Measures of Success


The ultimate goal of school restructuring is to improve the quality of education that students obtain. How can we tell if education is getting better? What are the appropriate measures of success?

People often compare education to business, arguing that education would be better if it were run more like a business. Business has the "bottom line" profit. Of course, every business has other goals, such as serving its employees, its community, and its customers. However, continued failure to make a profit usually dooms a business.

Things are not so simple in education. There is no single, universally agreed upon, bottom line in education. For example, what are the relative importances and appropriate levels of student attainment in learning reading, writing, arithmetic, speaking, listening, art, music, and sports? What about mastery of basic skills versus attainment of higher-order cognitive skills? Are schools responsible for values education and sex education? Is the percentage of students who graduate from a high school a good measure of a school system's success?

The Stakeholders

The major stakeholders in a private sector business include the owners, the employees, the community where the facilities are located, and the customers. All must be taken into consideration in running a successful company. Thus, the bottom line is but one measure of the success of a company. Increasingly, the successful business invests heavily in development of its human capital (the employees), and in customer and public relations.

Similarly, there are many stakeholders in our educational system. These include students, teachers, school administrators, parents, school boards, tax payers, politicians, business people, the school district, the state, and the nation. The needs of each must be addressed, and often these needs are contradictory. For example, suppose that a student grows up in a community in which most of the adults hold clerical positions. Should the student's education be strongly oriented toward preparing for such a clerical position, no matter what the particular talents or interests of the student?

We must not forget that the most important stakeholder is the student. I believe that education will be greatly improved as we move toward empowering students by appropriate use of technology.

Empowering Students

Imagine two workers each assigned a graphic artist task. One is equipped with a set of by-hand tools while the other is equipped with computer-based tools. The education and training of the two workers have much in common. Both have learned underlying concepts of graphics design and what constitutes a successful, high quality product. However, the education of one has focused on by-hand tools, while the education of the other has focused primarily on by-computer tools.
Over a broad range of tasks, it is evident that the computer-equipped worker will far out perform the other worker. In addition, the amount of training time needed to master the computer tools was most likely less than needed to master the hand tools. Thus, the worker empowered by computer tools gains the dual advantages of reduced training time and increased productivity.

The above scene can be played out in every aspect of our educational system. The story varies with the productivity tool under consideration, from desktop publishing to the spreadsheet and accounting package to the microcomputer based music (MIDI) lab. In all cases the student faces learning both concepts and processes. Our schools are better if students are receiving a high quality education that includes a focus on both underlying concepts and on learning to use modern productivity tools.

Now imagine a different scenario, one in which the same two workers are faced by a relatively new type of graphics problem situation. The workers have had equal levels of education and have approximately the same innate abilities. However, one worker was educated in a school system that was strongly mimetic oriented, while the other was educated in a transformative (progressive) school system. As a consequence, one worker is stronger at carrying out routine tasks while the other is more creative and more readily adjusts to changing situations.

Again, it seems clear which worker will do better. A mimetic educational system works best in times of relatively little change; a transformative educational system is designed to help students become more adaptable and to better deal with change. The Information Age is a time of rapid change; thus, we need an educational system that helps prepare students for change.

**Recommendations**

The various stakeholders in our educational system each have their own definitions of a successful educational system. Thus, it is inevitable that we will not have universal agreement on how to restructure schools to improve our educational system.

The bottom line, however, is the quality of education being obtained by students. We can empower students by helping them to gain an appropriate combination of basic skills and underlying concepts, along with increased creativity and higher-order cognitive skills. We can empower students by providing them with good access to modern intellectual productivity tools and instruction in their use. School restructuring must include a major focus on accomplishing these tasks.