

A business perspective on education: Launching a revolution of participation

Maine Policy Review (1992). Volume 1, Number 3

by James F. Orr, III

Business has been increasingly concerned about the reform of education in the U.S. in recent years, according to James F. Orr III, chief executive officer of UNUM. Although financial resources have been contributed to the reform efforts, Orr admits, business has not taken the larger step of actually participating in the process of education reform. Participation, he argues, is central to changing schools to respond to the realities of the Twenty-first Century. Business must retake ownership of American schools, along with other stakeholders and citizens in general. In this article, based on an address made earlier this year at a business conference, Orr called for a "second American Revolution" aimed at reforming our education system.

The privatization of public services is being called the global perestroika of the 1990s. Throughout the world, services provided by government are being managed increasingly by the private sector. These services include everything from electric utilities to hospitals to railroads to correctional facilities.

This change is occurring worldwide: in the U.S., the United Kingdom, and even Third World countries. Supporters say that privatization reduces costs, improves efficiency, raises the quality of the remaining government activities, reduces taxes, and shrinks the size of government. Opponents say privatization does not guarantee improved efficiencies. They worry that profit-minded managers will make essential public services unaffordable and unavailable to many.

Yet, on two points both sides agree:

- The establishment of managerial accountability is more important than the form of ownership.
- Some functions are well suited for privatization and others are not.

Surely, one function that is not suited to privatization is public education. If anything, we must make public education more public. This means education reform that is bigger than any kind of reform we have ever seen. The debate should not only be about curricula, standards, and requirements, not only about the length of the school day or the school year, and not only about the role of teachers and administrators. Education reform must transcend all of these individual issues. Reform must place public education back in the hands of the public.

This reform already has started thanks to Polly Williams. Williams is a grandmother who fifty years ago picked cotton as a child in her native Mississippi. Twenty years ago, she was a mother receiving public assistance. Today, she is a state legislator from Wisconsin, representing a

district in Milwaukee. For the past two years, Polly Williams has been fighting for the right of poor parents to use state funds for private education. Earlier this year, she won her struggle. The Wisconsin Supreme Court declared constitutional the nation's first educational-choice program that includes the private schools. The decision will allow more than 500 low-income students to continue to use a state scholarship worth \$2,500 to attend nonsectarian private schools.

As a recent editorial in the Wall Street Journal pointed out, that \$2,500 is less than half what it costs to educate a child in Milwaukee's public schools. The same article reports that parents involved in the program are "highly pleased" with it. Parent support is crucial in developing children's attitudes about school.

Judge Louis J. Ceci wrote in his concurring opinion that the program "attempted to throw a life preserver to those Milwaukee children caught in cruel riptide of a school system floundering upon the shoals of poverty, status quo thinking, and despair." He added a plea that the state of Wisconsin "give choice a chance."

Wisconsin has done that. As Gov. Tommy Thompson said, "The country has been watching Wisconsin for a signal. Now they've got it." He is right. We have received the signal. But the Wisconsin experience signals much more than the right to use public funds for private education. It says the public's right to choose how public funds are spent on education is greater than the force of inertia that preserves the status quo in public education governance today.

Polly Williams' victory, it has been said, could be the prologue of a major new political battle, one that pits poor parents against education unions. I hope that is not true, for such a battle could escalate into one of the most divisive wars America has experienced - a second Civil War of sorts. It would be a conflict whose fallen would not be hundreds of thousands of soldiers, but millions of our children. No one hopes for such a conflict. Although there is certainly a struggle underway, it need not and must not be us-against-them. We need our educators beside us, not across from us in opposition.

Educational change is not about pitting poor parents and their children against middle class teachers and their unions. It is not about setting poor districts against wealthy districts. It is not about race or battlefield deaths. We do not need another American Civil War.

Instead, we must band together, as did our nation's founders, in what may be seen as a second American Revolution. This revolution will put public education back in the hands of the public. It will be a revolution of participation that helps make American education more in the image of the democracy envisioned by many of our founders.

A hero of America's first revolution, Thomas Jefferson, once wrote: "Those who bear equally the burdens of government should equally participate in its benefits." For our purposes, Jefferson could have stopped at "equally participate" because, although sharing in the benefits of democracy is fundamental to our system, the benefits increase as participation increases.

Certainly, revolutionary change is needed in all areas of public education. But none is greater than a revolution of participation. Although many of us in business have served as special

consultants to work on various elements of the system, we must go beyond peripheral tinkering to initiate an overhaul of the entire system. To this end, I propose that business focus on increasing participation in the system and on redesigning education to include as many of its owners as possible. Despite this broad need, many of us in business have focused narrowly on defining needs and standards. It is easy to see how we could be drawn to standards, in light of the downward trend of SAT scores and other indicators. And yet, we in business believe that needs and standards are as dynamic as our businesses, our markets, and the world economy. They are moving targets, never static. We must stop working on standards that the real world can render obsolete in less than a semester's time. We must begin to define and to develop an education system that can keep up with the ever-changing needs of the marketplace.

At UNUM, we do not believe that there is a single model for education reform. A single model is inconsistent with the need for local involvement, which we strongly support, and it denies local circumstance. Restructuring the American education system demands that we build from the needs up rather than from the institution down. The imperative is simple: Every child must be better prepared to contribute at work, in the community, as well as to manage his or her own future.

The goal is independence - independence from the constraints of an inadequate education. Today these constraints, at least in part, put millions of Americans on the public assistance rolls, on the unemployment line, and under the poverty line. We must help our children become less dependent and more independent. If we are to accomplish that, our education system is the key.

But turning that key will not be easy. It will demand structural changes that cut to the heart of our current system. It will demand that we value outcomes more than inputs, that we create schools that learn as well as teach, and that we make the learning environment as dynamic as the world that awaits our children beyond the schoolyard.

Although we do not propose a single model, we have agreed on an ideal. It is called by UNUM's own resident education experts the transformational-outcome-based system. Its meaning is simpler than its name. "Transformational" means that the system can adjust to changing marketplace needs. "Outcome-based" means focusing more on what the system produces, and on what the students can do than on what goes into the production itself.

The gap between our current system and this ideal can be measured by three simple indices:

1. *The accountability measure.* Are teachers and administrators accountable for and compensated according to student performance? Are schools accountable for and supported on the basis of performance? Who determines success? And how? Do communities hold themselves accountable for student performance? Do we in business hold ourselves responsible and accountable for student performance? Is the continued flow of public funds and other resources contingent on student success?
2. *How the system's resources are organized.* Learning cannot be partitioned or blocked off like class schedules on a daily calendar. Knowledge, skills and attitudes are largely the result of a single system of learning. Today, institutional divisions define these needs and education itself. We must ask: How closely does the system match the function of

learning? How well does the system receive and respond to the needs of the marketplace? How quickly does the system respond to change? Does today's governance of education create a system for learning? Or does it create an institution?

3. *The fit between what the system values and broader community values.* Learning must be a value reflected in every component of the community because the results of any educational system are only as important as the value placed on them by members of the community. The value placed on education by families, business, government and the community is reflected in community standards that we typically measure by self-sufficiency. This, I am sad to say, is a measure by which we fail today if we judge by the continued need for public assistance programs.

Regardless of how we define the ideal educational system, the gap between it and our current one is surely large. How can we close this gap? How can business help?

First, business must cement its relationships with schools. Today, when I think of that relationship, I am reminded of a cartoon that depicts a young boy responding to a teacher. He says, "I was so busy pretending to listen that I didn't hear the question." Many in business are guilty of the same. We are so busy creating special education projects or making education part of our corporate public involvement programs that we have lost sight of our purpose: to become involved in the system and to help shape the system. Window-dressing and feel-good projects simply are not enough. Business must move beyond this stage and accept shared stewardship of our educational system. Business must accept a shared responsibility with the rest of the community, the rest of the system's owners, to prepare our children for tomorrow. But how can business better fulfill this responsibility?

First, business must make its involvement in education more than a special project or part of its corporate public involvement programs. Business must make involvement in education part of our business, as fundamental a piece of our business as corporate finance. And why not? For business, the long-term purpose of education, improved competitiveness and profitability, goes hand-in-hand with that of corporate finance.

Second, we must normalize relations between business and educators. Educators should be a regular part of businesses, treated like other consultants or vendors, rather than simply as VIPs at one-day special events or at week-long training programs who are never seen again. Business must be equally active in the education system to promote its own best interest as concerned, educated consumers. Normalizing these relations is the only way to establish and maintain open communications. This is the key to helping the system keep pace with changing marketplace needs.

Another responsibility that American business has yet to assume fully is to evaluate, define, and monitor its own employment needs and changes in those needs. Many of us have been so busy restructuring our companies that we have forgotten to tell educators just how much our employment needs are changing. Combined with the inherent lag between awareness and action in the educational system, this failure of communication has figured largely in the system's inability to meet business's needs. Business cannot expect educators to understand our needs if

we do not make educators part of our business. Clearly, we can no longer afford such miscommunication.

Multi-billion dollar business investments over the past two decades in technological developments and workplace management have paved the way to greater efficiency and profitability. But we have yet to fully realize either. We are not close to our full potential because our investment in preparing the work force for this new and better workplace has not kept pace.

I am not referring to the size of the financial investment. Time has proven that more money is not the answer. The answer is managing our investment more carefully, watching the performance of our educational system more closely, and addressing the system's management when we note shortcomings or have ideas for improvement. If businesses are to be partners in a true working relationship with educators, we must also commit our time and expertise, our knowledge and our experience. We must help shape a system that recognizes and responds to the supply-and-demand relationship between business and education. This is business' responsibility as partners in the educational system.

Public education is the key that can unlock the tremendous potential that business has developed through investments in the workplace. But the key is stuck. It cannot be turned without greater participation by all of the education system's owners. Some, especially those in business, are afraid of becoming more involved. They see public policy and politics as dangerous territory. But business must roll up its sleeves and get to work at a more meaningful, more long-term, and more productive level.

Despite the fears of some, business is in a perfect position to help shape the future of our educational system. Business does not carry the political baggage that weighs down some of the system's other owners - other taxpayers. As community leaders, business people also have a responsibility to help these other owners of the system to participate as well. We can no longer afford to relinquish public policy entirely to those in government. As certain public functions - such as jails - are privatized for greater efficiencies, conversely, it is time that we "publicized" at least one other element of our social system, public education. We must put education back in the hands of the public.

Public education will not simply be handed back to the public. Rather, we must pursue it. We must become more active in our schools, in developing a more responsive educational system at every level. We must take action beyond special projects and corporate public involvement programs.

It is time for business to lead a grassroots effort to get all of the system's owners involved. It is time to engage the status quo of educational governance. As a rallying point, I propose a declaration of interdependence to help our children achieve a truly independent future. This declaration would be based on these five "self-evident" truths:

- *We are owners of the public education system.*
- *As owners, we bear a responsibility to participate in the system.*

- The *accountability* of the system, its employees, and its funding, rests with the system's owners, including business.
- Our children's future depends on the *improvement* of the system.
- This improvement *depends* on our participation.

Business must begin drafting this declaration now.

James F. Orr III is chairman and chief executive officer of UNUM Corporation. He is chairman of the Maine Coalition for Excellence in Education and a director for the National Alliance of Business Center for Excellence in Education.

Full cite: Orr, James F. 1992. **A business perspective on education: Launching a revolution of participation.** Vol. 1(3): 19-23.