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Teaching Is Not a Business

By DAVID L. KIRP AUG. 16, 2014

TODAY'S education reformers believe that schools are broken and that business can supply the remedy. Some place their faith in the idea of competition. Others embrace disruptive innovation, mainly through online learning. Both camps share the belief that the solution resides in the impersonal, whether it's the invisible hand of the market or the transformative power of technology.

Neither strategy has lived up to its hype, and with good reason. It's impossible to improve education by doing an end run around inherently complicated and messy human relationships. All youngsters need to believe that they have a stake in the future, a goal worth striving for, if they're going to make it in school. They need a champion, someone who believes in them, and that's where teachers enter the picture. The most effective approaches foster bonds of caring between teachers and their students.

Marketplace mantras dominate policy discussions. High-stakes reading and math tests are treated as the single metric of success, the counterpart to the business bottom line. Teachers whose students do poorly on those tests get pink slips, while those whose students excel receive merit pay, much as businesses pay bonuses to their star performers and fire the laggards. Just as companies shut stores that aren't meeting their sales quotas, opening new ones in more promising territory, failing schools are closed and so-called turnaround model schools, with new teachers and administrators, take their place.

This approach might sound plausible in a think tank, but in practice it has been a flop. Firing teachers, rather than giving them the coaching they need, undermines morale. In some cases it may well discourage undergraduates from pursuing careers in teaching, and with a looming teacher shortage as baby boomers retire, that's a recipe for disaster. Merit pay invites rivalries among teachers, when what's needed is collaboration. Closing schools treats everyone there as guilty of causing low test scores, ignoring the difficult lives of the children in these schools — “no excuses,” say the reformers, as if poverty were an excuse.

Charter schools have been promoted as improving education by creating competition. But charter students do about the same, over all, as their public school counterparts, and the worst charters, like the online K-12 schools that have proliferated in several states, don't deserve to be called schools. Vouchers are also supposed to increase competition by giving parents direct say over the schools their children attend, but the students haven't benefited. For the past generation, Milwaukee has run a voucher experiment, with much-debated outcomes that to me show no real academic improvement.

While these reformers talk a lot about markets and competition, the essence of a good education — bringing together talented teachers, engaged students and a challenging curriculum — goes undiscussed.

Business does have something to teach educators, but it's neither the saving power of competition nor flashy ideas like disruptive innovation. Instead, what works are time-tested strategies.

“Improve constantly and forever the system of production and service”: That's the gospel the management guru W. Edwards Deming preached for half a century. After World War II, Japanese firms embraced the “plan, do, check, act” approach, and many Fortune 500 companies profited from paying attention. Meanwhile, the Harvard Business School

historian and Pulitzer Prize-winner Alfred D. Chandler Jr. demonstrated that firms prospered by developing “organizational capabilities,” putting effective systems in place and encouraging learning inside the organization. Building such a culture took time, Chandler emphasized, and could be derailed by executives seduced by faddishness.

Every successful educational initiative of which I’m aware aims at strengthening personal bonds by building strong systems of support in the schools. The best preschools create intimate worlds where students become explorers and attentive adults are close at hand.

In the Success for All model — a reading and math program that, for a quarter-century, has been used to good effect in 48 states and in some of the nation’s toughest schools — students learn from a team of teachers, bringing more adults into their lives. Diplomas Now love-bombs middle school students who are prime candidates for dropping out. They receive one-on-one mentoring, while those who have deeper problems are matched with professionals.

An extensive study of Chicago’s public schools, Organizing Schools for Improvement, identified 100 elementary schools that had substantially improved and 100 that had not. The presence or absence of social trust among students, teachers, parents and school leaders was a key explanation.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, the nationwide mentoring organization, has had a substantial impact on millions of adolescents. The explanation isn’t what adolescents and their “big sibling” mentors do together, whether it’s mountaineering or museum-going. What counts, the research shows, is the forging of a relationship based on mutual respect and caring.

Over the past 25 years, YouthBuild has given solid work experience and classroom tutoring to hundreds of thousands of high school dropouts. Seventy-one percent of those youngsters, on whom the schools have given up, earn a G.E.D. — close to the national high school graduation rate. The YouthBuild students say they’re motivated to get an education because their teachers “have our backs.”

The same message — that the personal touch is crucial — comes from community college students who have participated in the City University of New York’s anti-dropout initiative, which has doubled graduation rates.

Even as these programs, and many others with a similar philosophy, have proven their worth, public schools have been

spending billions of dollars on technology which they envision as the wave of the future. Despite the hyped claims, the results have been disappointing. “The data is pretty weak,” said Tom Vander Ark, the former executive director for education at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and an investor in educational technology companies. “When it comes to showing results, we better put up or shut up.”

While technology can be put to good use by talented teachers, they, and not the futurists, must take the lead. The process of teaching and learning is an intimate act that neither computers nor markets can hope to replicate. Small wonder, then, that the business model hasn’t worked in reforming the schools — there is simply no substitute for the personal element.

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