A Policy With Punch

Institutional purpose is something that school boards can address effectively and responsibly

Marion Brady

Imagine a school bus with a dozen steering wheels and a dozen drivers, each with a different mental map of the day's route. The bus, of course, would go nowhere, or at least nowhere in particular.

It's a ridiculous image. But in a very real and important sense, almost every school in America is like that bus. It has multiple "steering wheels" and "drivers," and most of the drivers have different "mental maps" of what the school is supposed to do. The engine may be running, but the school isn't going anywhere in particular.

Harsh words, those. But common sense says that members who don't agree about an organization's purpose are ill-equipped to function, much less accomplish anything of real consequence.

Americans don't know what they want their schools to do. Ask, and you'll learn that they should teach "core" subjects. Prepare students for democratic citizenship. Instill a love of learning. Transmit societal values. Teach the "basics." Prepare students for useful work. Achieve world-class standards. Build self-esteem. Promote love of country. Encourage creativity. Raise standardized test scores. Keep America economically competitive. Teach problem-solving skills. Explore the "eternal questions." Help students become culturally literate. Explore key concepts. Respond to student needs. Develop character. Instill virtue.

Sound familiar?

Most of those are legitimate purposes, and some are absolutely essential. But no two are the same. Each requires its own standards, instructional materials, teaching methods, and tests, and none are interchangeable. In fact, getting really serious about a particular aim has implications for those attracted to the profession, what kinds of professional training they would need, the types of in-service activities that would be most helpful, even what equipment and physical facilities are most appropriate.

It's no more possible for a school to have multiple overarching aims than for a bus to reach two destinations simultaneously, and the practical consequence of trying is having no aim at all.

No clear purpose

Think of a school-connected problem—student boredom, classroom discipline, dropouts, walkouts, reliance on extrinsic motivators, teacher turnover, police presence, the profession's susceptibility to fads, the defeat of bond levies and school taxes, the perceived need for never-ending education "reform." Chances are that problem was created or is being exacerbated by the absence of a simple, clear purpose.

People don't abuse or abandon social institutions that help them meet a need, but instead of recognizing aimlessness as a major source of problems, poor performance is routinely addressed by tightening procedural screws. Not surprisingly, ever more rigid applications of failed policies simply worsen the problems they were meant to solve.

School board members who think their districts don't suffer from aimlessness, or believe their systems are too big, complicated, or tradition-bound to change, should put those thoughts aside. Institutional purpose is a policy matter. Boards can address the matter effectively, and they surely have a responsibility to do so. The gratitude of many educators and students would be unbounded.

What emerges from an effort to address the problem of institutional aimlessness should be a policy that is:

- Brief, simple, clear, and unarguably important.
- Consistent with "conventional wisdom," and therefore accepted without question by students, parents, educators, influential citizens, editorial boards of local newspapers, officers of civic organizations, business leaders, and others.
- Supportive of all legitimate aims of education, including those noted earlier.
- Free of implementation costs.
- Bureaucratically benign, requiring no changes in staffing, scheduling, grade cards, or other printed forms.
- Politically neutral and incapable of being attacked by ideologues and conspiracy theorists.
- Dynamic, constantly adapting to social change, and generating new instructional activities consistent with that change.
- So concrete that teachers and students can explain how every lesson, assignment, and activity relates to it.
- Perceived not as change, but merely as improvement on accepted practice.

Obstacles

The institutional purpose that best fits these criteria and has easily the most productive potential is "improving student thinking skills."

The aim is simple, consistent with conventional wisdom, and a prerequisite for achieving every other legitimate aim of education. It costs nothing to implement, requires no bureaucratic adaptation, reflects no ideology, is unfailingly appropriate, and, when properly understood and implemented, has the potential to move students to whole new levels of intellectual performance.

There are, of course, obstacles in formally adopting such a policy. Most school districts already have statements of purpose and are reluctant to revisit them. Others, knowing from experience how little attention is paid to high-sounding declarations of aim, vision, and mission, will consider the effort a waste of time.

But the real foot dragging is likely to come from administrators who are content with the status quo, and from a minority of teachers who assume no policy is necessary because: "I'm already teaching my students to think," or "I'm getting them ready to think."

Trying to get past those obstacles requires treading on some very sensitive ground. To avoid defensive, counterproductive reactions, it might be wise to address a personal letter to all participants. Commend them for work well done, and then explain why the board thinks institutional aim should be revisited.

The letter could say that the current emphasis on helping students develop higher-order thinking skills, and widely differing ideas about exactly what that means, suggest the need for dialogue. Working together, the letter could say, would allow policy to be clarified and get everyone on the same page. To add weight to the message, workshops involving board members, administrators, faculty, students, and local opinion leaders could be proposed.

A policy statement that emerges from the initiative might read something like this:

"There being universal agreement that academic instruction should improve student ability to think clearly and effectively, schools will devise and adopt comprehensive lists of specific thought processes or thinking skills they consider essential to successful personal and community functioning. 'Specific thought processes' means those mental operations used routinely by individuals for making sense of experience, such as inferring, hypothesizing, generalizing, predicting, imagining, and so on.

"Each of these skills will be (a) defined, and (b) illustrated in writing in simple, clear language understood by all, (c) published in a readily accessible form, and (d) made widely available. Traditional academic content will be used to enhance the skills.

"All tests and other measures of performance will evaluate student ability to use the skills to deal with important, "real-world" matters. At or near the end of each academic year, schools will make available examples of student-generated work as evidence of adherence to the above policy."

Make no mistake. As noncontroversial as a policy affirming the need to teach students to think should be, making it official would be a revolutionary step. A target date for full implementation should probably be set three or four years in the future.

Why we don't have the schools we want

It's generally believed that all would be well if America's schools were like those in many upscale suburbs. This simply isn't true.

Start with school systems designed more than a century ago. Impose standards and standardized tests created by subject-matter specialists who don't talk to one another about the whole of which their specialized fields are parts. Add responsibility for student well-being and other matters that schools are ill-equipped to handle.

Entangle them in complicated local, state, and federal recordkeeping-obsessed bureaucracies. Stir in conflicting political ideologies. Subject them to a constant barrage of simplistic media criticism. Add powerful corporate interests lobbying for ever-larger chunks of the half-trillion dollars a year that school districts spend.

Those schools pointed to with pride may function smoothly, may ace the standardized tests, enhance real estate values in the areas they serve, offer myriad advanced courses, send most graduates to the best colleges and universities, and attract the media's attention and admiration. But success in operating a design for education that was put in place in 1892, and never seriously reconsidered in the 116 years since, hardly merits unconditional praise.

We teach what we know, determined to send kids into the future with what we think are the "right" answers. But that isn't possible. We don't know—nobody knows—the answers to tomorrow's questions because nobody knows what those questions will be. Students must learn to ask and answer those questions themselves. In short, they have to *think*, and public relations rhetoric notwithstanding, no objective observer of education in America could reasonably argue that that's the institution's primary thrust.

Information is expanding at an ever-accelerating rate and access to it is now nearly instantaneous. What the young need to know nobody knows. Failing to free schools to take direct, concrete steps to support students' ability to think is more than misguided, a waste of time and money, and a sure path to institutional irrelevance—it's a dereliction of duty. ■

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