

# Peter Drucker, Knowledge Work, and the Structure of Schools

Peter Drucker's apt recommendations of nearly two decades ago about economic stability and an educated workforce have direct application to the current discussion of reorganizing schools.

Peter Drucker commented 19 years ago in *The Age of Discontinuity* (1969) that, over the preceding 20 years, manual work had been in decline and knowledge work was in the ascendency. He then made two crucial observations. First, the economic race would be won by those countries that invested in the education, training, and retraining of their people. Second, American management knew very little about managing people who think for a living, and our economy would be in deep trouble unless and until management could create work environments in which knowledge workers could be productive.

Drucker then laid out the keys to managing knowledge workers successfully. First, the old blue-collar maxim—a fair day's work for a fair day's pay—will not work with them. High pay is a necessary but not sufficient condition for motivating knowledge workers. Knowledge workers need the opportunity to accomplish an extraordinary day's work and to earn extraordinary pay while doing so. Knowledge workers, he said, are not satisfied with earning a livelihood. They view themselves as professionals and "require a performance-oriented organization rather than an authority-oriented organization." It is not that management is unnecessary, but rather that the task at hand and the knowledge to address it define who is in charge and how the work gets done, not an individual whose authority is based in hierarchy. In fact, the role of management is key. "To make knowledge work productive," Drucker said,

"will be the great management task of this century."

## Application to Schools

What Drucker laid out almost 20 years ago became, in part, the basis on which other nations have successfully challenged America's basic economic supremacy. It is also the theme of the second wave of school reform. Drucker understood that a highly educated workforce would be essential to economic success and that a highly productive education system would be required to prepare that workforce.

Applying Drucker's principles to the schools, one can readily infer that the line workers in the schools—the teachers—would have to be treated as professionals and that the schools would have to be restructured to make those teachers productive. And he laid down the key principles that would have to inform that restructuring: professional autonomy for teachers, flatter organization structures, and a shift from authority-oriented organization to performance-based organization.

Finally, Drucker made one last point that is very important for our purposes: the typical products of knowledge work are very different from and much harder both to specify and to quantify than are the products of hand work. So outputs, Drucker predicted, would have to be redefined and new measures invented to gauge performance in organizations based on knowledge work.

How, specifically, should the schools be restructured? The detailed answer to that question will be the

work of a generation of educators, but here is a start.

## High Standards for Professional Competence

Teachers are now treated as unskilled and semiskilled production line workers are treated in business and industry. Until teachers can demonstrate high standards of professional competence, they will neither be paid as professionals nor given professional autonomy. The National Board for Teaching Professional Standards has been created to define those standards and to certify teachers who meet them. Thus it is a vital element in the strategy for restructuring our schools.

## A Professional Career Path for Teaching

Teachers now have the same career path as automobile assembly line workers—none. Like the assembly line worker, the teacher does the same job on day one as on the final day on the job. Compensation is a function not of expertise and level of responsibility but of time on the job. Like assembly line workers, teachers are treated as interchangeable parts (actually, this is more true of teachers than assembly line workers).

The alternative is to create a real career path in teaching so that, as a teacher acquires more skill and experience, he or she is rewarded with more responsibility and pay. This notion, of course, has no meaning if teachers have virtually no authority and little responsibility, as at present. But, if, as we describe below, the teachers in a school participate in key decisions about school policy, then it

will make sense to involve the most competent teachers more heavily in these matters than the less competent, just as senior partners in a law firm have more to say about how the firm is run than junior partners. It is also the case, of course, that the senior people in the law firm take on the most difficult cases. Similarly, one would expect that the most competent teachers would take on the most difficult problems in the school.

Increasing skill and experience would bring increasing responsibility and with it increasing pay. In this way, a career path in teaching would open, with the potential of pay levels comparable to those in true professions. For example, the contract recently negotiated in Rochester, New York, will enable lead teachers, those at the top level of responsibility in the system, to earn yearly salaries of \$70,000 without leaving teaching.

One severe impediment to implementing plans of this sort has been teachers' concerns about the criteria used to determine who advances along the career path. Rarely have they believed that administrators would make such decisions based on teachers' professional competence. The Carnegie report proposed that certificates to be issued by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, an organization dominated by teachers themselves, be used as a prerequisite for advancement. Other factors, determined locally, would determine which board-certified teachers would actually be assigned senior responsibilities. The Rochester contract is written in such a way that board certification can be used when it becomes available; but until the board starts certifying teachers, panels of administrators and teachers—with teachers in the majority—will make that judgment.

### **School-Based Management**

Transferring more responsibility to individual schools does not imply turning teachers into administrators or adding yet another layer of bureaucracy to a system already far too bureau-

cratic. To the contrary, it is essential to turn schools into organizations run by people who operate as true professional colleagues, not as collections of supervisors and subordinates.

Many decisions now made at the district level would be made at the school level, and many resources now located at the district level would be assigned to the school level. Most decisions about curriculum, instructional materials, teaching techniques, and staff development needs would be made by the staffs of individual schools. Much of the budget for district-level activities would be distributed to the schools, which would decide how best to use the funds to meet their objectives. Schools could decide to purchase services, such as testing or curriculum specialists, from the central district or from other sources.

Individual schools would also determine their staffing needs and how to fill them. Some might decide to rely heavily on electronic technology for the delivery of information that teachers would otherwise transmit through conventional lectures, using the money saved to hire highly paid teachers who are first-rate diagnosticians and tutors. Another school might decide to invest heavily in college students who could tutor students in subjects not requiring skilled teachers, thus producing a high ratio of adults to students.

Each school would decide its own professional growth needs, so that staff development would be tightly integrated with the goals of the staff for that school and would become a tool that the professional staff could use to implement their overall plan for that school.

Many of the people who now operate out of district offices would be reassigned to individual schools, becoming part of the team of people with collective responsibility for that school. The balkanization of the schools, with each office in the district responsible for some aspect of what goes on in the schools, but no one in control of the whole school program, would come to an end. Using

Drucker's terms, control by authority would be greatly reduced, largely replaced by professional norms of performance, operating within the school itself.

### **School Leadership**

Effective school leadership is crucial to the success of restructured schools. Because many decisions now made at the district level will be made at the school level, there will be more issues to decide within the school than ever before. At the same time, it will be essential to involve teachers fully in making those decisions. For both those reasons, school leaders will face greater burdens than they have in the past.

How should that leadership role be structured? Certainly, one way is to have a sort of cabinet or senior council made up of the principal and the lead teachers in the school. Another way is for lead teachers as a group to take responsibility for their school, with one in the role of "managing teacher," similar to the role of managing partner in a professional firm. These two alternatives may look precisely the same in practice.

Still another approach, probably most suitable in large schools, would draw on the example of hospitals, in which a sharp distinction is made between medical policy and administration. In this model, the school would be run by a school administrator, who would not be expected to be an instructional leader; instructional leadership would come from the top teacher in the school (the "principal teacher"), operating in council with other lead teachers, in much the way that the top medical leadership in a hospital comes from the chief of staff, who is a doctor, rather than the hospital administrator, who is not.

The point is not that any one of these models is preferable to another, but that we need to try variations of all of them to determine which work best under which circumstances.

### **District Leadership**

Drucker's central challenge—how

best to manage knowledge workers for maximum productivity—falls to the school board and the superintendent. This is where the leadership must come from for redesigning the system, moving it from the management of people who are told what to do to the management of people who think for a living. This is the challenge faced by almost every corporation in America today.

Those companies that are succeeding—like IBM, 3M, and John Deere—have learned to be clearer than ever before about organizational goals, to push decision-making authority down to the front lines, to tie progress against goals to the rewards of front line workers, to reduce the layers of management between the front line and the front office, and to turn middle management into champions and developers of the most able talent on the

front line. In the schools, just as in many industries, labor and management will have to learn how to work together toward these ends.

### **Redefining Goals and Creating New Measures**

The primary goal of the school structures created in the early part of this century—the structure we have now—was to help students acquire basic skills. Schools were places where facts were crammed into students and procedures mastered. They still are.

The task ahead is very different. A nation that thinks for a living needs conceptual mastery of the core subjects, strong analytical skills, the ability to communicate well, and all the other things educators put in the category of higher-order thinking ability. The purpose of restructuring our schools is to create organizations capable of vastly

increasing students' higher-order skills. That is why schools need to be places where ideas have currency, why they need to be staffed by people who are comfortable with ideas, and why they must be redesigned so that such people can be as productive as possible.

A major obstacle, which policymakers and educators must work to avoid, is that the success of school restructuring efforts may be measured against the old goal of basic skills achievement with the old measures of norm-referenced machine-scorable tests, rather than against the appropriate goals of progress on higher-order skills. This is partly because policymakers and the public do not yet understand why the old goals are inadequate and the new goals necessary, and partly because educators have not yet figured out how to devise adequate measures of performance on higher-order skills that can be economically administered to large numbers of students.

It is essential to solve this problem. Drucker's point about goals and measurement is that the proper management of knowledge work requires appropriate ways to evaluate the performance of knowledge workers. The whole school restructuring effort will surely fail if teachers and school managements are judged by the wrong goals, using the wrong measures. Some states, districts, and research centers are making progress on this score. Here as elsewhere, the full dimensions of the restructuring agenda are only now becoming apparent. □

#### *Reference*

Drucker, Peter F. *The Age of Discontinuity: Guidelines to Our Changing Society*. New York: Harper & Row, 1969.

*Author's note:* This article is based in part on recommendations made in *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century*, released in 1986 by the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy.

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