

Wednesday, January 31, 2007

Feature Article

Workforce Readiness: The Tripe Behind the Hype

As amazing as it seems, impossible to contemplate, baffling to ponder…American business leaders agree that our graduating high school students are incompetent (actually "deficient" is the word that they use). Instead of describing the value and benefit of hiring our high school graduates, business executives and managers talk in terms of major deficiencies.

The ratio of deficiencies to strengths would be ten to one…except that there was not a single "one." That is, no capacities of our high school graduates were evaluated as "excellent." What Skills are Needed before Hiring? Name the skills that are crucial for business and industry and you have a catalog of the shortcomings that these business leaders lament…but what you might not guess is the magnitude of these business folks' assessment of our graduates. Here are some examples: About 81% of high school grads are deficit in written communication Maybe we need to test our students' writing every year 70% are deficient in professionalism and a work ethic See our previous article on student honesty Student Honest and Ethical Behavior: The Road to Politics (Perdition) or Spin City? About 70% of our grads have defective critical thinking and problem solving skills Probably the business leaders didn't provide high-stakes test coaching immediately before the exam About 53% failed to demonstrate adequate oral communication skills

The business leaders just don't speak the language of youth. They should analyze their cell phone conversations with their friends to discover the real language and communication shorthand that our students are skilled in About 44% of our grads are judged to be lacking in ethics and social responsibility Amazing, since they have been trained to drink responsibly and at social gatherings, and to "Say no" to recreational chemicals About 38% don't measure up in the area of reading comprehension Of course, the employer are probably using business jargon on an unfair test without providing a study guide to the controlled vocabulary first. About 34% need remedial work in teamwork and collaboration Odd that our students don't learn this skill while listening to their teachers give lectures About 28% of our grads were judged to be weak in "diversity" Maybe this means that bussing has ended, or that bussing didn't go far enough About 21% require retooling in the use of technology applications I guess the huge funding of "Ed Tech" should be cut by our wise politicians if only one out of five students is graduating with a deficit in this area About 21% are judged to be deficient in the English language Maybe these aren't our graduates at all, but undocumented migrants who purchased their high school diploma and transcripts at the flea market Solutions to this "Problem" If We have One? If our country has a problem, whose problem is it?

If there are solutions to a problem, then who knows what to do to resolve those issues?

One issue is important to note: if business and industry expect to benefit from the skills of our high school graduates, shouldn't business and industry foot more of the bill for operating and managing our schools?

In addition, the squawking that these "captains of business and industry" are doing stems from the cost of training workers after they are hired…costs which diminish the value that the companies are able to deliver to their stakeholders.

Here are some possible solutions, not in any sort of order: Find ways to teach applied skills throughout our students school careers. If necessary, add additional hours to the school day

Build school-business partnerships. If necessary, extend school into the workplace, and hire teachers to staff the company training programs

Create a post-secondary diploma in the area of lifelong employability

Get politicians and politics out of the way of education

Use some of the school technology money to retrofit graduates instead of buying new computers

Create a multitude of small businesses that provide business coaching for employed but deficient youth, possibly a lucrative business opportunity similar to the test-prep tutoring businesses that litter our landscape Discussion for these "Alternative Solutions" Retrofitting teachers would be a lot cheaper than retrofitting students simply because there are more students than teachers. However, the impact of upgrading teachers might pay in the long term.

Is it unfair (and uncompetitive in the world market) to ask that business and industry foots the bill for new worker training? It is business that reaps the benefits (profits) from this training (if the worker remains employed long enough). But, those grads with diminished work ethic and deficient company loyalty might take advantage of training, then move to another company with better pay and benefits. Training them might prove to be a "bad" business investment.

Some schools have felt the "crunch" of providing technology for students. Maybe this paid off for business since only 21% of our grads were judged to be deficient in this area. Sidebar Of course, the number of students with this deficiency may be much larger since this study only measured high school graduates. There may be a much larger number of young people with these deficiencies since most of our schools under calculate and under report the actual number of school leavers (dropouts). Our School's Roles in Business Skills Remediation Maybe our schools don't have a role in rectifying this problem for business and industry since it is the stockholders of these companies that actually profit from

the labors of our graduates.

One solution is to graduate students and not worry about them, just as we do now.

It would be easier and cheaper for our taxpayers if our country just increased the "guest worker program" and allowed enough qualified workers from India, China and Russia in to fill these positions.

Of course, that could mean that 50% to 80% of our graduates would be unemployed, but that is what they get for not studying more.

After all, it is their own fault that they wasted their time cramming for high-stakes tests instead of learning employable skills.

Schools must discover that test-taking is not a skill that employers will pay for, and alter their strategy if they hope to snare some of that school-business partnership money.

If our schools are doing a fine job, as increasing test scores attest; and if students are meeting graduation requirements with "flying colors," then isn't it the employer's responsibility to hire, train or import workers? What does the Education Dollar Buy? If we are purchasing "the most expensive public education that money can buy," what are we buying? And who is doing the purchasing?

Debating the argument of whether we are getting "our money's worth" from our educational dollars is a worthless rut to follow. What we should follow instead are two lines of questioning: What is truly needed? What will it cost? and How long will it take to bring education up to the required level?

When we know what it will cost, are we willing to pay for what it will take? Another solution is to let this issue remain a "private domain" solution such as a nation-wide program of Small Business Grants and Loans to develop a safety net of post-high school tutorial services for our deficient students.

In this case, students could attend private tutoring service, something like "boot camps" where they would be "toughened up" for the world of work.

Another solution would be to modernize our "Use Tax system" and base the system upon consumption. That is, if a business consumes a one of the rare, "grads of quality", that business would be taxed at a higher rate than a business of industry installation that "consumes" a grad of lower quality.

This recommendation is based upon the common business practice of charging more for the deluxe version (the upgraded model, the "pro" model).

Recently we heard the phrase, "Vision without funding is hallucination" bandied about. But, a belief that under funding and political spin will produce superior results in our schools is "delusion." Who's Job is it Anyway? Who says that it is our school districts' job to build employable graduates? Isn't it enough that our graduates can read, write and calculate?

The short answer is, "Yes."

Reading, writing, speaking and calculating are exactly the kinds of skills that our schools focus upon. But the results of our expensive efforts are what our business leaders label as deficient.

If this is true, then our collective educational track record is dismal at best and a disgrace at worst. But the complaints of these business leaders needs further examination…Enough Talent to Go Around? The fallacy of this entire business leaders' argument is that there is not enough good talent to go around.

Our students are as talented as students anywhere. However, the analysis that these business leaders gloss over is "the rest of the story." Here is what is "left out of the complaints…" Business leaders are successively more satisfied with "Junior College" graduates and even more satisfied with college graduates who work for them. So, the "shabby product" that these business leaders are referring to are the students who don't go on to a college career of some kind. Not a representative sample of all our high school graduates

These "corporate giants" spin their argument as though they provide most of the jobs for our country. Facts are that small business provides from 70% to 80% of the jobs in this country. So, small business is also grabbing the "lion's share" of our graduates, probably the best remaining workers. So, the business leaders are complaining about an even smaller, unrepresentative sample than just our graduates that don't go to college. The bureaucracies of many big companies are similar to the bureaucracies of school districts, and creative, independent thinkers find accommodation to such restrictive environments to be a trade off with their values and ideals. This is one reason that so many talented and dedicated teachers leave the teaching profession and go into business for themselves, or find other outlets for their talents. Creative, talented teachers are probably better off not going to work for the companies run by these complaining business leaders. This would be like stepping out of the cat litter box and onto the doggie's pile. Final

Recommendations Teachers should counter the "hype and gripe" of these business leaders with "a shot across the business bow" challenge to change the business climate from one of "profit and stock valuation at all cost" to one of social responsibility and altruism.

Teachers should also point out the fallacy of these business leaders' complaints, showing that their arguments represent distorted reasoning, exaggerated expectations, and the effect of their own inability to attract top talent from the much larger employment pool.

These business leaders are getting away with a thinly disguised form of "teacher bashing", and teachers should call them to the front of the room, shame them by revealing their "self-centered, selfishness", and rap their knuckles with a ruler.

On second thought, that recommendation is a throwback to a pre-industrial age style of teaching that went out of fashion with hoop skirts, or at least out of fashion with "Poodle skirts."

Maybe teachers should just continue on teaching, reclassifying (reframing) the noise that these business leaders are generating from "just blowing hot air" to "just passing gas."
Teachers should stand proud and gallant and face these business leaders down. Teachers should take credit for the great work that we all do for the benefit our our students, and not stand for distorted criticism about the work that we do. We're teachers, we're proud, we know it, and we show it."

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Featured Article at 09:00