

Why Can't We Be Friends - Challenging School Districts and Teachers' Unions to Work Together

The #1 reason that we do not have better performing schools is that there is no shared vision for education in schools or school districts.

Why do I say this?

Because in my 30 plus years in the workforce, rarely have I seen stakeholder groups more at odds with one another than in the area of education.

Let's face it: School district administrators and teachers' unions are locked in an arranged marriage which generally doesn't grow into mutual love, respect, and adoration. In the best of times they tolerate one another; at the worst they hate each other and attempt to sabotage everything the other attempts to do.

Unbelievable. One would think that we could agree that educating our children is the primary purpose of schools and school groups. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

I must admit, I may be a bit of jaded – rarely have I seen any benefit come from unions. Years ago, unions were a good thing – they filled a real need in society, representing powerless groups who were being taken advantage of. However, I would submit to you that those unions who focus only on what is best for their constituents have outlived their usefulness.

Peter Senge said that "Today's problems come from yesterday's solutionsⁱ."

Which brings me to my original premise, the concept of shared vision.

Senge describes shared vision as "a force in people's hearts, a force of impressive power. . . . A shared vision is the answer to the question, 'what do we want to create?' Just as personal visions are pictures or images people carry in their heads and hearts, so to are shared vision's pictures that people throughout an organization carry. They create a sense of commonality that permeates the organization and gives coherence to diverse activitiesⁱⁱ."

To have shared vision, people must be committed to the same vision – each cannot have their one individual vision which does not agree with the overall shared vision. So, what are educators' visions, and are they shared? Let's start with the basics. Can we agree about:

What constitutes good education?

How we measure what is good education?

What must be done to have well educated children?

As you might have already deduced, these are three key questions whose answers are rarely agreed upon by educators. As the saying goes, the devil is in the details...

Let's take a step back. What is the purpose of educational institutions? Let's see what a few organizations actually say:

Los Angeles Unified School District: "The teachers, administrators, and staff of the Los Angeles Unified School District believe in the equal worth and dignity of all students and are committed to educate all students to their maximum potential" (<http://www.lausd.k12.ca.us/lausd/lausd.html>)

Sweetwater Unified High School District: The Sweetwater Union High School District is committed to holding its students to rigorous academic standards which will successfully prepare them to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Supported by the collaborative effort of staff, parents and community members, our students will exhibit academic and technological competencies which will enable them to achieve career goals, become lifelong learners, and make meaningful contributions to a multilingual, multicultural society (http://www.suhsd.k12.ca.us/orh/pdfs/orh_handbook_07-08.pdf).

Akron Public Schools: The mission of Akron Public Schools, a pioneer in academic excellence passionately committed to life-long learning, is to ensure that each student in our diverse population achieves his or her fullest potential in a safe and affirming learning center characterized by an extensive, student-focused collaboration of all segments of the community, with an emphasis on preparing students to live and excel in a global environment (<http://www.akronschools.com/about/info.html>).

Let's take a look at some teachers' union websites.

National Education Association: "To advocate for education professionals and to unite our members and the nation to fulfill the promise of public education to prepare every student to succeed in a diverse and interdependent world" (<http://www.nea.org/aboutnea/statement.html>).

Similarly, NEA's values include: "We believe partnerships with parents, families, communities, and other stakeholders are essential to quality public education and student success."

Oregon Educational Association: From their October 19, 1981 *Bulletin*, "The major purpose of our association is not the education of children, rather it is or ought to be the extension and/or preservation of our members' rights"

Finally, let's take a look at a parents' advocacy group, Los Angeles Parents Union, who formed out of frustration with LAUSD and UTLA.

"[LAPU] is a parent-led organization that is transforming public schools by organizing parents to demand an equitable and high-achieving education through advocating for small, safe schools, demanding greater accountability and systemic reform in our current public school system and empowering parents to drive educational reform efforts in their communities" (<http://www.parentsunion.org/mission/index.php>).

Isn't it interesting that the first portion of most of these statements, arguably their primary focus, is on something other than educating our children?

So, why can't we get along? There is no shared vision for education. Frankly we have become a society whose motto is WIIFM (what's in it for me):

We cannot put aside our own self interests to do what is right by others; We want more for ourselves with no regard for how it will impact others; and I/we know better than anyone else what is right (which makes you wrong), so I don't have to listen to anyone else.

It's sad. Teachers (and their unions) generally blame school district administrators for standardized approaches for instruction that they say don't work, and when confronted with poor performance on the one metric that is legislated, annual testing, they say that it is poorly designed standardized tests that are to blame, that the standards are wrong.

On the other side, administrators blame teachers, and say that pay for performance is the answer.

They are both right, and they are both wrong. Welcome to Systems Thinking 101 – just like Senge said, yesterday's solutions are today's problems.

The sad part of this is that I know few school district administrators who did not get their start as teachers. It is as if when a teacher joins the administrator ranks their former colleagues feel that they have lost 30 points of IQ and like Darth Vader, "turned to the dark side."

The bottom line is that we have numerous students who can't read beyond the 5th grade level. I teach college students who cannot write a coherent sentence.

So, what are Dr. Drumm's prescriptions for success?

School Districts must:

- Engage teachers and their unions as equal partners.
- Jointly develop strategic and implementation plans with teachers as a trusted partner.
- Agree with teachers and unions on common goals focused on the children's learning and achievement, and then jointly work out the tactics to get there.
- Communicate with all stakeholders regularly, not just at contract renewal time.
- Remember that you are not always right, and neither are the teachers/unions.

Teachers and their unions must:

- Learn to partner with school districts.
- Realize that they are only one of many stakeholders whose voices must be heard.
- Understand that district leadership must balance priorities, and that from their vantage point in the organization they generally see the bigger picture.
- Stop trying your case in the press. All that does is drive more of a wedge between your two groups. Sometimes, teachers unions see things from their limited perspective, have their own interests first and foremost, and want to drive the agenda. They are not always wrong, but certainly not always right.
- Remember, the people across the table from you were teachers not all that long ago.

Both parties must:

- Learn how to play nicely. Trying your case in the court of public opinion doesn't make anyone want to cooperate or change. If you can't do that, you didn't deserve to graduate from kindergarten.
- Learn how to communicate. Communications by its nature is more listening than talking – God gave us 2 ears and 1 mouth for a reason. Find commonality and work from that - you can do that only by listening.
- Learn to trust each other – after all, we're adults (right?).
- Learn to think win-win - this requires collaboration and compromise.
- Develop a shared vision centered focused on student learning and achievement.

The only winners and losers in this game are the kids. And believe it or not, they are the only one in the game who matter. Set the example for them – be civil and work together for their growth and good.

Remember, those that we are educating now are who will be the leaders of our country and taking care of us in our elder years.

ⁱ Senge, P. M. (1990). *The fifth discipline*. New York: Currency Doubleday (p. 57).

ⁱⁱ Senge, P. M. (1990). *The fifth discipline*. New York: Currency Doubleday (p. 206).