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State Legislators: Put the “Business Hammer” Down

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“If the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to treat everything as if it were a nail.”

This quote encapsulates how education policy is framed in North Carolina. Why are business leaders and our state legislators taking the lead on education policy? More troubling still: why is teachers’ input seen as superfluous?

Our state legislators, as part of a part-time legislature, are predominantly entrepreneurs and professionals. They bring those valuable perspectives to policymaking, but their experience proves a liability when they apply such principles to education.

It is dangerous to blindly accept the assumption that businesses are the proper referencing institutions for developing public education policy. While there are some ways in which education is like a business, there are significant ways in which it is not. Knowing that nuance makes all the difference in policymaking that is effective in classrooms.

This article is the first in a three-part series. Here, I will explore how schools are *not* like business, in the second article I will explore how they *are* like businesses, and in the final article I will explore why we need to return to an alternative and superior referencing institution for nurturing children – the family.

Successful businesses control their supply chain. Starbucks desires the production of only the best coffee, and therefore requires the freedom to reject some sources of coffee that are substandard. Public schools do not have that ability; they take every child, whatever their abilities and challenges might be. The most critical period in a child’s development lies between the ages of 0-3 yet public school does not begin until age 5. Schools cannot simply reject those coffee beans which were not grown under the perfect conditions required by Starbucks. Schools do not have control over the most important teachers children ever have - their parents. Since parents vary widely in their skills and abilities, children vary drastically in their skills and abilities. However, the single standard to which we hold our teachers is not nearly so flexible. We don’t ask Starbucks to magically produce top-rate coffee from any source. Yet we frequently ask teachers to produce world-class educational outcomes in *every* student, no matter the supply stream.

Using business as the reference model for education also sets up dangerous expectations in parents and students. By reinforcing that paradigm, parents and students come to have a set of possibly-helpful, mostly-counterproductive “customer service” expectations. I am the first to recommend that if parents have concerns about the way their child is being educated, then they should consult with the teacher. I have become a better teacher because of such contact. It didn’t always feel good, but it made me think and act differently. However, a background assumption of business models remains that “the customer is always right.” We increasingly see a default expectation that teachers should custom-tailor instruction to meet an individual student’s individual preferences. I have students who

say, “I’m a visual learner, and I just don’t get the way she teaches.” While I understand that students as consumers want the path of least resistance, we are increasingly coming to understand the importance of students experiencing frustration, developing coping habits, and demonstrating grit. The idea that learning should not be stressful and should seamlessly result from teacher input ultimately robs the student of the notion that there is one person ultimately responsible for their learning – them. Also, how will the “customer service” model of learning transition to the workplace or to family life? What shall our kids do when their role in life is not to be catered to, but to serve others? Will our children be equipped for that role reversal?

Business models that focus on production of a predetermined “product” are also dangerous. For example, it has become commonplace for elected officials to mock educational endeavors that do not directly prepare students for work. It was W.E.B DuBois who said:

“If we make money the object of man-training, we shall develop money-makers but not necessarily men; if we make technical skill the object of education, we may possess artisans but not, in nature, men. Men we shall have only as we make manhood the object of the work of the schools—intelligence, broad sympathy, knowledge of the world that was and is, and of the relation of men to it—this is the curriculum of that Higher Education which must underlie true life. On this foundation we may build bread winning, skill of hand and quickness of brain, with never a fear lest the child and man mistake the means of living for the object of life”

We may want to tightly control our “production line” and pop out programmers, accountants, and engineers by the dozens, but human creation is not quite that compliant as a raw material. We tenaciously refuse to all march to the same drummer. Education is really more of a mining endeavor, and a child is a natural resource that has treasures to be developed and refined. It is the job of education to mine and shine, not break and make. Attempts to rigidly standardize educational outcomes, to produce a single student “product,” are counterintuitive, dehumanizing, and short-sighted.

Competition in the business world can yield efficiency and cost savings. Want to get that sales team motivated? Give a prize to the member of the team with the highest sales numbers! However, in education, competition results in waste and inefficiency. For example, any merit pay system that encourages teachers to compete to “stand out” above other teachers threatens collaboration and leads to “silo-ing” that prevents the sharing of good ideas and best practices. A better model is one that gives teachers a shared school wide goal that they can collectively aspire to and work together to achieve. We did this with the [“ABCs of Education”](#) model from 1996-2012. That model paid teachers bonuses when the whole school met growth goals. That ended in 2013. The state had to quit paying bonuses in 2009 because so many schools were exceeding growth. Schools demonstrating growth became victims of their own success.

These are just a few examples of how framing education through a “business” lens can be myopic and misguided. That model could only work if were to control our supply stream, if servicing our “customers” were actually in their long-term interest, if the human mind and heart were more satiated by work alone, and if good teaching were less reliant on collaboration. However, make no mistake, market forces are at work in our schools. More on that topic next time, and then a quick turn to “home” – and how family should be the ultimate paradigm through which we see education.

In the meantime, some advice for state legislators: Put that hammer down.