

Washington Post, December 3, 2009
Column: "The Answer Sheet" by Valerie Strauss

Brady on Education Reform: Ignoring the Obvious

My guest today is [Marion Brady](#), veteran teacher, administrator, curriculum designer and author.

By Marion Brady

Any serious attempt to improve the quality of American education surely ought to take major account of the expertise of W. Edward Deming. He's the American the Japanese credit with making the quality of Japanese manufactured products the envy of the world.

Deming was best known for his "Fourteen Points" – fourteen principles for transforming organizations into performance powerhouses.

Every one of those principles is applicable to education but, ironically, leaders of business and industry who take the points seriously in their day jobs, ignore them when they switch their attention to schools.

Consider, for example, the matter of "aim." One of Deming's fourteen points argues the common sense idea that, for an organization to function well, it has to have an aim, the aim has to be clear, and it has to be understood and accepted by everybody.

For schools, "everybody" means not just boards, administrators and teachers, but the cook in the kitchen, the janitor in the hallway, the editorial board of the local newspaper, taxpayers, parents, and the ten-year-old on the playground swing – everybody.

If you don't think clarity of purpose is a problem in American education, check out your nearest school system.

Ask about aim, and note the blank looks, the long pauses before answering, the confusing of aim with activity. Query those in charge, and be prepared to make a list.

"Our aim is to introduce the core subjects," ". . . master the basics," ". . . prepare the young for democratic citizenship," ". . . meet student needs," ". . . create informed consumers," ". . . develop character," ". . . transmit societal values," ". . . promote inter-cultural understanding," ". . . prepare students for useful work," ". . . meet world-class standards," ". . . solve social problems," ". . . raise test scores," ". . . teach thinking skills," ". . . improve graduation rates," ". . . get our graduates into college," "foster a love of learning" – just to begin a much longer list.

We spend a half-trillion dollars a year educating the young, and we have no agreed-upon aim. Why? Probably because schools are so ubiquitous, the experience of attending so universal, the status quo so deeply embedded, a shared aim isn't considered necessary. Schools just do what schools do.

Look again at the list of aims above (a list by no means complete), and accept some obvious facts.

First, if American education has no clear, overarching purpose, there's no way to know if progress is being made. Without it, measuring performance presents the same level of difficulty

as setting out on a journey and arriving at several different destinations simultaneously. It can't be done.

Second, when no single, overarching aim is in place, multiple aims assert themselves.

This becomes a serious problem when the question, "What should we do next?" is asked. Before the US backed out of Vietnam, official government documents listed twenty-two different aims to explain and justify our military adventure there. The North Vietnamese had just one aim: Get the foreigners out. Everybody knows how that matter turned out.

Three, when no overarching, agreed-upon aim is in place, resources can't be organized and focused. Taken seriously, every one of the educational aims listed above would require particular instructional materials, particular instructional approaches, particular tests, none of them interchangeable. The supportive logistics would be unmanageable.

Finally, without a clear aim, "reform" invariably comes down to doing what's always been done, just doing it harder, or longer, or both.

The problem with that, of course, is that doing what's always been done is what leads organizations to crisis. Doing it harder and longer just speeds up the process, supercharging it with more rigor, more rules and regulations, more controls, more pages in policy manuals, more inspectors and inspections.

All of which, incidentally, increase fear, the elimination of which Deming also said was absolutely essential if an organization was to function well.

Deming identified a universal organizational aim: "Continuous improvement through lifelong learning." I nail that down more precisely by identifying the key to continuous improvement through lifelong learning.

The aim that enables all other legitimate aims, the aim that's philosophically most consistent with our cultural values, the aim that ought to be Number One in America's schools, colleges, and universities, is simple: Help learners make more sense of how they make sense.

Adopting that aim would engage the gears of educational innovation in revolutionary, history-making, intellectually explosive, world-saving ways. It wouldn't just raise the bar. It would put it far beyond the reach of those playing any other aim game.

##