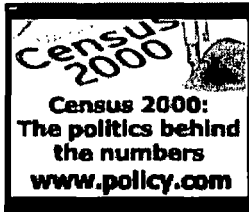




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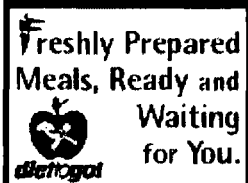
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Good Business in the Schools

By David S. Broder

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The late Malcolm Baldrige, the secretary of commerce in the Reagan administration, was a visionary. Earlier than most, he recognized that American firms had to restructure themselves to compete effectively worldwide in the information age. So he started a competition for companies that involved management and workers alike in a relentless drive for quality and customer satisfaction. After his untimely death in a horseback riding accident, the award was named for him. Winning the Baldrige became the most prestigious honor in American business, and the systematic effort to set organizational goals and measure progress became pervasive -- contributing significantly to the economic dominance the United States now enjoys.

Recently, with support from Congress, the Baldrige process has been applied to another threatened area of American enterprise -- the public school system. And, judging from what I saw last week at a briefing arranged by the National Alliance for Business (NAB), the benefits may be just as great.

Peggy Siegel, who is managing the project for NAB, said that while "random acts of improvement" can boost school performance, it is only when those changes are "properly aligned" in a strategic plan that major, long-term results emerge.

Mike Ward, the North Carolina superintendent of education, explained that the Baldrige model, introduced in seven school districts in 1992 and now being used in seven times that number, has helped his state achieve the greatest gains in standard test scores, along with Texas, while dramatically reducing school violence and boosting teacher standards and salaries.

Even more dramatic was the story told by one Texas educator, Gerald Anderson, superintendent of the Brazosport school district south of Houston. It has some areas of affluence, but about 40 percent of its 13,500 students are minorities and economically disadvantaged. In 1992, prodded by school board members from Dow Chemical, the district's biggest employer and taxpayer, Anderson began training himself and his faculty in the "total quality management" approach used by top-performing companies. At the same time, his school board committed itself, for the first time, to the proposition that all children -- not just those from the best homes -- can learn.

The story since then is captured in a few charts. At the start of the decade, they show white students outperforming African American,

Hispanic and low-income students on standard Texas reading, writing and math exams by 20 percent or more. Over time, all four lines slant upward, and they converge dramatically, with 92 percent to 98 percent of all students -- whatever their category -- passing the tests in the last school year.

An official of the Business Roundtable told me that when Anderson made the same presentation to her group, the CEOs of America's biggest companies gave him a standing ovation. The reaction was equally enthusiastic at this briefing.

But the star of the day was Brenda Clark, principal of the Azalea Elementary School in St. Petersburg, Fla. She reorganized her school, which is 30 percent African American, on Baldrige principles five years ago and told how she had indoctrinated not only faculty but students with the ethic that achievement and improvement are everyone's responsibility. Learning goals are clearly defined, and progress is measured in notebooks the children maintain themselves.

When 32 members of last year's kindergarten classes were so poor at word recognition they did not meet state and district standards for promotion, Florida policy would normally require they be held back. Clark and her teachers took a different approach. The 32 were promoted into two first-grade classes of 16 each, even though the size of the other three first grades had to be increased to 25 or more. The schedule was rearranged so each of the special classes had four hours of uninterrupted instruction time each morning. Assistants were brought in and trained to work with the most advanced of the lagging 32, while the two teachers concentrated on the worst of the worst, creating a 3 to 1 student-teacher ratio for significant blocks of time each morning. By May of this year, every one of the 32 was reading at grade level, while the other three sections had 95 percent success rates.

Watching a video of those rescued first-graders proudly talking about their accomplishment packed the same wallop as seeing the U.S. women's soccer team last Saturday -- goal defined; mission accomplished.

With backing from the major business organizations, the National Education Association and many state officials, the Baldrige in Education initiative is almost ready for a national rollout. Mack Baldrige would be proud.

(The NAB contact numbers are 1-800-787-2848 or www.nab.com.)

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