

WHY DON'T YOU RUN THE SCHOOLS MORE LIKE A BUSINESS?: LESSONS FOR STUDENTS IN SUPERINTENDENT PREPARATION PROGRAMS*

Ronald Lindahl

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Abstract

It would exacerbate the tragedy of the current economic situation if no lessons were learned from it which would contribute to future growth and prosperity. That applies equally to the business sector and to the education sector. This is not to imply that many current, effective superintendents do not ask the very questions posed in this essay; Routinely, they do! However, teachers have long cherished the “teachable moment” in their classrooms, where reality creates a unique opportunity for true learning. Hopefully, the unfortunate reality of today’s economic milieu can provide a “teachable moment” for prospective superintendents in university preparation programs to engage in ongoing reflection upon, and examination of, the schools and districts they aspire to lead.



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¹<http://ijelp.expressacademic.org>

1 Introduction

What superintendent has not heard critiques, explicit or implicit, with a refrain of “Why don’t you run the schools more like a business?” The current economic situation may abate those queries, at least temporarily, but it also provides students in superintendent preparation programs with impetus for reflection and examination of the current practices of America’s schools. After all, scientists have long recognized that as much can be learned from an experiment which yields different results than anticipated as from one that yields the expected results. America’s schools exist in a mutually beneficial and dependent relationship with America’s businesses. Businesses depend on schools for a well educated, well disciplined work force. Also, they need a consumer base with the knowledge and skills to occupy jobs that afford them good disposable incomes. That consumer base also must have the ability to make rational choices among spending options. Schools depend on businesses for the future employment of their students and for the financial support that comes through property taxes, payroll taxes, sales taxes, and the income taxes paid by their employees. Consequently, despite the pain and suffering caused by the current economic crisis, there is much to be learned by prospective superintendents from the current, and hopefully temporary, plight of America’s businesses.

2 Lessons from the Automobile Industry

With both General Motors and Chrysler in bankruptcy, with shareholders losing virtually the total value of their stock in either corporation, and with millions of Americans out of work and deprived of much of their life savings due to the failures of these two automotive giants, the question then becomes, what can superintendents learn from the plights of General Motors and Chrysler? Both of the automotive giants failed for a variety of reasons. First, they both had far too many brands and lines of automobiles, which scattered their resources and attention across too wide a spectrum. Only cosmetic differences separated General Motors cars bearing the brands of Pontiac, Chevrolet, GMC, Buick, and (until very recently) Oldsmobile. Similar cosmetic differences caused Chrysler cars to bear the corporate name or the Dodge brand. Second, both corporations catered to the expressed “needs” and preferences of small groups of customers, ignoring economic and ecological data that suggested strongly that those preferences would be short-lived. Third, neither company was viewed as being on the technological forefront of their industry. Fiat, on the other hand, developed a diesel engine technology that became the standard for all European manufacturers; this helped them to raise the capital necessary to take over Chrysler. Fourth, both corporations suffered from public perceptions of inferior products. Rightly or wrongly, the general public considered General Motors and Chrysler cars to be of inferior quality to Japanese cars such as Honda and Toyota. These perceptions were further substantiated in popular automotive evaluation publications, such as *Consumer Reports*. Finally, both corporations were perceived by the American public as taking better care of their employees, e.g., through salaries, pensions, benefits, and work guarantees, than of their customers. This did not engender company loyalty among the customers, but it did generate very vocal, organized employees who were very resistant to giving up some of their benefits and salaries to keep the companies competitive with other automakers who did not have the same residual and legacy costs. In the end, both corporations were forced to file for bankruptcy, with potentially severe consequences for its employees and pensioners.

2.1 So, what can prospective superintendents take from the lessons of these auto companies? That question may best be addressed through a series of questions they should ask of themselves and of their future constituents, e.g.:

1. Do we have too many programs to be really efficient and effective at all of them? Are some of them so similar that they could be eliminated? Do we try to be “all things to all people,” beyond our true strengths and capabilities?
2. Do our schools meet the students’ and the community’s (world’s?) *real* needs, or are we artificially establishing our own set of needs? How do we know?
3. What planning and decision-making processes do we have in place to ensure that we are pursuing meaningful and worthy strategies and goals?

4. Are our schools, and our students, on the cutting edge of technology, or are they a technological “generation” behind their global competitors?

5. Do we continually measure and protect the quality of our schools, programs, and student learning? How do our standards compare to our worldwide competition?

6. Do we have an appropriate balance in meeting the needs of our teachers and those of our students? Does our focus on teachers’ professional development and compensation overshadow our primary customers and their needs? Are we making too many concessions to teacher organizations/unions to keep student learning and success in the forefront of all we do?

7. Do we assume that just because we have been the nation’s choice educational provider for the past century, our future is guaranteed? Because we have long been a virtual monopoly, does that mean that we will continue to hold that privilege?

3 Lessons from the Financial Sector

Another economic sector hard hit by the current crisis has been the financial sector. Even government-created mortgage monopolies like Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac had fallen into such disreputable and careless lending practices that they no longer proved to be viable entities without massive government bailouts. World-wide financial giant AIG became so embroiled in meeting public demand for products which led to quick wealth that they compromised even minimal attention to quality and ethics, leading to a total implosion. AIG only survived (if their current and future status can truly be considered survival) through massive government bailout funding on the grounds that the company was “too big to fail” because of its potential effects on so many other companies, individuals, and even nations. And then there was Lehman Brothers, who the government decided was not “too big to fail.” This company filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy and completely disappeared from the market. Similarly, Merrill Lynch, with huge exposure to questionable mortgages and mortgage securities, tried to unload these toxic investments from its books, but was forced to agree to be sold to Bank of America.

3.1 From these and the countless smaller bank and insurance company failures, prospective superintendents are challenged to continually ask such questions as:

1. Do we truly have, and deserve, the trust of our customers (be that the students, their families, or the communities that support the schools)?

2. Are we allowing public pressure to coerce us into taking shortcuts or developing products that we inherently know are inferior to what we could, and should, be producing?

3. Are we allowing short-term considerations to take precedence over long-term consequences?

4. Are we compromising what we know to be ethically correct? If so, to what extent and with what potential consequences?

4 Lessons from the Globalized Effects of the Economic Crisis

The ramifications of the current economic crisis are certainly global, not at all confined to the United States. The nation of Iceland essentially entered bankruptcy as a consequence of its investment in questionable United States-based securities, a condition that led to the closing of its public schools. The worldwide petroleum industry fell dramatically as the demand for petroleum dropped drastically, leading to lower prices, lower production quotas, lower profits, and far lower investment in drilling, exploration, and alternative energy sources. Prices of other commodities plummeted, e.g., phosphates, copper, and steel, as worldwide demand came to a relative standstill. With massive drops in demand, the world-wide shipping industry came to a virtual standstill, far below its frantic activity of 2008-2009.

The textile and garment industries provide yet another example of the global effects of the economic crisis which began in America. There are very few textile or garment industries left in the United States, as cheaper overseas labor provided insurmountable competition. Over the past two decades, production shifted

from the United States to Mexico, Central, and South America. However, China soon provided yet cheaper labor, which caused the production to shift from Latin America to Asia. As China's economy diversified and industrialized, there were many economic opportunities for Chinese labor and capital; consequently, textile and garment production shifted yet again, to countries such as Cambodia, which did not have a broad industrial base and which was willing to focus on low-profit margins in the textile and garment industries.

4.1 What can prospective superintendents learn from the globalization aspect of the economic crisis? They can learn to obtain insight by seeking answers to questions such as:

1. Are our students competitive globally?
2. Are our curricula global and future-oriented, rather than provincial and past-oriented?
3. Are we preparing our students for a world that will change extremely rapidly and which will require ever improving skills and knowledge across that student's lifetime? Are we fostering flexibility or conformity?
4. Are we preparing our students for economic sectors and opportunities where they will be valued for their skills and knowledge rather than for their willingness to work cheaply?
5. Are we preparing our students to appreciate the world's growing demand for natural resources and to both value and understand how to protect and develop those natural resources in sustainable, environmentally-friendly ways?

5 Conclusions

Prospective superintendents can gain new perspectives on schools from the lessons of businesses and countries affected by the current economic crisis. The millions of jobs lost and the devastation of retirement plans and savings plans are terrible tragedies. Iceland's focus on short-term gains over long-term security led to severe national consequences, including for its public schools. Through such crises, superintendents in preparation are reminded that "business as usual" can lead to disaster. They are challenged to examine the assumptions and practices of those businesses that contributed to the malaise and to learn to ask, constantly, if they and their schools are potential victims of similar assumptions and practices.

There are many fundamental questions which must be asked. Who are we, really? What should our products look like? What are we doing that we must be doing and what are we doing that we should not be doing? How do we measure the quality of our work and of our products? Are our products globally competitive? What data and whose opinions should we seek and integrate into our planning and decision making? How well are we preparing our students for today? For tomorrow? What alternatives should exist to schools as they are currently conceived? Do today's schools really meet the needs of diverse groups of students or do we assume that the students must conform to the needs of the schools? If the American public truly values education, why is it so unwilling to make substantially higher investments in its public schools? To what extent are schools viewed as an investment or an expense?

It would exacerbate the tragedy of the current economic situation if no lessons were learned from it which would contribute to future growth and prosperity. That applies equally to the business sector and to the education sector. This is not to imply that many current, effective superintendents do not ask the very questions posed in this essay; Routinely, they do! However, teachers have long cherished the "teachable moment" in their classrooms, where reality creates a unique opportunity for true learning. Hopefully, the unfortunate reality of today's economic milieu can provide a "teachable moment" for prospective superintendents in university preparation programs to engage in ongoing reflection upon, and examination of, the schools and districts they aspire to lead.