

WHAT'S TO DO WITH KIDS WHO ARE NOT SUCCEEDING?

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If I were advising a superintendent -- or a group of teachers -- on what to do with kids who are not successful in school, the first thing I'd try to do is convince them to stop beating their heads against the wall. More of the same (as, for instance, in detention halls and required summer schools and other new forms of discipline) will not do it. Not even if we up the ante and intensify the punishments. Intensifying repeatedly failed efforts is a definition of fanaticism, not a route to success. But the necessary first step in the success direction is not very complicated: it lies simply in recognizing that when it comes to schools, one size cannot possibly fit all. Thus it follows that if a kid has demonstrated she's not going to make it in one kind of school, let her try another.

And it can't reasonably be another that is essentially the same as the one she left. Let her try a different kind of school -- which in turn calls for a diversified school system. We've done our best to standardize schools, just as we've standardized cars and clothes, food and housing. But unlike the production systems to which schools have been likened, unsuccessful kids aren't like Fords or blue jeans, or plumbing that somehow got damaged in the assembly line and needs straightening out. That's why we can't just establish one straightening out center to fix them, whether you call it an "alternative school," an "opportunity center," or a "second chance school."

What a youngster who doesn't thrive in one school environment needs is another. And obviously, one that strikes her as worse than the last one isn't going to cut it. That's why the frightening number of schools Tom Gregory calls "soft jails" aren't going to do it. What's needed is a school with a different sort of 'personality' -- that feels different -- and a program that strikes the youngster as quite a departure from the one she left. As

the scholars have put it, “we must change the experience of school”¹ -- the way it looks, tastes, smells, and the reactions it produces in those who are there.

What kind of school is needed then? Certainly not a school for the unsuccessful. We can't accurately predict what kind -- because kids, like adults, may thrive in different environments. Therefore there isn't a right kind. You need several schools that are genuinely different from one another, among which unsuccessful youngsters -- and successful ones, too -- may choose. Some youngsters may need a fairly structured school environment, others a fairly open one. Some may want a curriculum that centers on science-oriented topics, others a curriculum that centers on democratic living. Some may do their best work in a program that relies heavily on classroom learning, others in a program that draws heavily on experiential learning. Policy wonks to the contrary notwithstanding, there's no single formula yielding a model (for replication and upscaling) that is an ideal School for the Unsuccessful.

We do know some things, however, offering some clear general principles. Unsuccessful kids need a good education a lot more than do the youngsters who manage to succeed under virtually any circumstances. Parents who have themselves been fortunate, and who spend a lot of time with their children, often have kids who can thrive despite how bad their schools may be. Those lucky few whom researchers have labelled “resilient” appear similarly blessed. Despite poor home circumstances, and lousey schools, they manage to adapt and succeed.

Not so with the kids we call unsuccessful. They require really good schools in order to thrive. What would be nice for others is essential for them if we are serious about wanting to turn their failure around. We know, for instance, that small schools would benefit all youngsters (with the

possible exception of an infinitesimal proportion)². A brand new study shows that the highly negative “power of poverty” to predict school failure can be halved in small schools.³ So what might be desirable for virtually all becomes essential for poor youngsters. Similarly with the widely recognized need to personalize schools so that all students are genuinely known by at least one adult. It would doubtless benefit all youngsters. As Columbine should have taught us, it may even be important for all youngsters. But as more formal and extensive evidence suggests, it is clearly essential with the unsuccessful, and with the predictably unsuccessful.

We have re-discovered in the last 10 or 15 years the importance of real “engagement” in learning on the part of youngsters -- necessary for all, but doubly so on the part of the unsuccessful who may need more help than most in bringing into play those higher level processes so widely sought today. -- And sadly, these are the youngsters who have characteristically been handed workbooks to fill out and a dumbed-down curriculum that never demands such processes, and that pretty well precludes engagement. Engagement depends upon “authentic” learnings: Unless a youngster can see value in it, perceive it as intrinsically worth doing, he’s not likely to become genuinely engaged with it. This means that traditional school fare, traditionally arranged in traditionally presented academic packages (disciplines) will hardly be found authentic to anyone who’s not heartset on college -- or who needn’t fear parent castigation for school failure.

Together, these features that research has collectively verified to constitute “good education” -- small, personalized schools offering authentic learning and producing student engagement -- are what is essential if we are serious about enabling unsuccessful youngsters to become successful.

Now although the weight of the evidence may be recent, these are not really very new ideas. Progressives old and new have talked about them.

And as many of us here are fully aware, they've been evident in a number of alternative schools for more than 30 years. But they have never triumphed the way they must if we are to seriously address turning individual and school failures into success. One reason is they have never been taken very seriously by school administrators. Even when they have permeated the rhetoric, few within the education Establishment have tried very hard to get them into practice. And even for those who tried, major obstacles have emerged along the way. In the last quarter century "behavioral objectives" were one such. Much of the Excellence Movement of the '80s was another. More recently, re-centralization has been yet another. Today we are facing a major challenge with the accountability concept that is sweeping the country.

There are things about the notion of accountability that those of us interested in equity have to welcome. There are three parts to the idea and two of them sound really great. One is to assure -- finally -- that we can no longer just sweep school failure under the rug; the public will finally have a chance to find out just how poorly some schools are doing. Another is finally to assure that failing schools can no longer continue that way indefinitely and that something will be done to turn them around. No reasonable person could oppose that either. It's the third feature that's the challenge: determining just when a student or a school is succeeding or failing. How do you assess a student's progress or a school's adequacy? Sadly, we've settled on a simplistic, reductionist answer: student scores on standardized tests. A single number is supposed to tell us how much a youngster knows -- and cumulatively, how well a school is doing.

As of now, it looks as though there is no hope of talking decisionmakers out of gathering test scores. It's the revenge of the psychometricians: for years they, along with other researchers, were ignored by decisionmakers. Now their products are assigned godlike properties: every single item on a student test is a crucial revealer. Two items either way legitimately

separate a winner from a loser.

I don't think there's anything any of us can do to reverse the testing craze. It's here to stay for the predictable future. And it threatens everything I have here claimed to be important to the success of the previously unsuccessful youngster: it buttresses standardized curricula and programs, teaching as didactic informing and drill, and schools primarily as giant dispensers of both.

But there are some things we can and must try to do. And we've got to recognize that they must now be done in the public arena. Educational accountability and assessment are now more a political matter than a school affair. Forty-nine states have now adopted standards and testing to explore how well they are met is already in place in about half of them.⁴ In most places the pressure for this didn't come from the Superintendent's office, but more often from governors and mayors and legislatures. This means that there is little to be gained by addressing your comments to school officials. The Rotary Club and letters to the editor and lobbying the legislature might be more to the point and more effective, just cc-ing the school officials.

One of the main things we can do pertains to the defining of school success. If school test scores are going to be splashed all over the headlines, so must other indicators be. One easy way to raise 11th grade test scores, of course, is to keep low scorers out of the 11th grade. So a school's dropout, course failure, and grade retention rate are important to assessing it. So is how well the school does with the less fortunate; and therefore, all the numbers need to be collected and displayed by racial group, relative family affluence, and family educational background. It's also important to know about teacher morale and retention. Its teacher turnover rate is an important indicator of how a school is faring.

If we are going to make the public into school evaluators -- and that is exactly what the accountability idea is trying to do -- then we must try to help them become evaluators with good sense, evaluators aware that the reading of the success or failure of 150 hours of work from a single test score is absurd. So I think that the major way to try to meet the test score craze is to try to contain it by insisting that the test scores be surrounded by a lot of other numbers that are equally telling in judging a school: absence rates, dropouts, expulsions, failures.

In trying to make the public into competent school evaluators, we can also insist on one other measure that ought to be a major one in judging a school: value added. A parent -- and a citizen -- ought to have some indication of just what the school has done for its students. If a youngster starts the year with 595 points of his 597-point year-end score, it doesn't appear to have been a year well spent, irrespective of how impressive the 597 sounds. If this means pre-testing to compare with their post-testing, we'd probably better do it, even if we resent the time it takes. And I'm suggesting that teachers better do it even if the formal assessment system doesn't call for it. Particularly in a school where scores are likely to be low, to be able to document that you've raised them considerably may disclose a great victory (and stand as your best defense).

One problem with the vast majority of tests, of course, is that they are curriculum-biased -- meaning that students receiving a traditional curriculum, traditionally delivered, are more likely to score well than students getting a more innovative curriculum, even though the latter engages them fully and they learn a great deal. (Some accountability types have said quite openly that that is, indeed, the point: to force all teachers to present the same curriculum.) But if tests are curriculum-biased, and they are, it would make sense to see if you could locate a standardized test or two that is more friendly to your innovative curriculum than the one officially

administered. It's worth trying, even if not officially sanctioned, because it documents your accomplishment, which is what accountability is about.

An even better solution, though a riskier and less assured one, is to seek official approval for assessments other than tests. This is what a courageous group of 40 alternative school directors in New York City has tried to do. They wanted to be able to substitute rigorous authentic assessments for standardized tests. They mounted some excellent arguments -- including the cruciality of this to their innovative curricula and the success of their previously unsuccessful students. They offered some stunning examples of the sort of substitute assessments they used -- citing a youngster who built a full IBM-compatible computer from scratch as an alternative way to satisfy a science and technology test requirement; and a youngster who created her own number system as another way to satisfy the math test. They managed to convince New York City's Chancellor who fought for the substitutions. But he was overridden by the State Commissioner determined to uphold the sanctity of his tests. The Commissioner has held out the hope that they might appeal for substitutions other than for the Regents exam in English, but the prospects do not appear too bright.⁵

Clearly, despite its virtues, there is danger that the accountability movement will settle into one more attempt to shore up a losing system: the comprehensive high school, traditional curriculum, traditionally arranged and delivered, with assorted penalties and punishments for the unsuccessful. If the accountability movement contents itself with exposing failure, and assuming that everybody will simply straighten up and fly right once this has occurred, another reform flop is in the making. We've got some important solutions for reaching the accountability movement's goals. I hope we're able to make its advocates listen. We owe it to our kids as well as ourselves

to try.

Endnotes

1 Fred M. Newmann, "What Is a Restructured School? A Framework to Clarify Means and Ends," *Issues in Restructuring Schools* (Issues Report No. 1), 1991, pp. 3-7. Madison, WI: Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools.

2 N. E. Friedkin & J. Neccochia, "School System Size and Performance: A Contingency Perspective," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 10(3), 1988, pp. 237-249.

3 Craig B. Howley & Robert Bickel are the authors of the study, cited by Bess Keller in "Small Schools Found to Cut the Price of Poverty," *Education Week*, February 9, 2000, p. 6.

4 See Jacques Steinberg, "Educators Focus on 'Pain ' of Standards," *New York Times*, September 30, 1999, and Linda Perlstein, "Who's Grading the Schools? Accountability Lacking, Study Says," *Washington Post*, January 8, 1999, p. D3.

5 Lynette Holloway, "Education's Chief Says Regents Test Won't Be Waived," *New York Times*, January 27, 2000, p. A1