

## **THE BUSINESS OF EDUCATION**

Teaching is a Profession but Education is a Business whose purpose is to support teaching. Parents are the primary customers who hold schools accountable. Businesses that do not achieve desired results and do not satisfy their customers must make significant changes to their operations. Not doing so is crazy or so said Albert Einstein ("Doing the same thing over and over expecting different results is the definition of insanity.") and that's the way it is with education.

Over twenty-five years ago a business consortium led by the DuPont Company recognized that Delaware's public school system was a liability to the state's economy. It affected everyone who lived or worked in the state. Public schools adversely impacted Delaware's ability to attract and retain businesses, provide jobs, improve property values, reduce taxes and crime rates, minimize population shifts, etc. Having children wasn't necessary to be affected by the public school system.

Pre-Covid test results show poor performance with Delaware's current, entrenched public school system. The Smarter Balanced Assessment showed only 67% of white 3<sup>rd</sup> graders and 36% of black 3<sup>rd</sup> graders were proficient in reading and math, while 2/3 of 8<sup>th</sup> graders were functionally illiterate in math and reading (National Assessment for Educational Progress). Only 44% of Delaware high school grads were college ready (Alliance for Excellent Education). Delaware colleges reported that 53% of entering Delaware freshmen required remediation.

As far back as 1995 a business consortium (DuPont, Hercules, Verizon, Delmarva Power, Zeneca, and Christiana Care); State Superintendent and co-author of our charter law, Mike Ferguson; and the Brookings Institution identified the problem as our system of school boards and bureaucracies. While these entities have many good people, operational decisions are best made at the local or school level by professionals hired to get the teaching job done. When hired to start Delaware's first charter school, the school president was told by the consortium leader that the members did not know how to run a school and that was why an education professional was being hired. Only two directives were given, "Just get the job done" and "Failure is not an option".

Steve Jobs once said, "It doesn't make sense to hire smart people and then tell them what to do; we hire smart people so they can tell us what to do." Who is hired to educate the kids? Principals and teachers! Through distributive leadership they should be making operational decisions (site-based management) answerable to parents. Board and bureaucratic responsibilities should be limited to oversight duties. This would also permit a significant reduction in the number of school districts along with a reduction in personnel at the district and state levels resulting in substantial cost savings.

The essence of administration is decision-making and most current principals will need additional professional development to assume their new and broader administrative responsibilities. This could be conveniently accomplished if our local colleges would develop an MBA in Education Administration degree. The work of these new CEOs (Chief Education Officers) formally principals will be innovative and challenging as they interact with teachers and parents in the best interests of students. They don't teach a single student but they are responsible for educating all of them. Teachers do it in classrooms but the CEOs do it by creating an operational system that supports teachers and staff in their mission to provide an exceptional educational experience for all students. It should be a self-sustaining system that continues to produce and improve quality results even if the CEO leaves, retires or is hit by a bus.

This power shifting systemic change was to be piloted by only a few charter schools. State Superintendent Ferguson didn't want to increase building capacity with several charter schools which he said would be inefficient and expensive. However, "Charters proliferated in a way unintended and unanticipated." (Delaware Today, August 2015, page 106). While charters were competitors of traditional public schools that was never their main purpose. Changing the way all public schools operated was their primary goal.

Many charter schools were doing well relative to their traditional counterparts. The state hired Dr. Gary Miron of the Evaluation Center at Western Michigan University to conduct a three-year study of Delaware's charter schools. In his year 1 report (December 2004) he reported that, "The Charter School of Wilmington students are outperforming their counterparts at similarly matched traditional public schools in both reading and math." In his final report (March 2007) he wrote, "Overall, the Charter School of Wilmington performed exceptionally well on all subject tests. Its residual scores were far above predicted values and they appeared to become even more positive over time." I specifically cited CSW because, as the founding President hired by the business consortium to open the first charter school, I am very familiar with the intent of the Charter Law and the process employed to achieve it. In a 2022 meta-analysis of research compiled by edchoice.org they found that charter schools increased their students' test scores as well as the likelihood they would go on and persist in college. Charter schools lead to greater racial integration in schools and save taxpayers money. Their success, in large part, was due to the way they operated, i.e., with local control. A system that should be implemented in all public schools.

Increased spending is frequently proposed as a magical elixir to cure anemic academic performance. History would disagree especially when that money doesn't make it to the classroom. Economist, John Stapleford, reviewed some of the economic factors involved. Between 1999 and 2017 while our NAEP scores remained flat, our per-pupil spending grew at nearly twice the rate of inflation approaching today's figure of over \$15,000. During that interval of time the system went from about 21 students per administrative role down to only

13.9 students while the student-teacher ratio went from 16 to 14.9, a disproportionate increase in administrative roles.

Funding was used by the existing system to hire additional competent, well-intentioned people to do jobs that simply didn't address the real issues and didn't produce the desired results. The most significant factor to improving education is high quality teachers. Over the last 20 years, inflation has averaged about 2.3% per year while the average teacher salary increased 1.6%. Despite increased funding, teachers are making less today than they were 20 years ago. In addition, teaching as a profession is not regarded as highly as it should be.

Dr. Stapleford estimated that with 1/3 of the state's budget along with school district and federal funds, the state spends well in excess of \$1 Billion for its public schools. If you consider "lost" revenue for taxes and purchases from people who work in Delaware but who moved across the state line to avoid our public school system, the cost to the state is well over \$2 Billion per year.

People have focused on WHAT charter schools were doing to achieve their success when they should have been focusing on HOW they were doing it. What a school does depends on many factors that vary at each school (what parents and the community want, available resources, student interests/ability, school personnel, etc.). How the school operates goes to the heart of systemic change and affects all schools equally. Even the U.S. Department of Education stated that we had to move away from rules-based governance and move toward performance-based accountability.

Local control (site-based management) produces a customized education instead of a standardized one. The pilot school has proven successful. It was ranked by U. S. News and World Report as one of the 100 best public schools in America. It had the highest paid teachers using a total school performance bonus system and after 14 years it had accumulated an unrestricted operating surplus of \$3.4 million. Now is the time to move on and change our low performing system of public education by adopting a dynamic, bold system of local control for all public schools answerable to parents through choice. School boards and bureaucracies will assume new, supportive roles rather than directive ones. It's a system similar to one that has been operating in Delaware since before 1776. Change is difficult but as George Bernard Shaw once said, "Progress, without change, is impossible."

Situations that exist outside the school can affect education in the building and must also be addressed. Amanda Ripley, author of, "The Smartest Kids in the World and How They Got That Way" and the Hoover Institution observed that kids do better if they come from a two-parent home. Amanda has also commented that students perform better if a parent shows an interest in education by frequently asking their kids questions about school. The answers, if any, are not important. Just asking does the job.

In Delaware white babies are born to single mothers 30% of the time, for black babies it's 77%. If parents did not have a successful experience as students, they are unlikely to provide needed support to their kids. Parents must be more than customers; they must be participants in the education process. Any attempt at education reform must start with parents by emphasizing the significant benefits of a good education for their kids and their role in achieving it.

Many people view teacher unions as opposed to education reform but, with higher pay for teachers and more say in operations, unions will become partners for systemic change and not opponents. A comprehensive strategy is needed to implement this BOLD PLAN for systemic change including a promotional piece because as P. T. Barnum once said, "Without promotion a terrible thing happens.....nothing!" Let's get started!

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