boards. But the greatest leverage for change can come from an independent, community-wide effort, initiated through a community organization such as a chamber of commerce.

The effort would take the form of a blue-ribbon panel or study commission empowered to undertake a thorough examination of the management structure and practices of a city's public education system. Working with the local school district administration, the panel would also be empowered to make recommendations for changes in the management system and to review progress on those changes.

As a vehicle to focus the total community's attention on education reform through management reform, the panel would include not only business leaders, but also members of community organizations, unions, teachers, parents, and administrators. In short, it would include representatives of all those who have a stake in public education within a community.

This kind of community-based intervention, spearheaded by business leaders who understand the managerial issues, has the best chance of breaking the cycle of well-

intended education reform being frustrated and defeated by inadequate or dysfunctional management systems.

If this is the kind of change we in business want to see in our schools, then we ourselves must lead it.