

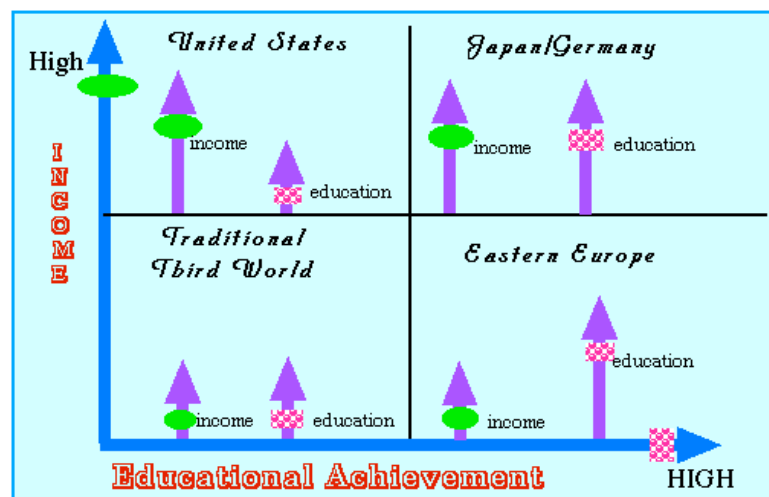
## Editorial Comment

# SALVAGING OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

By Franklin P. Schargel

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America has gone through dramatic changes in its 219 years. Our economy has moved from agriculture to mass production; and now we are in an information — and knowledge — based environment that requires greater educational levels for success. Yet the school model has changed very little. Our school year is still based on the agrarian model that allows our students to leave school for the spring planting and the summer and fall harvesting. Our schools are organized on the industrial top-down management model that was created to train people for low-skilled jobs through rote learning and individual skill-building in a time-structured and tightly disciplined environment. True, our school buildings have changed. Some are even air-conditioned. Green boards have replaced the black slate of old. Yet in many classrooms, students still sit in straight rows. Teachers stand in front of the room, giving the perception that they have all the answers, using chalk-and-talk methods to pour knowledge into the seemingly empty heads of their students. On the economic side, America cannot compete against low-wage, low-skill countries (see diagram below). And if we are to compete against countries with advanced economies, we must do so with a highly skilled workforce. Unfortunately, our schools have failed to keep pace with the changing demands of the global marketplace and have become a drag on national productivity.



Some people believe that if we devote enough energy and resources to the problem, we will halt the decline of education. This assumes that pouring more money at a process that is faulty will somehow erase its faults. Experience suggests otherwise. After all, after 10 years of educational reform and \$60 billion in new expenditures, standardized test scores are stagnant and dropout rates are climbing. Clearly, the “more-longer-harder” strategy — lengthening the school year, extending the school day and making students and teachers work harder — is not working.

And more money is no longer available; in fact, budget cuts are setting in. Today, education is facing serious competition for declining government resources, and taxpayers are demanding a measurable return on investment.

We cannot solve our problems by spending more or by spending less, by creating new public bureaucracies or by privatizing existing ones. The way to achieve school transformation is through a systemic change in the way our schools are organized and run and the ways in which teaching and learning take place.

There are no easy answers, but it's clear that the success of America's economy is tied to our public school system. Therefore, if America's schools are incapable of producing graduates who are proficient in communicating, doing math and thinking critically, then America's businesses are doomed to fail. If America wishes to regain the economic world leadership in the 21st century, we must make some tough choices and take some drastic steps and salvage our public education system.

1. Educational reform must move to the top of our national agenda. We must reprioritize America's values and raise the status of education and educators. American society must stop being enraptured with short-term thinking, which too frequently offers a quick, unsustainable fix and shortsighted thinking. It is time for America to realize that our greatest natural resource is our human resource, our people!

At the same time, schools cannot be expected to do a quality job with inadequate resources. The cutting of our federal, state, and local budgets must stop. This doesn't mean that schools should be a long-term expense that just keeps increasing: Deming taught us that things become less expensive as they become better. Imagine the implications for education.

2. The federal government must join the states in setting goals and standards, developing performance information, supporting evaluation and dissemination results. The federal GOALS 2000 and the Malcolm Baldrige Quality Award, which is now open to educational organizations, can serve to help refocus the nation's attention on the need to strengthen education.
3. We must make schools as customer-driven as the most successful business. That means providing ways for students to become actively involved in their own education. It also means that schools must adapt to the changing world before schoolwork becomes irrelevant to the student.

Confining students for six hours a day to a place where they do not want to be and where they feel they are wasting their time is ultimately a prescription for failure. As a society, we cannot afford to sacrifice 27 percent of our young people as “scrap” when they drop out of school. How can this or any nation succeed when it wastes 27 percent of its human resources?

Schools must also teach the kinds of skills that are needed in the workforce. Our knowledge workers need to learn to work cooperatively and in teams, and with people from diverse backgrounds, and to know how to investigate problems and analyze situations. Learning these skills should start in school.

4. Businesses must redefine their role. While businesses frequently lament the quality of workers being turned out by the schools, they traditionally have not worked closely with the schools to define the skills and abilities they want to hire. Business-education links for specific projects are becoming increasingly common; now businesses must enter into closer consultation with schools, perhaps coupled with long-term hiring relationships that could aid both the school and the business.

In the future, hiring decisions could be based on school transcripts and business managers could provide real-world expertise in the classroom, such as critiquing resumes or presenting the world of work to young people.

5. We must change the way we educate educators. The classrooms of the future will demand new teaching skills. Deans of education can no longer accept the status quo. Yet the faculty in many schools of education have had little or no classroom experience; some have never been in a schoolroom in this country.
6. States should provide financial aid and promote those schools that are adding value to student performance. So often in the past we have thrown additional dollars at schools where the processes were not working, effectively rewarding failure instead of success. We must change that paradigm and, at the same time, recognize that when we provide money for effective change in our schools, we may be eliminating the need to spend more money on police protection and prisons. There is something wrong when a society can find the resources to incarcerate its young people, but not to educate them.
7. We must ensure that our schools are sanctuaries of safety as well as citadels of knowledge. Our children cannot learn if they are consumed by fear: We must develop strategies to dissolve the root causes of school violence.
8. We must overcome our complacency with our schools. Businesspeople, parents and educators must realize that our nation’s economic and political well-being depends on how well our young people perform when they enter the workforce.

Our public school system is unique in the world: It is the only system available to all young people, regardless of social position, family background, or physical or mental ability. Statistically, our public school system can never compete with that of Germany or Japan, for example, where only the elite students are allowed to enter academic high school.

But since our students will be competing with workers from around the world, those American schools that are achieving success must benchmark with the best schools in Singapore, Hong Kong, Israel, Sweden and the United Kingdom. If America's graduates cannot stand shoulder to shoulder with the world's best, they soon will have no place to stand at all.

The failure of America's public schools endangers the very fabric of American democracy and the foundations of America's industrial might. We cannot allow education in America to fail because education is the foundation of our democracy, the glue that holds our society together and the backbone of the American economy.

### **Time For Change**

Change takes time. That means high schools, with (at optimum) 25 percent per annum student turnover, are not the best incubators for change. Change also takes an investment in training, yet it is the unusual school system that has more than a few days or dollars per year to devote to this purpose.

Despite these issues, change is occurring in the classroom, propelled by corporate leaders who have proved willing to provide money and expertise to assist schools in their communities. Many of these programs have been successful, but few have been replicated on a large scale. Some of the hindrances to developing and duplicating successful business-education partnerships are as follows:

- School and business cultures are so different from each other that it is difficult for parties to communicate with one another or find ways to work in common toward their goals, even when those goals are complementary. Few teachers have personal experience in for-profit environments and few businesspeople have knowledge of what goes on in the classroom beyond what they think they remember from their own school days.
- The school system is built on bureaucratic and political criteria, while businesses are self-contained entities that are most interested in helping to sponsor change in the local community where it will do them the most immediate good. Each business-education partnership has to be developed independently, and the work frequently gets done outside the normal channels of a top-down school bureaucracy.
- Public schools exist in a tenured, unionized, captive environment. Most businesses that are creating change are nonunion, or the change process is taking place with the full support of the union. Those circumstances do not exist in public school education. Additionally, a business can always fire a worker who doesn't "get it," but social and political pressures serve to keep malcontents in high school as long as possible, not the opposite.

Martha H. Peak

## **TQM TECHNIQUES IN THE INNER-CITY CLASSROOM**

George Westinghouse Vocational Technical High School, located in downtown Brooklyn, N.Y., is in many ways a typical inner-city high school. Many of the students come from single-parent, low-income families. Nearly three-quarters of its students are black, and one-quarter are Latino. Most graduates will be the first in their families to obtain a high school diploma.

Westinghouse has problems typical of many urban schools: a high attrition rate, an aging infrastructure, and a student population that arrives with poor reading and math skills, lack of motivation, a history of scholastic failure and low self-esteem.

Four years ago, George Westinghouse Principal Lewis Rappaport and I decided it was time to reinvigorate our school using total quality management to change our instructional process. We have been successful in changing the direction of the school and in addition, we are making changes in the classroom - the place where learning happens and relationships are formed. Most important what we have done at Westinghouse is replicable across the nation.

Here are some of our successes:

- Our Apprenticeship Training Program designed by two teachers, pairs an entering freshman with a senior mentor in our vocational and technical department. The ninth-grader works side by side with the older student, who guides the ninth-grader through class experiments. Freshman pick up skills, and the seniors get leadership experience. Teachers report less boredom, less disruption in class, and a lot more focus on work. Moreover, the structure of the class has changed from one teacher lecturing to 28 students to 14 pairs of students learning from one another, with the teacher acting as mentor. Both attendance and grades of the ninth-graders ( the most at-risk group to drop out ) have improved.
- Students, teachers and parents are more involved in the school. School extracurricular activities are more popular as students have more say in their governance. Faculty members give up their own time to be active on the unpaid Quality Steering Committee. Membership in the PTA grew exponentially after the school asked parents when they would like to meet and help craft the agenda. For the first time in recent memory, parents are competing for PTA offices.
- Nearby colleges in Brooklyn-Pratt Institute, Polytechnic University and New York City Technical College - have agreed to run coordinated programs with the high school. Project Care allows our students to take courses at the college while they are still in high school.
- Our external customers have assisted us. We have raised more than \$2 million in new or additional programs and services. AT & T, Xerox, Marriott, Colgate-Palmolive, Digital Equipment, Time Warner and NYNEX have all generously provided technical assistance to us. Westinghouse Electric and National Westminster Bank have provided scholarship monies, and IBM provided two weekends of total quality training for members of our staff, student body and their parents.
- The Ricoh Corp. has formed a partnership with our school in which students are repairing broken Ricoh photocopiers and fax machines.
- Business School Advisory Councils have been established in the electronics, woodworking, and optical vocational areas. Council members - from business, industry and the faculty - meet

regularly with the principal and staff to suggest ways to upgrade our programs and make our students more employable.

Franklin P. Schargel has retired as assistant principal and quality coordinator of George Westinghouse Vocational-Technical High School in Brooklyn, N.Y., and is the author of "Transforming Education Through Total Quality Management: A Practitioner's Guide" (Eye on Education, Princeton Junction, 1994).

For any comments please contact Franklin P. Schargel at: [fschargel@aol.com](mailto:fschargel@aol.com)

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