Alternative to Performance Contracting

The School-University Program

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IN THE midst of the controversy over performance contracting, something significant has been happening—virtually without notice. A growing number of school systems are reporting that special efforts to improve achievement in reading are paying dividends. There are no performance contracts and no federal grants involved, only skilled diagnostic work and effective teaching. Although there is an outside agency, it has no profit motive and does not promise magic. The outside agency is the university.

Typically, these school-university efforts are focused on poverty area schools where educational performance seems hopelessly below national norms. This population is also the target of private companies in their performance contracting activities. From that point on, however, all resemblance between the school-university model and that used by big business ends (including any similarity in outcomes).

Performance contracting is a monumental failure. The results of controlled experiments[1] indicate that pupils who participated in technology company programs did not show superior achievement to similar pupils who received conventional instruction. Indeed, in many instances the control classes were significantly superior in achievement to performance contracting classes.

In Philadelphia, for example, not a single performance contracting class showed significantly superior achievement gains to control classes; out of 12 classes, grades 1-9, in no cases did performance contracting reveal significantly superior results to conventional classes. But in five out of twelve cases, the control classes were significantly superior in achievement to performance contracting classes. In the remaining seven cases, there were no statistically significant differences.[2]

What clouds the issue is that, despite the overwhelmingly negative results, the performance contracting companies got paid. This creates the impression that they *must* have been successful. Payment, however, was not based on the comparison of the achievement status of experimental and control groups, but rather on the gains of individuals in the experimental groups. In other words, the contracts were written so that the technology companies simply could not lose.

In Philadelphia, 14,000 pupils partici-

[1] Battelle Laboratories. *Research Report on the Office of Economic Opportunity Experiment in Educational Performance Contracting.* Columbus, Ohio: Battelle Memorial Institute, January 1972.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 85.

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pated in the performance contracting programs in the 1970-71 school year. Although fewer than 5,000 pupils gained at least a year's progress, and such gains could have occurred by chance, the contracting firm was paid over $284,000.

Unfounded Approach

It should be emphasized that these are federal funds. By dangling financial incentives before financially strapped, desperate school districts, the federal government has encouraged schools to take a completely unfounded approach to solving children's learning problems. The beneficiaries have been not children but private companies.

To educators familiar with the materials used in performance contracting programs, the results of the experiment could not have been altogether unforeseen. For the workbook can be the most unindividualized and deadly-dull tool that the teacher has at his disposal, and performance contracting programs tend to place heavy emphasis on the use of workbooks.

It is also conceivable that a steady diet of blank-filling is more than some children can bear. At the Banneker School in Gary, where Behavioral Research Laboratories (BRL) conducted their performance contracting experiment, attendance fell significantly, in comparison with other Gary schools, during the experimental period. (Children who attended school fewer than 150 days, however, were dropped from the experimental population!)

In his book, *Teach Them All To Read*, S. Alan Cohen observed that the best approach to helping disadvantaged children learn to read is to use the know-how that we have, rather than federal pork barrels.[3] This conclusion is well borne out in research studies which repeatedly point to the teacher, rather than the program or materials used, as the crucial factor in whether or not children learn to read. If we accept this as a given, the focus of our efforts to improve performance in reading must be on improving teaching effectiveness, on helping teachers to make operational the know-how we have. The school-university model for improving educational performance is based on the assumption that the know-how we have can best be made available to teachers through the combined resources of school and university.

Reading Needs

While not widely publicized, the school-university approach to alleviating reading retardation is well supported by data. An Atlanta Public Schools–University of Georgia program, which involved all first, second, and third graders in the Atlanta system, is exemplary. The goal of the Atlanta Public Schools Comprehensive Instruction Program (CIP) is to assure each child of the maximum progress possible through improvement in the quality of instruction. The blueprint followed is the identification of *each* pupil's reading needs and the use of the combined resources of school and university to help teachers meet these needs.

During the first year (1970-71) pupils scored significant gains as measured by standardized achievement tests. Second and third graders gained a month of reading achievement for each month of reading instruction, and first graders were very near grade level (although a readiness test given in the fall of 1970 indicated that only about 80 percent of the children were ready to begin reading). The greatest gains were made by schools where traditionally achievement had been very low. Significantly, these were the schools where the most intensive effort was made to improve reading instruction.[4,5]

The diagnostic test used to identify pupil needs was developed cooperatively by school district personnel and the reading staff of the University of Georgia. The uni-

[3] S. Alan Cohen. *Teach Them All To Read.* New York: Random House, Inc., 1969. pp. 4-5.

[4] Atlanta Public Schools. *CIP.* Atlanta, Georgia: Atlanta Board of Education, 1971. p. 20.

[5] Data released as this article goes to press reveal that these gains were sustained in the second year of the program (1971-72).

versity conducts three in-service courses in reading for Atlanta teachers. While these courses carry traditional university course numbers, their content is anything but "canned"; they are focused on the teaching of reading skills most in need of attention as identified by CIP resource teachers assigned to each school to provide direct assistance in the classroom.

Recently, the American Institute for Research (AIR) conducted a comparative study of successful and unsuccessful remedial programs to determine how they differed. The AIR identified two elements present in successful programs: first, they had *specific objectives*, and second, *attention and resources were concentrated on these objectives*.[6] We are coming to realize that these are the requisites not only for successful remedial programs but also for effective school-university programs, whatever their focus.

Traditionally, school-university in-service education programs were dedicated to the amorphous goal of "professional growth." Not surprisingly, the lack of clearly spelled out objectives led to poorly-focused programs, giving in-service education a bad name for many teachers. And the teachers were right; where the goals were formless, the university usually saw its role as the purveyor of courses. (Any resemblance between course content and the needs of individual teachers was purely coincidental.)

Even when objectives *were* clear, the help of the university tended to be procedural rather than substantive. This was a characteristic of in-service programs from the end of World War II until the mid-1960's. Generally, the educational consultant viewed his task as helping a group of teachers to work effectively as a group. In the words of Goodlad[7] in 1957, "The useful consultant, then, is one who is conscious of, sensitive to, and competent in guiding the dynamics of groups at work." Is it any wonder, then, that teachers looking for substantive help with their classroom problems were grievously disappointed?

Yet there were those who maintained that the role of the university included giving teachers concrete and authoritative information about a problem. Said Maucker and Pendergraft:

> It is highly desirable for the consultant to get the local teachers to declare what they feel should be done about a given problem, but it is equally essential that he be able to explain, in concrete language, what the recognized authorities advise, what research and experimentation have revealed, and how other school systems have successfully attacked the problem.[8]

Successful school-university programs in the 1970's are predicated on the principle that the university and school are partners in the solution of learning problems. This is a giant step forward from the providing of information because *the university helps to make what we know about how children learn operational in the classroom*. "Cooperative action" now means the combined resources of school district and university focused on educational problems with the objective of providing educational opportunity for all. This is a far cry from the group process focus of the 1950's.

Atlanta's Comprehensive Instruction Program is system-wide. There are other successful cooperative programs on a smaller scale, such as the Temple–Philadelphia Portal Schools Program which involves selected schools in the area surrounding Temple University. As the model for school-university programs discussed in this article replaces the traditional model, educators and the lay public will, hopefully, turn a deaf ear to promises of magic, expensive promises that cannot be kept. □

[6] A. Harry Passow. "Urban Education in the 1970's." In: A. Harry Passow, editor. *Urban Education in the 1970's*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1971. p. 12.

[7] John I. Goodlad. "The Consultant and In-Service Education." In: Nelson B. Henry, editor. *In-Service Education*. 56th Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Part I. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957. p. 183.

[8] J. W. Maucker and Daryl Pendergraft. "Implications of In-Service Education Programs for Teacher-Education Institutions." In: Nelson B. Henry, editor. *In-Service Education*. 56th Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Part I. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957. p. 277.