

Assessing the impact of change on public education – transferring the responsibility for risk

The reader might wonder what this topic has to do with personality science. Each of us and the organizations for which we work play an important if not a critical part in our local school systems. Your employees serve on boards of school corporations, and as long as schools are supported by taxpayers including corporations have a vital interest in the quality and cost of public education.

We want top notch schools to educate our own children, to provide a stable supply future literate employees and entrepreneurs; and generally, to raise the quality of life an opportunity for everyone in our community.

What's that got to do with personality? If your community is like ours, increasingly, teacher evaluations are being based upon students' performance on standardized tests and graduation rates. "No Child Left Behind" legislation puts pressure on schools to improve graduation rates and test scores. This movement represents a profound change for schools, administrators and teachers.

The following represents my opinions. Discussions about education and schools often become political, but this is not an attempt to take any political side in the issue.

I offer that the job of teaching, especially in the elementary grades has been and still is very task oriented. Smart, talented, well-educated teachers were recruited to and compensated for work which honored their ability to deliver prescribed coursework in a clockwork fashion. Pass, fail and drop-out rates, while always important, weren't used to measure success or failure of the teacher.

The personality expert might describe teaching as "high process" and "high rule-based" work. As long as one followed the rules, mastered the details his/her field and thrived on delivering the same class material repeatedly, one could prosper and be rewarded with tenure. If work attracts people whose needs are satisfied by the work, I'd offer that teaching attracted high process, rule-bound individuals.

The rules of the game are changing for school corporations and teachers in very dramatic way. Where, historically, a teacher could succeed carrying out the tasks and processes of the job perfectly; today, tax payers, parents and other constituencies want to link teachers' compensation to student grades, drop out and graduation rates. In personality parlance, taxpayers and parents are effectively saying that the **results** are more important than the **tasks** of teaching.

That's an immense change of the rules! Results-oriented people want to pay for performance, letting the employee figure out what s/he has to do to achieve the desired objective. Let them take the risk, reaping the rewards or suffering the penalty, just like banks want tellers to sell and factories want production employees to "take more ownership of the results".

Do we really want to build a system wherein teachers are judged by their results? The effects are predictable. Doing so will force a wholesale change of teaching personnel. If schools pay on an incentive basis, current teachers will be driven out. Will taxpayers support the salary and bonus programs to attract and retain results-oriented people? Can teachers' salaries ever be competitive with the private sector?

Compare sending children to school to sending them on a trip aboard a commercial jet. Are we more comfortable knowing the crew will fly a prescribed course in a manner for which it has been exhaustively trained; or, do we want the last instruction to the pilot to be: "I don't care how you get there, as long as you get there?" Successful completion of that trip (the desired result) is achieved by deliberate execution of rules and processes.

N. N. Taleb speaks to this in *Fooled by Randomness*:

"To view it another way, consider the difference between judging *on process* and judging *on results*. Lower-ranking persons in the enterprise are judged on both process and results - in fact, owing to the repetitive aspect of their efforts, their process converges rapidly to results."