

Overview

RON BRANDT

Ramrodding Reform in Texas

Ross Perot, the man most responsible for massive changes being hastily made in Texas education, spoke a few weeks ago at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. Perot's is the classic American success story. He started his business career peddling newspapers in a poor neighborhood and went on to found a Dallas-based computer empire that he sold last year to General Motors for \$2.6 billion.

In many ways Perot epitomizes the style said by the authors of *In Search of Excellence* to characterize successful corporations. He avoids bureaucratic restrictions and gives his employees trust and responsibility. His sick leave policy, I am told, is "If you're sick, stay home. If you're well, come to work."

Perot, a busy billionaire executive, donated his time to head a state-appointed commission that has visited schools and heard testimony in communities all over Texas. He also helped the governor and lieutenant governor convince the legislature to pass House Bill 72, an omnibus education reform act that requires thorough appraisals of teachers and administrators, creates a career ladder for teachers based on those appraisals, provides schooling at public expense for four-year-olds who need it, demands that students be promoted only if they score 70 percent or better on tests measuring grade level objectives, and provides tutoring for students who do not pass.

As he proudly enumerated these changes, Perot expressed open contempt for professional educators. His audience of Washington reporters nodded with knowing smiles as he told how the "education establishment" had resisted his efforts. According to him, Texas administrators are interested only in their athletic teams and their own careers—interests, he implied, that are not unrelated.

I cringed when I heard Perot speak of educators that way. He may be right about some of them, but I know many in Texas and elsewhere who are conscientious, dedicated people. If those educators question some of the provisions of

House Bill 72, it is not because they want to preserve the status quo, but because they have a different vision of excellence.

I was struck also by the seeming inconsistency between Perot's top-down approach to improving education and the enlightened way he is said to have managed his own business. This point is relevant because all across America reform-minded legislators and other state officials are decreeing changes—changes that in themselves may be desirable, but that are likely to encounter strong resistance because of the way they are being imposed.

Most of the authors in this issue are remarkably consistent in advocating a different approach. They contend that the most productive and lasting change originates at the level of the individual school, not the district or state. Staff members of each school, they say, should assess their situation, set reasonable goals, and work together to accomplish them. State governments need not be powerless bystanders; their role is to set guidelines for the way the process is to operate. They can propose, support, and encourage changes considered desirable—and through training strengthen the capability of educators to run good schools. This method is less flashy and more time consuming, but in the long run it is usually more productive.

As I puzzled over the contrast between the approach advocated by John Goodlad, Ernest Boyer, and other leading educators and Perot's more direct approach, a former Texas school administrator told me, "If Perot were to personally take charge of all the schools in Texas for a few years, he'd do it the other way—but he's not going to be running them. And frankly, Perot's right about a good many of those who are. So he had no choice but to play dictator."

Perot predicts that classroom teachers will get behind his new program and help make it succeed, so he apparently has confidence in some educators at least. For those in leadership roles, though, the

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flection of my own participation in the Center and to my own new commitment to learning, I'm not sure. I think it is." I think so, too. In many schools, the more important you are, the further you are removed from learning. But when the leader is learner—when the principal's learning is continuous, sustained, visible, and exciting—a crucial and very different message is telegraphed to the school: this school is a community of learners; learning is its most important characteristic; and the principal is the *head* learner.

The resistance to the leader becoming learner belongs on the current agenda of school reform, and the power of the leader as learner in improving schools rests squarely on the extent to which we proudly and openly find ways of inventing, owning, sustaining, displaying, and celebrating our own learning. □

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message is unsettling. We need Ross Perots in every state. We need their intelligence and drive, and we need their influence. We even need their perspective and criticism. But before we can work in harmony with them, we need their respect most of all.

How can we join forces with such determined reformers? If we are seen as obstacles to change, is it because we understand subtleties of education that political and business leaders do not grasp, or is it because we have failed to explain and use the growing body of knowledge on successful change? One thing is clear: if *we* don't act to improve our schools, somebody else will.

Ron Brandt



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