

The Hidden Cost of Performance Contracting

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PERFORMANCE contracting is in vogue in American education. The publicity surrounding the Texarkana Project, the clamor of vocal anti-public school minorities, the promotions of market-hungry young educational industries, and a large financial boost from the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity seem to ensure that performance contracting will be at least a short-term success on the national education scene. Due to the fact that performance contracting and the larger concept of accountability are being associated so skillfully with efficiency and sound fiscal policy, public school officials and school boards across the land can soon expect an increasing pressure for such a "business-like" approach to public education in their communities.

I am one of those who have some rather strong reservations about performance contracting and all that it implies for our public schools. Are we prepared, for instance, to eliminate all from our public school curricula which cannot be readily observed and measured? Are we willing to see classroom learning reduced to what Albert Shanker of the American Federation of Teachers has called "quiz-show mentality"? For those of us in education who do possess doubts about performance contracting and who fear the landslide effect this movement may have on our public school system, there is a need to develop some sound rebuttal to meet those who will soon be approaching on this latest of educational bandwagons.

I suggest that the arguments of those who advocate the wholesale adoption of the

performance contract concept in our public schools are weak, and therefore vulnerable, in at least two respects. First, I believe that the performance contract advocate displays a unique form of tunnel-vision concerning the purpose and the roles of today's public school. Second, I believe that such a simplistic approach to the learning process in the typical public school classroom reflects a grossly limited awareness of the learning patterns, motivation, and behavior of today's school-age children.

While nearly all of these newly-formed education businesses seem willing to bet their very existence on the fact that they can indeed transfer a given body of knowledge to a given number of students in a given amount of time, an underlying assumption apparently is being made that the transfer of such knowledge is the only vital function being performed by the public schools. What could be further from the truth? In a world where the body of knowledge is doubling about every seven years, such a perception of the school's function seems futile.

The role of today's school as a socializing agent is at least as important as its function of transmitting knowledge. Only through such socialization can we prepare our children to live in the society of the future. All over this nation the rate of teenage crime and drug abuse is soaring. All across America the number of emotional and mental disturbances among the young is on the rise. The number of homes in which both parents are in the work force is climbing. Yet, at the same time, the influence of

the other socializing institutions, such as the church, is declining. Almost by default, the public schools have an increasing and vital role to play in the socialization of the nation's children.

Socializing Agent

In the role of socializing agent, the school must necessarily deal with affective variables such as values, attitudes, human relations, and communicative skills. Such affective learning cannot be easily observed or measured, and thus this type of learning is not applicable to the performance contract. Yet one of the pillars of the accountability concept is that performance must be measurable.

I believe that the affective development which occurs in our public schools is important. A simple proof of this importance can be found by asking the high school graduate ten years out of school what value, if any, his public school experience had for him. I venture that few will respond by saying that the important things were the verbs he learned to conjugate, or the theorems that he could prove deductively, or the parts of the body which he so painstakingly memorized in biology. It is more likely that the typical response will focus on personal development and the influence of classroom teachers on that development. I believe that it is the medium, the classroom teacher, that is the real message in our public schools.

The wholesale adoption of the performance contract concept in our public schools could eventually force every classroom teacher into a state of competition with the resources of private enterprise. Further, such "competition" would be in terms of the rules set up by the advocates of the performance contract. Since the competence of classroom teachers, and the schools that they teach in, would be judged solely on the basis of quantity of cognitive development, all peripheral roles of the public schools would become irrelevant. The school's role as a socializing agency would soon wither away under the pressure of classroom performance standards. I am not certain that a society with

as many social problems as ours can afford the luxury of such efficiency.

A second assumption underlying the performance contract position is that today's schoolchildren will permanently submit to being educated in a rather mechanical and "business-like" fashion. I would question this assumption. The success of the Texarkana Project, for instance, was based on a reward of trading stamps which were doled out to the children to be exchanged for transistor radios and television sets. Surely, such bribery has to be a dead-end street?

I would also be interested to see how the performance contract advocates will deal with the persistent but non-essential interests of the pupils. Or what about the decreasing attention spans that are certain to appear as soon as the novelty of something different has subsided? In short, all the normal problems of the public school classroom focusing on interest, motivation, and behavior have yet to be confronted by the performance contract concept on a day-to-day basis.

I do believe that the idea of performance criteria holds promise for our public schools and can make a real contribution toward ensuring that all of our children receive an adequate education. However, I believe that the current promotion of the performance contract as a panacea for better schools is nothing short of a sham. Such an approach to educating our children does not recognize the varied roles of our public schools today. Nor does the performance contract concept deal realistically with the nature of the children attending our schools.

As Charles Silberman stated so eloquently in his article, "Murder in the Classroom,"¹ "Education should prepare people not just to earn a living, but to live a life." The performance contract, now being so strongly advocated for our public school systems, contains some hidden costs.

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¹ Charles E. Silberman. "Murder in the Classroom. Part I: How the Public Schools Kill Dreams and Mutilate Minds." *The Atlantic* 225 (6): 84; June 1970.

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