

Wednesday, January 31, 2007

News Nuggets

NCLB: Up for Reauthorization, but "Not Up to the Task" of Benefiting Children

Why would a politician propose extending a non-working program? This is like putting gas into a car that has the tires removed and is sitting on blocks. You can rev and race the engine, listen to the muffler growl; but you get zero miles per gallon and you arrive at exactly where you were, only your wallet is a bit lighter because the wasted gasoline was so expensive.

From this scenario, the choice is obvious, i.e., put some tires on the car before wasting any more gas. Why isn't the same obvious for the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)?

In the car example, the car owner could say that they were testing the fuel injectors or the power train. They might say something like this, even though they know that the facts don't support their statement, to avoid their neighbors saying that they are "stupid."

Politicians seem to have the same motivation, plus an extra level of concern; e.g., that the voting public will become angry for the "stupid" decision of supporting the NCLB Act, and vote them out of office. Voting NCLB "Out of Office:" The Time is NOW! Finding a teacher who believes that the NCLB benefits children is a long standing challenge that Classroom Toolkit has issued. In over a year, we have yet to find such a person.

The teacher that believes that the NCLB does any good at all for students is probably a "mythical creature."

Sidebar By the way, the "Find a Teacher that supports NCLB" challenge does not apply to the case study that politicians might dredge up; if the person that they find is, 1.) "off their meds." or, 2.) has not taught in a real classroom for the past decade.

Our Politicians Supported the NCLB "Stupidity": Now What?

What's a vote-hungry, do anything to stay in office political sot, (excuse me, I meant "sort") supposed to do?

The answer, of course, is to move to reauthorize the non-working legislation, then propose that the legislation be "improved and enhanced."

Of course, the "improvements and enhancements" amount to scrapping the legislation, but the important question of, "Why did you pass this albatross of a law in the first place?" can be deflected. Sidebar There is another strategy that politicians employ, but they won't be tempted to use this strategy because the next elections are only two years away. That strategy is to "blame the innocent."

In this cases, blaming children for the failure of the law will aggravate parents. Parents know better, and a politician who attempts this ploy would be "walking on political thin ice."

Blaming teachers, the other choice, would be like sawing a hole in the bottom of the "legislative party boat" and expecting to sail into the "Port of PorkBarell" with no wind in the sails. Teachers remember and teachers vote!

Teachers Need to do More than Vote Now is the time to take action to eliminate the NCLB and its odious effects upon education. Contact your state's Senators

Contact your representative

Contact an influential "politico" What to Communicate to Politicians (In Strong Terms) The ideals that prompted the NCLB Act are noble, but, the focus was misdirected, and execution was flawed. Here are the reasons: The process was started by politicians, for politicians, to benefit politicians

Those politicians had a political, rather than an educational agenda

The politicians didn't... Understand teaching

Understand children or the learning process

Know that there is little or no connection between standardized tests and teacher improvement

Know that there is little or no connection between standardized tests and improved student learning Understand the inefficient and wasteful bureaucratic process that manages our schools

Understand the human nature and survival instincts of teachers Besides, politicians wanted to create an instant cure for our schools, not realizing that it takes three years for a teacher to become proficient in a research-based, proven, and well-designed educational program. Other "Dead on Arrival" NCLB Issues The "Voyage of the NCLB Act" was jinxed and doomed, even before its ship left the dry dock.

And, the first years after the launch of the NCLB Act saw some of the most Draconian school district "budget hacking" in recent memory.

The NCLB Act is based upon unsound, now disproved, assumptions that…

Bureaucracies provide streamlined support for education

Bureaucracies are able to reward teachers with negative consequences and stressful demands

Students' standardized tests are valid measures of teachers' skill improvement

Programs forced upon schools by outsiders who know little about education have a snowball's chance The NCLB Act

diminishes education and creates obstacles and barriers rather than resolving the issues that plague our school systems operation and management. Taking Credit for a Mirage The politicians who point to NCLB successes are pointing to a mirage. What they are pointing to are schools where progress and improvement were happening (and would have happened) despite the NCLB Act.

What really occurred because of NCLB is that… Stress skyrockets in classrooms

Principals launch "witch hunts" to rid campuses of teachers who don't build "test score improvement" equity

Teachers bail out of schools where an oppressive administration tries to "put the screws to them" to make them work harder

Great teachers transfer from "inner city" schools to middle class schools where the "low hanging testing fruit" makes life easier

Testing "irregularities" abound

Students' alienation magnifies because there is no intrinsic motivation in studying test-taking, and no compelling life interest (Test-taking skills hold little currency in the world of work or the arena of life)

Crucial learning activities such as art, music, even physical activity such as recess, are eliminated to make more time for "teaching to the test" The NCLB Act fails in the same ways that my attempts to fly by making wings of wax and feathers will fail every time.

The time to reject the reauthorization of NCLB is NOW!

Tell your representatives so, now.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in News Nuggets at 11:00

Short Article

Budget and Finance for School Folks who Love Children School district budgets are controlled by the folks at the top who have specialized training in the management of large, static sums of money. Might our school districts be better off if we hired executive types who know how to get more money, instead of "tightwad" types who howl and groan as though every penny spent on our children is extracted from their wallet with a stun gun and crowbar?

Would our school districts would be better off if we managed our budgets with the common sense of the staff who were two or three rungs down the "chain of command" ladder.

In fact, if you want to learn "where money is being wasted" on a campus, ask the custodian. The Money Savers The people in charge of school district budgets take pride in "saving money". But getting rid of the "Scrooge Mentality" of top school district management seems like a positive strategy if our goal is to improve the fiscal management of our schools where maximum benefits accrue to our children.

An analogy in business illustrates this point.

During a recession, the company that lays off its sales force, dies. The company that survives is the one where, not only do the salesmen keep their jobs, but everyone else in the company assumes a sales roll, too.

Yet the strategy of "going out and getting more money" seems to escape many of our top school district leaders. Budget Myths School district folks will tell you a lot about their budgets. They spend an inordinate amount of time calculating "the Budget" and they are proud of their acumen. But, their stories are more like mythology than gospel. Here are some budget myths… Myth: There is a shortage of money Fact: There is always plenty of money for the pet projects of the highest paid executives.

Fact: The school district has to keep a lot of money in reserve

Fact: Failing to hold enough funds in reserve to meet "the payroll" is the ultimate budget sin, fare worse than squandering money Myth: The amount of money is fixed Fact: There would be a lot more money if the folks at the district knew how to go about getting more of it.

Opinion: A "Fixed Income" mentality seems to be ingrained in many school district executives

Fact: For school districts with lots of low-income and minority students (the districts that complain the most about their lack of funds), the money that could be brought in is almost unlimited because agencies and organizations are willing to fund project that deliver results for these populations Myth: It is a conflict of interest to have teachers involved in the budget process Fact: Teachers are the only ones that know how the money can be used to improve education

Fact: Prohibitions keeping teachers from becoming active members of the school board stem from the "old days" where the town elders had to keep the one school teacher from offering themselves a \$1.00 raise per year

Fact: These were also the days when a school teacher could not get married (then become pregnant!) because they would ask for more money. Myth: The main goal of the budget is to save money Fact: The main goal is to juggle the money, so… Fact: There is plenty of money until the end of the year

Fact: The money is "all used up" by the end of the year

Fact: The amount of money for this year must not be "overspent" because this will come out of next year's budget

Fact: The amount of next year's budget must be bigger than this year's budget

Fact: The amount of money for next year will be cut if the money is not spent this year Myth: Expenditures are deliberate and wise Fact: Funds sometimes roll in (especially from the Federal Government) that have to be "spent in a week"

Fact: This leads to the "We have half a million dollars to spend by Monday" syndrome Myth: Schools are focused upon

delivering a quality education
Fact: School districts are focused upon delivering the highest quality education that they can purchase cheaply

Fact: Education bureaucracy, like other bureaucracies, are fueled by "mediocre madness". This is also called "Spin." The strategy here is to reach at least the mediocre level of performance outcomes, but then talk up the features of the program as though the program was a "high payoff success" "The "Caring about Learning" Alternative
The people who manage a school district budget need a vision of love, caring, support and encouragement; just like children receive from the professionals that teach them...sort of like how a devoted mom would advocate for her children.

But teaching professionals can't get what they need, when they need it to teach their classes. That is the reason that our school teachers spend an estimated \$1 billion a year of their own money to provide supplies and learning materials for their classrooms.
Reward Factors
Education higher-ups care about children and they have a vision for improving the lives of all students. But, their rewards are different than the rewards that teacher receive.

Teachers are rewarded by the smiles, hugs, excitement, enthusiasm and spark that they see in the children that they teach.

High level school executives are rewarded when school board members look at budget printouts and say, "Well done. Test scores are up, and the amount of money spent to achieve that goal is less than last year!"

This motivates the district's fiscal managers to reign in spending still further.
Squeezing the Budget for All its Worth
The "tight-grip-on-the-wallet" folks choke the life and spark out of education, and crush teachers and staff under their thumbs. "Pinching pennies" is a kind name for the process of squelching the fire and energy that sings, dances, draws, paints and plays through the real treasures and assets of a school district, its students.

In fact, music, art and other "frills" (even physical education(PE) are the first programs cut when there are signs of a "we might have a shortfall" budget scare.

Next, expenditures are delayed. For example, computers that should be replaced after three years (because they are too old and slow) are kept running until they are six years old. Busses that should be replaced when they are 15 years old are kept running until they are 30 year old. Building repairs that should be completed now are left to fester until the entire building rots. Some repairs never get done.
The Human Connection
School district leaders will point out that 80% of a school district's budget is for personnel costs. (Notice that this is not considered an investment in human capital!) Listen carefully to this, because this is important. This fact is what separates the "common sense" of budgets that mere mortals (like us) understand from the the "Mt. Olympus view" of school district executive from high altitudes.

This reflects the "Law of Large Numbers" that clouds the minds of those at the summit when it comes to providing frills to the children at the foot of the holy mountain.

Here is how this works…

If a superintendent gets a raise of \$20,000 USD, this budget expense is affordable because the total cost is \$20 K ("chump change"that hardly shows up on the budget).

But, other administrative staff, counselors, principals, assistant principals, directors, grant writers and coordinators want their raises. So, \$2,000.00 for 100 people costs an additional \$200,000.

If teachers also get a raise of \$1,000 USD, the budget starts to become unaffordable because all 500 teachers expect the raise. This is already 1/2 million dollars, and is not "chicken feed."

But that is not all! Next, all the electricians, technicians, air conditioning specialists, plumbers, painters, mechanics, secretaries want their share, so 200 of these employees get \$500 each or another \$100,000.00.

Then, all the clerks, custodians, maids, cafeteria workers and building and grounds workers want their raises, and so 400 more of these employees get \$300.00, for another \$120,000.

And finally, the 75 bus drivers want their raise of \$100, for another \$7,500/00.

So, while a raise of \$20,000 USD is a paltry budget sum, the cost of providing all the other raises in this scenario ducks in at just under the million dollar ceiling.

So, if the superintendent threatens to leave to get more money, we better pay up.

But, if a teacher asks for more money, just let them go, because we can always replace them with a "Newbie" teacher who comes more cheaply.

It is this "Law of Large Budget Numbers" that makes school finance unintelligible to normal mortals.

But, the solution is always the same. Require that your school district's top money managers "go out and scrape up more money."

If your school district finds a person that can bring in the dollars, pay them whatever they want so you can keep them. They will be worth the budget expense.

Keeping these folks working for your district is like spending \$200,000 for their salaries and receiving multiple millions each year. They are a great investment.

School executives who bring in vast sums of money may not need the "heart of gold" that teachers have to have. But, they will have the room to look generous when teachers make requests for programs and projects that benefit children. We should focus upon providing every benefit for our children that we can. We may have to accept a lack of funds today, but we don't have to accept that scenario forever.

If you have a choice, opt for the executive who knows how to "spend money to make money."

Our students deserve nothing less.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Short Article at 10:00

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 themSo, 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 countryFacts 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 collegeThe 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 idealsThis 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 talentsCreative, 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

RecommendationsTeachers 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

Quick Tips

PocketMod;: The Ultimate Organizer for Your Students (and Maybe Yourself)

In the land of high tech, high-dollar planning, it is amazing when a simple, useable, solution pops on the scene. And **PocketMod** is a solution that is so simple that it is elegant.

Forget (no pun intended) paying "big bucks" for a heavy, battery-sapping, wallet-draining, Personal Data Assistant (PDA). **PocketMod** is free and light weight. In fact, it weighs only as much as a piece of paper.

How do I know without weighing it, because **PocketMod** is a piece of paper! How it Works **PocketMod** is software that you can download for your PC or Apple; . **PocketMod**; runs on Adobe; Flash, so the **Flash**; Player must be installed on your computer.

If you don't have the **Flash**; Player installed, here is a link to download the **Flash**; player…

You can also create **PocketMod**; organizers online.

PocketMod; allows you to customize the many different kinds of organizer pages on eight panels of a single-sided page of paper.

Then, you send the paper to a printer.

You can customize these notes any way you wish, even add them to your wallet-based PDA later.

The **PocketMod**; prints folding guides for each panel, and once you see the trick, you will be amazed at someone's ingenuity for devising such a clever product. Where to get **PocketMod**; **PocketMod**; can be downloaded without cost from the **PocketMod**; site…

Link to the folding instructions…

Instructional Uses

Once you see what you can do with **PocketMod**; you will be able to devise all sorts of classroom and curriculum uses.

A few that come to mind include: A useful Art Class Activity

Student Weekly Organizers

Organizer Designing Contests

Manipulative Study Guides

3D-Flash Cards

Mini-StoryBoards for Learning Centers

Pocket Games for Reward or Fund Raisers

The possibilities just keep presenting themselves Download **PocketMod**; and devise lots of uses for yourself.

But don't pitch your electronic or leather PDA just yet.

One flaw with this version of the software is that you can't save your custom sheets, and you have to create a fresh design each time you use the software.

But, this software is bound to be a hit with your students.

Introduce them to the program as soon as you can.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Quick Tips at 08:00

Top Tips

Wink; a Free Screen Capture Program

Wink; is a Tutorial and Presentation creation program. The difference between the high-priced commercial program (Camtasia Studio) is that **Wink**; is free. **Wink**; is used to create tutorials for how to use software or on-screen operations. **Wink** can capture screen shots, add explanations boxes, buttons, titles etc and generate effective tutorials for your students.

You can create tutorials by capturing screen shots, mouse movements and specifying your own explanations.

Wink; also uses standard Windows-based, drag-and-drop editing. **Wink**; makes it easy to create high quality tutorials and online documentation.

Wink; saves its screen capture videos in Adobe; Flash format. You probably have the **Flash**; player installed on your computer (since **Flash**; is installed on more than 90% of all computers. If not, here is a link to download the **Flash**; player…; Link to Download **Wink**; Here is the link to download **Wink**; …

Here is a link to a demo of what the **Wink**; program can do…; Other **Wink**; Features Here is a listing of other **Wink**; features (from the **Wink**; Website). Versions are available for Windows™ and Linux Captures screen shots and saves the images in BMP, JPG, PNG, TIFF and GIF formats

Creates output in Adobe Flash, Adobe PDF, Adobe PostScript, as a "stand-alone executable program", and as HTML for viewing on Web pages with a Web browser

Output can also be used to print manuals

Support for multiple languages, including English, French, German, Italian, Danish, Spanish, Serbian, Japanese, Brazilian Portuguese and Simplified/Traditional Chinese

Smart Capture Tools: Capture screen shots automatically based on mouse and keyboard input. This is a time-saver that creates professional screen captures

High Performance Compression: Wink; compresses Flash presentations to be much smaller than the commercial products. This saves bandwidth if you place your captures on the Web. The price is right, the need is great, the uses are many, and the quality is high. So, give Wink a try.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Top Tips at 07:00

Teacher Resources

Two Low-Cost, Hands-On "Our District should buy this stuff but won't" Resources

If you are going to open your wallet and purchase classroom supplies and materials, you might as well get more for your money. Here are two places where you can spend your disposable cash, and obtain value, if you are careful.

But be warned, you can spend a lot of money, even if the individual items are "cheap." Oriental Trading Company; Some people would say that the Oriental Trading Company; is just a purvey of "dollar store junk."

But their catalog offers just the kind of colorful stuff that brings a gleam to the eyes of young children.

And the parents of young children treasure these items when their kids bring them. Some parents will have these items on display 20, 30 or more years later. Others will keep them in cupboards, trunks and suitcases.

Here is a link to the Oriental Trading Company; site, handsonfun.com. Bits and Pieces; Bits and Pieces; on the other hand, offers quality and selection of unique puzzles and gifts that teachers would like to give and receive for themselves.

These are teacher's desk items, if you dare bring them to school.

When Bits and Pieces; claims that their products are unique, they mean it.

Check these out for yourself. I bet that you'll be fascinated.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Teacher Resources at 06:00

Book Review

Balanced Scorecard in a Week, 2nd Ed. Author: Bourne, Mike & Bourne, Pippa ISBN: 10-0-340-849452 Format: Soft cover Pub. Date: 2003 Publisher: : Hodder Arnold Pages: 95 Cost: \$ 9.99 (List) Available: Amazon at as low as \$7.96 (new) - not currently available at eBay(TM) Balanced Scorecard represents an antidote to the fiscal-only management of businesses and organizations. The idea is that many other factors besides money can be measured so that organizations can improve their performance.

This concept is applicable to school districts where measurement's "two trick horse" of test scores and fiscal restraint tramples the educational progress of our students. The Books' Topics: What is the Balanced Scorecard?

How to get started using the Balanced Scorecard

Deciding what is Important

How to Measure

Displaying (and using) Measures

Keeping the Scorecard Relevant

Problems and Issues from Using the Balanced Scorecard The central themes of this book are: Improving organizational and business performance requires measurement. But measurement restricted to financial variables is not adequate for managing an organization

To make a measurement process work, you have to measure the right things

Measuring the wrong things leads to lots of wasted time and opportunity costs

The Balanced Scorecard approach does not work in every case, but most organizations can see improvement when the Balanced Scorecard process is implemented

Keywords: Balanced Scorecard

Performance Measurement System

Key Drivers

Targets, Measures and Desired States Main Idea: The idea behind the Balanced Scorecard is basic and simple, i.e., what organizations and companies measure gets done. But, the right things have to be measured.

Once the right things are identified, the measuring process has to be workable so that the measuring does not interfere with ongoing operations. The measuring process cannot be so cumbersome and complex that it ties up managers and employees so that they cannot get their work done.

Thought and planning are necessary before a system is implemented because it is possible to measure the wrong things and actually diminish progress.

The buy-in of all stakeholders also is necessary if the right measurements are going to be used to effect worthwhile change. Quotes: "Over the last 10 years, companies have come to realize that they can no longer manage using financial measures alone. To survive and prosper, companies have to track non financial measures…The Balanced Scorecard is a framework for designing a set of measures for activities chosen by you as being key drivers of your business. For the scorecard to be effective, you will need to display these measures and manage the resulting actions to improve performance." (p. - 5)

"Unless you measure accurately and consistently, the whole ethos of measurement will be undermined. Before you start making comparisons between departments or between your company and someone else's you need to establish your current position through clearly defined and appropriate performance measure." (p. -

"How many times have you seen a well-constructed strategic plan, created and read by a few but ineffectively communicated across the business? Performance measures can rectify this, making the goals and objectives explicit, bringing the strategy to life and communicating direction throughout the whole business." (p. - 9)

"Having a set of measures is one thing, but the real benefit comes from reflecting on what the measures are telling you and deciding what action you should take." (p. - 9 & 10)

"The Balanced Scorecard was originally developed for the business sector, for profit-oriented organizations. However, there is no reason why it shouldn't be used for charities or public sector organisations. [sic]" (p. - 17)

"Perhaps the most important factor for success in using the Balanced Scorecard is ensuring that you are measuring the right things. If you measure the wrong things you can channel energy and time into activities that are not contributing to the success of your business, with damaging results." (p. - 27 & 28)

"Many people think that the process is over once you have set the objectives, but this is not the case." (p. - 39)

"Clear thinking is vital for deciding what to measure." (p. - 40)

"Although it is useful to consider the design of each measure individually, you will find that measures often overlap in the application. It is not uncommon for more than one measure to be use to track one dimension of performance." (p. - 55)

"Deciding what to measure is not enough. You must also take care in designing the measures themselves." (p. - 57)

"If positive action is to be taken after analyzing the measures then everyone concerned with improving performance needs to fully understand what the results mean." (p. - 60)

"When deciding what to measure, give some thought to the amount of time each measure will take -- if it is very time consuming is it really worthwhile or can it be measured less often?" (p. - 68)

"Concern about what will happen if results aren't good can lead to distortion of the figures or excuses as to why the measures are no good. Of course some of these excuses might be genuine, particularly at the early stages before wrinkles have been ironed out. The important point is for individuals to see that the results are being used objectively for improving the business and not to allocate blame…No matter how carefully you design your measures, problems in collecting the data can distort your results" (p. - 68 & 69)

"In fact, each time you review and update your strategic plan, the measures should also be reviewed to ensure they remain congruent. This may well mean dropping some well-established measures and implementing new ones. If this isn't done, then don't be surprised if the strategy fails, The [sic] old measures and reporting system will ensure that what has been decided is never implemented." (p. - 75)

"Another important way to keep your scorecard going is to weave it into the everyday processes of your business rather than to regard it as an initiative in itself…The danger is that if you create the Balanced Scorecard as a separate initiative it will receive attention only for a short time and then will fade when the next fad appears on the horizon. If you link initiative or processes together so that they are complimentary you develop a certain strength and cohesion and the positive results are cumulative. This helps build management competence in running the business." (p. - 78 & 79) Issues Addressed by the Book: This book summarizes the thinking behind using more than financial data in managing a business.

The key to understanding how measures can be used to improve the function of an organization is to understand that an organization operates from more than one perspective.

The book itself recognizes that the original Balanced Scorecard does not address the perspectives of people, suppliers, regulators, or other entities. One of the biggest omissions for the original scorecard was the perspective of competitors. In the case of school districts, it is clear that the teacher's perspective has been absent in the "drum-beating, circus parade" know as "benchmark testing." Sidebar For further examination of the issues affecting Benchmark Testing, see our article, The Flaws, Fallacies and Foolishness of Benchmark Testing.

Note: Benchmark Testing, as performed by most schools, fails to rise to the level of being called a Balanced Scorecard. The Book's Shortcomings: If you consider the format as a digest-volume that is intended to cover a complex subject in seven bite-sized chapters, this book doesn't have any shortcomings.

The book gets the job done, is easy to read, and the main points are highlighted.

If there were a criticism, it would be that the book doesn't dig deeply enough into the difficulties of implementing any initiative where people's behavior must change. The Balanced Scorecard assumes that all folks who are working for an organization want success and assumes that these individuals are willing to make whatever changes are required to obtain that success.

Observation of human nature, in school districts and without, verifies that this assumption about people's willingness to changes is unfounded. Comments: The author gets a number of items correct about school districts, even if his information targets businesses. These include warnings about…Measuring the wrong thing
Misusing data and assigning blame
Not understanding what the data mean
Measuring the same old stuff, even after the plan changes
Measuring only items that fit the perspective of one group, especially if another group is responsible for the implementation of the organization's mission
The frustration in reading a simple volume like Balanced Scorecard in a Week is knowing that the challenges facing school districts could be resolved with simple thinking and basic common sense…;but knowing that the changes needed just won't get done. Summary: The book also allows us to interpolate the difficulties that school districts will face when coming up with key perspectives. There will be so many perspectives, so many divergent views and so little knowledge behind these divergent opinions that nothing is apt to be done.
This book is an easy read, and offers a common sense approach to identifying strategic goal, discovering measures of progress toward those goals, and consistently executing improvements until those goals are reached. Rating (Four Point scale): Useful - 4
Applicable - 4
Relevant - 4
Innovative - 3
Original - 3
Interesting - 3

Overall Rating - 3.5

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Book Review at 05:00

Site Strategy

Course Building and Open Source Learning Management System (LMS) Tutorials Now Online
Check our tutorial site over the next five days as our course on developing online courses and tutorials is posted online. Here is the link…
We are conducting a workshop for the Texas Computer Education Association (TCEA) on Monday, February 5, 2007 in Austin, Texas.
Link to the online presentation...
This is a "practice what we preach" workshop, and, since the course offers hands-on training for using the Open Source Learning Management System (LMS), Moodle!, we will use Moodle! Online to drive the presentation.
Seminars at a local university and this workshop for TCEA have captured much of our development effort over the past few months.
We have finally crafted a system to structure and manage our content in this online format. Look for our other tutorials to be placed online in the next month or so. Unique Focus
Our tutorial approach and workshop format is unique in that…; We model what we preach
The use of technology is secondary to teaching, and secondary to the needs of teachers
The online model is adaptable to face-to-face presentations, hands-on workshops, and most importantly, post-workshop or post-training follow-up.
The presentations are driven by an a free online LMS (Moodle!) that is hosted on a server that costs \$3.96 per month to maintain.
The hands-on activities are hosted on several sites that cost \$2.24 per year (the cost of the domain name). That is, four sites for under \$10.00 USD. Of course, we have to put up with a yellow advertising strip at the top of each page, but the sites provide real hands-on practice
Other Values and Benefits of this System
Our tutorial shows which instructional activities are suitable for integrating with a LMS, and which activities are best left to other support methods. For example, elementary core curriculum classes are probably not suited for this method, but some high school and college classes are.
Computer lab courses, software training, professional development programs and and in-service training are all workable.
And, any face-to-face training or workshop can be enhanced with follow-up sharing, encouragement, reinforcement, coaching and mentoring support.
Other areas that you might explore are basic how-to information that you can post for student, parents and community members.
One additional benefit is that Moodle! courses are easy to copy and distribute, i.e., are easy to share. The courses can also be developed on a standard computer that uses the Windows™ operating system. And, the courses can even be run from a portable USB drive. If this Sounds "Too Good to be True"
If the Moodle! software sounds too good to be true, well, it's not. You get all this value from Moodle!, and the learning curve is not too steep.

About the biggest problem with the Moodle! LMS is that it has an "activity-based" interface metaphor. Why is this familiar model a problem? Because teachers can use Moodle! (like other minimally planned strategies such as textbooks) to let instruction devolve to ad hoc, activity-driven delivery. Strategic planning, structured implementation and streamlined management are key to effective and efficient instruction. Try Moodle!. You are sure to discover additional benefits for yourself and for your students.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Site Progress at 04:00

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