

Creating Constancy of Purpose

What is the purpose of your local school?

In the first of his 14 Points for Management, the late Dr. W. Edwards Deming urged leaders to “create constancy of purpose for improvement of product and service.” I’ve always said that clear statements of an organization’s mission and purpose should define the system’s “purpose” in the phrase “constancy of purpose.”

In his texts, letters, papers and lectures, the Deming defined a system as follows:

“It is a series of functions or activities (sub-processes, stages – hereafter components) linear or parallel, within an organization that work together for the aim of the organization. The mechanical or electrical parts that work together to make an automobile or a vacuum cleaner form a system....

“The aim of the system must be stated by the management thereof. Without an aim, there is no system. The components of a system are necessary but not sufficient of themselves to accomplish the aim. They must be managed.”¹

My friend Joel “Jim” McAbee, former superintendent of School District 51 in Ware Shoals, South Carolina, attended one of my seminars and continued his own learning via reading and a lot of reflection. Months later, I met with him to discuss what he’d learned about his local school system.

Jim said, “Both you and Dr. Deming taught me that the first step to improving a system is to find out what’s wrong with the current system. But Deming insists that without an aim, there is no system to begin with. Something finally dawned on me: I have no system! I have but three buildings united only by a common parking lot!”

In the context of the systems perspective, what did I later observe in Jim McAbee’s district? I saw a great deal of work devoted to clearly defining and reaching consensus among groups throughout the Ware Shoals community on the aim, or purpose, of the district and schools.

What is the aim of your local school district? Is it to achieve high (standardized) test scores? Or is it to effectively facilitate child development?

Clear Purpose vs. Cross-Purposes

If the stated goal, aim or purpose of your district is to achieve high test scores, that district cannot effectively and fully facilitate child development. Standardized tests at best assess child development only along cognitive lines. Many people claim that standardized tests don’t really assess students’ cognitive development. Rather, they argue that such tests merely measure facts and rote memorization. To give the devil his

due, however, let's accept for now any claims that standardized tests assess cognitive development.

Dr. Robert Audette, former commissioner of special education in Massachusetts and later elementary education coordinator at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte, taught me that child development occurs over time along four dimensions: physical, cognitive, emotional and social. (Parochial schools would add spiritual; so did the ancient Greeks.) There are no widely employed standardized tests that measure child development along physical, emotional and social dimensions. Therefore, any district with the stated purpose of achieving high (standardized) test scores cannot effectively facilitate child development. Attention to development along dimensions other than cognitive will continue to take a backseat to classroom time spent on facts, test-taking skills and practice tests.

(I've always said that any farmer will tell you that you don't fatten a hog by weighing it. District goals for high test scores result in preparing hogs to stand on the scale; and such practices end up making the hog lose weight!)

Such emphasis on high test scores has negative effects in ways other than lack of attention to all aspects of child development. The following front-page story appeared almost 20 years ago in an issue of the *Austin American-Statesman*, Austin, Texas.

“Sophomores at Georgetown High School say they saw blatant cheating during the spring Texas Assessment of Academic Skills testing, including classmates who copied answers, left the room for long periods of time and whispered answers to others.... The TAAS is a basic skills test required by the state that covers math, reading and writing. High school students must pass it to graduate....”²

The state of Texas delivers a very clear message to its high school students: Whether or not you walk across the stage at graduation depends on how you do on this test. Now, we're not going to tell you what's on the test. We're not even going to tell you if the required writing sample will be descriptive, expository or some other form. But whether you walk across the stage or not depends on this test.

Then it's front page news that good kids do bad things in Austin! What would one expect? Some studies have reported that emphasis on standardized tests retards student learning, restricts curricula and constrains both teachers' and students' creativity.³ Students also learn what's really important: not learning, but passing tests.

And it's not just kids that do bad things. Administrators and teachers in Georgia have not only been dismissed but also face criminal charges because of their part in “rampant, systematic cheating” during standardized testing in Atlanta's public schools.

“At the center of the cheating scandal is former Superintendent Beverly L. Hall, who was named 2009 National Superintendent of the Year and has been considered one of the nation’s best at running large, urban districts... [Hall was hired as the Atlanta superintendent in 1999.]... Still, the investigation shows that cheating on the state-mandated Criterion-Referenced Competency Test began as early as 2001, and that ‘clear and significant’ warnings were raised as early as December 2005. Dr. Hall’s administration punished whistle-blowers, hid or manipulated information and deliberately altered documents related to the tests, the investigation found. The superintendent and her administration ‘emphasized test results and public praise to the exclusion of integrity and ethics,’ the investigators wrote.”⁴

This is not to suggest that your local students and educators are cheating on their standardized tests. The Atlanta scandal is a clear and dramatic illustration, however, of a school district with a clear but highly-dysfunctional purpose!

In October 1994, C-SPAN broadcast a conference that featured a spokesperson for the Carnegie Foundation. He reported that their studies found that, regardless of family or socio-economic background, the most common question asked by kindergarten children in this country is, “Why?” By third grade, the studies discovered that students no longer commonly ask, “Why?” The most common question among third graders – regardless of family or socio-economic background – is, “Will it be on the test?”

If the purpose of your local school district is high test scores, it risks extinguishing the intrinsic desire to learn that every child brings to kindergarten. What is the purpose of your school district? Is it to achieve high test scores? Or is it to facilitate child development? It cannot be both!

Notes

¹W.E. Deming, “A System of Profound Knowledge,” W.E. Deming, “A System of Profound Knowledge,” from J.F. Leonard, *The New Philosophy for K-12 Education: A Deming Framework for Transforming America’s Schools*, ASQ Quality Press (1996), pp. 310-311.

²L. Welch, “Cheating on TAAS Reported,” *Austin American Statesman*, Austin, Texas, 9 June 1994, p. 1.

³H. Stout, “Math, Science Tests are Too Simplistic, New Study Finds,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 16 October 1992, p. A5.

⁴K. Severson, “Systematic Cheating Is Found in Atlanta’s School System,” *The New York Times*, 6 July 2011, p. A13.