

The Education Crisis

SCHOOL REFORM HAS FAILED. THERE'S A BETTER WAY.

Over the years, I've often opened my seminars with educators, their business partners, and community leaders by posing the following question: Is there a crisis in American education? Although a few seminar attendees have insisted that there may be a perceived crisis (but not a real one), the vast majority of them have agreed that the American education system is in a crisis mode. When I ask what symptoms they observe that may lead them to conclude there's a crisis, I've gotten the following responses (among others):

- Businesspeople claim that entry level workers don't have the skills they need.
- There is an unacceptable and disturbing number of high school dropouts.
- The United States has the highest rate of teen pregnancy in the developed world.
- The United States has the highest rate of workplace illiteracy in the industrialized world.
- There is violence in schools. School shootings.
- School districts are experiencing crises in funding because of state- and federally-mandated programs that aren't funded. Local property owners' are resisting increases in school budgets and taxes.
- The United States has the highest prison incarceration rate in the world, with more than two million people in prison – and the number is growing.
- Students' SAT scores are falling.
- Americans have a dramatically different family structure than we did in the past, with working parents unable to participate fully in their children's learning.
- A growing percentage of children are in single-parent homes, facing economic hardships as well as scholastic struggles and less quality time with a parent.
- Schools are burdened with programs to deal with society's problems (teen pregnancy, sexually-transmitted diseases, AIDS, counseling, and so on) in addition to academics.
- American students lag far behind their peers in other countries in tests of international comparison.

After discussing these and other symptoms, I always ask my seminar audiences a second question: Is the American education system broken?

The consensus answer to this question is a resounding NO! The American education system is not broken; it's operating precisely as it was designed to operate; it's delivering precisely what it was designed to deliver.

So, on the one hand, we have this widely perceived crisis in American education. On the other hand, there is broad consensus that the system is not broken. When pondering this conundrum, I can reach only one conclusion: We do not need school reform! The system's not broken; why reform it? The system's operating as it was designed to operate; why reform it?

Our schools need neither reform nor restructuring. The American education, instead, is in need of transformation – and transformation implies a complete change in state. For example, if our vocational education system is water, but today's workplace technology requires ice, we cannot become ice and remain in liquid state. If our elementary schools are caterpillars, and today's child – faced with an increasingly complex society and living in a fractured family structure – requires a butterfly, we cannot become a butterfly and remain a caterpillar.

Yet, many of our alleged reform or restructuring efforts seem geared to flogging the caterpillar to get it to crawl faster! For example, a school district in northeastern Connecticut went through a very long, very involved strategic planning process. Focus groups of parents, teachers, administrators, business partners and community members worked for months to develop five long-range goals. All five goals called for higher scores on the state's standardized tests.

One may ask, "You mean this district has not been working on higher test scores in the past?" Have they been working to *lower* test scores?

This is not an example of transformation. This is an example of using new ways (strategic planning instrument, focus groups) to work in the same thing (higher test scores). The means may be different, but the end is not.

Transformation, on the other hand, requires a complete change in state. Organizations truly making progress on transformation no longer have the same priorities, the same concerns, the same problems. They are willing to question everything they ever learned and believed about their systems.

As a teacher and consultant, the late Dr. W. Edwards Deming is credited with helping leaders in business and education understand and implement a process for achieving transformation. And the most critical factor for accomplishing the transformation is leadership. In American companies, Deming asserted that there's too much management and not enough leadership. "In the absence of vision and leadership, set a numerical goal." How does this point translate to education? In the absence of vision and leadership, give a test!

Any farmer will tell you that you don't fatten a hog by weighing it. But what have we been doing as a result of the angst created by America 2000, Education 2000, Common Core, and other so-called reform movements? We've been coming up with new and exciting ways to way hogs! New tests; more tests.

Once again, we don't need any school reform; the system never needed reform in the first place. What's needed is transformation, and transformation requires leadership. In Deming's words, "The required transformation in Western style of management requires that managers be leaders. Focus on outcome (management by numbers, MBO, work standards, meet specifications, zero defects, appraisal of performance) must be abolished, leadership put in place."

One cannot help but notice that many so-called education reform or restructuring proposals have not taken heed of Deming's warning. They call for continued focus on outcomes (test scores), pay for performance for teachers, doing away with tenure, competition (choice) between schools based on test scores (results), and so on. For far too long our management system has accepted the myth that these practices work. For far too long, we've been locked in an age of mythology, and now we're trying to "reform" our schools by applying the same myths.

We don't need such reform. We need transformation.

Note

J. F. Leonard, *The New Philosophy for K-12 Education: A Deming Framework for Transforming America's Schools*, ASQ Quality Press, Milwaukee, WI (1996), pp. 1-3, 8.