

## **Are Our Schools in the Education Business or The Business of Education?**

*Bryan Lee, Former Principal, Ontario Conference*

Often the comment is made that “if a school was in the business world they would fail miserably.” A case could be made to validate such claims. However, I suggest that a better understanding of the distinctiveness of the educational culture, as compared to the business world, and what matters most to educators in the decision-making process could be helpful in eliminating negative environments.

First of all, education is by default a backward-looking enterprise. This is not a condemnation. Looking back is a central feature of schooling. The fact is we can only teach what we know. Good teaching is always creative, but not always innovative. It should benefit from regular refreshers and occasional overhauls, but it doesn't demand the kind of continuous updating that, say, law or medicine or high technology do.

There is no doubt that a school must be sufficiently businesslike to survive, but it is not about profit any more than a family or church is. Its goals are to teach skills and build character and citizenship; a teacher's daily work consists of instructing, advising, counselling, and coaching -- is comparable to that of parents and pastors. What that means is that teaching is both very personal and highly individual, a reality not to be ignored.

Studies of educators show that for the most part education attracts people who have a core need to belong through duty and responsibility, are very organized and have a strong service ethic. Teachers tend to look for a school that is a good "home" and stay there. <sup>1</sup>

In schools, unlike corporate, medical, and legal settings, conflict avoidance is a way of life. Teachers are, after all, people who thrive in the company of children and adolescents and try to promote the positive. Would we want our children taught by people who *didn't*?

But can schools change? Robert Evans, in his book *The Human Side of School Change: Reform, Resistance, and the Real-Life Problems of Innovation*, suggests that schools *do* change, but at a far slower speed than companies do. In education what is vital to introducing something new is meaning. This is true of big changes and small ones, not just of implementing a new curriculum, but even when changing the daily schedule. <sup>2</sup>

What often happens is that change fails because we don't consider how an initiative comes across to teachers, what it means to them. Evans suggests that for any major change teachers must be clear about three essential points: why they (or the school) can't continue a current practice; what new practice must be initiated; and how they will be helped to accomplish it. And all too often in schools, "change" means "addition," rather than "replacement."

The best way to sustain morale and generate commitment while making change includes three helpful steps. First, change must be connected to the values that are the “heart of the

school.” Second, everyone needs to know what they can count on to remain in place. Third, people need to be reminded of their strengths and helped to maximize their "old" competence as they struggle to master new tasks, roles, and behaviors.

Working with and observing educators and boards, as they have struggled with issues of change, has left me with a tremendous respect for the realities of school life. Schools are simply less suited to innovation than most organizations, and they adapt more slowly. We may wish they were different, but they have good reason to be as they are. The business they are in, is not just traditional but timeless. We can best help fulfill their mission in new ways by, tempering expectations, concentrating efforts, and celebrating strengths.

*Bryan Lee, a former principal, is owner of Read2Learn, a reading disability clinic, and is a presenter/consultant for Paragon Info Group, providing training, development and consulting to schools and educators.*

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<sup>1</sup> Personality Dimensions, 2004, Career/LifeSkills Resources Inc.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Evans: *The Human Side of School Change : Reform, Resistance, and the Real-Life Problems of Innovation* (Jossey-Bass Education Series) (Paperback) 2001.