Education
Re--engineering Could Aid Stalled Budget Process

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Over seventy years ago, the famous sociologist and authority on management, Mary Parker Follett wrote extensively on the process of conflict resolution. Her book, *Dynamic Administration*, is now in its 23rd printing and was printed again in 1995. She described the three kinds of conflict resolution as domination, where one party gets what it wants, compromise, where neither party gets what it wants and goal integration, where the problem is reexamined and the solutions reengineered so that both parties end up better off than they would have been had the problem not been solved. This is the style of conflict resolution that has been lacking in Washington for many years.

With both major parties championing entrenched positions, there has been a reluctance on both sides to examine the problems before us for their practical impact. Creative solutions go wanting as we continue to go further in debt by funding programs that are often beneficial only to the people who administer them. At the same time, enforcement of the public interest goes wanting as we allow individuals of many stripes to take unfair advantage of confused and ineffective enforcement mechanism — some of which are needed. The average American sees through this situation, of course, which is one of the reasons why neither Bill Clinton or Newt Gingrich are very popular.

Yet, there are many instances where we could re-engineer to approaches to be far more effective at lower cost. Education is one. Most of the money has not gone to benefit the children. It has gone for earlier retirements, higher pay and more time off for teachers. Experienced teachers who now earn about twice the average yearly wages of most full time workers in the US. The work considerably fewer hours per year and yet can often retire, with excellent benefits when they are 52 or 55. We have one of the shortest school years in the entire world and one of the shortest school days among industrial countries. We have almost systematically driven anyone with work skill or work experience from being able to teach in local schools. Yet, there is a mountain of evidence suggesting that what our education system needs is closer association with work readiness, better role models, and more time spent on the fundamentals. Education in the US has become very costly as it has become a bit of an international laughing stock.

We could conduct education differently. We could allow people with experience in industry to teach in local schools. We could make extensive use of part time adjunct instructors to provide specialized knowledge and skills. We could increase the number of school hours per year to more closely approximate what takes place elsewhere. Instead of having conflict over whether Spanish or English will be the language of the future, we could build upon the fortunate presence of our Spanish speaking population (three languages are required in many countries). We could hold some of the classes in places of work to provide the students with a better appreciation of how our economy works. We could be less timid about Most of all, we could dismiss those teachers who are neither effective at what they do or interested in improving their effectiveness. We could either make tenure a meaningful badge of academic excellence or get rid of it. In trade, we could become less tolerant of those students who disrupt school and we could provide better support to those teachers and school officials who find it necessary to implement disciplinary action.

The good teachers would have nothing at all to fear from these changes and many of them champion the need for educational reforms now. Tenure does nothing for the good professors —only the marginal ones. If we were to have widespread re-engineering in education, the schools would be more orderly, students would be more invigorated, we could better prepare them for later life, and cost would be lower. We could pay the good teachers better.
Education system gets failing marks

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The recent standoff between the Legislature and the governor was both healthy and overdue. There are five teachers in our immediate family and I would like to join with the many other educators who are interested in educational reform. People, in every profession, want to be part of a class act. Unfortunately, if we were to give education a grade for its achievements during the past 30 years compared to world standards, it could not be a favorable grade. Education is failing the American people and many dedicated people within education feel this keenly. Education is not failing because it lacks resources. Education is failing because the resources are rarely used to benefit students. Many of us have the concern that we are missing a key ingredient to the quality of U.S. education — the work ethic and preparation of the nation's teachers.

Education majors historically score very low on tests themselves. Out of 47 fields of study with national norms on the Graduate Record Examination, the norms for education majors are at or near the bottom. Engineering, science and humanities majors all score much higher. And yet, irrelevant certification requirements make it quite difficult for a physics, engineering or foreign language major to obtain a job teaching school. Most of the first-rate scholars I know would not be able to legally teach school — nor would experienced practitioners from industry, which is one thing that education sorely needs.

This shortfall in qualifications is not because of teacher pay. Teachers in our district, Hopkins, had W-2 earnings averaging $48,300 per year in 1995 — about twice the average for full-time Minnesota workers. The shortfall in qualifications occurs because it is a closed club. It is too difficult for people with good training and experience to break into the system. This applies particularly to highly qualified teachers who may wish to transfer from one school district to another. It also applies to the many energetic young teachers who cannot find teaching appointments while we continue to employ others who have limited zeal and effectiveness.

Neither is it because of other resource limitations — even for Minneapolis. The U.S. spends lavishly on education compared to other countries and gets much poorer results. I was highly impressed with the engineering students at the Czech Technical University (where Einstein once taught) who were making do with facilities well over a hundred years old filled with improvised equipment which served to amplify and make more relevant their learning experiences. The faculty, however, was highly dedicated.

Nor are our problems due to a lack of time. Teachers in Minnesota are required to teach about 22 to 25 hours a week for about 34 weeks of the year. In our district, teachers are allowed 18 paid days off out of this already abbreviated work year. Many teachers put in much more time, of course, but we all know that many do not. The variance in dedication is huge and we have few established mechanisms for dealing with these variances. Few companies would be able to stay in business with the work-time practices employed in education.

Unfortunately, the money appropriated for education in Minnesota rarely benefits students. The money goes for shorter hours, more time off, more benefits, earlier retirements and extra bonuses to retire early. In 1995 and 1996, 30 teachers retired from the Hopkins School District at an average age under 58 years and with special retirement cash bonuses averaging $34,000 which they received in addition to their retirement pay in addition to medical benefits. In some cases, in the past, retirees from that district have also received lucrative severance pay just in addition to early retirement bonuses. The average machinist stands in front of his or her lathe about 80,000 hours before retirement. The average Minnesota teacher is in front of his or her classroom somewhere around 20,000 hours before retirement. Retirement eligibility reportedly occurs even earlier in some metropolitan districts and, looking ahead, it is not impossible that we will have some teachers in retirement twice as long as they worked — an enormous cost to the system. Yet we are timid in our exploration of how these limited number of work hours impact education.

Students the Czech Republic routinely take math through differential equations, three languages and lots of humanities before graduating from high school. The students I had in Uruguay were also excellently prepared. I've also visited and taught in other universities in the United States — including the University of Minnesota. U.S. students are coming to college unprepared to participate meaningfully and we put up with it. But the ramifications are huge. There are six times as many science and engineer-
ing graduates coming out of Southeast Asia as are graduating from the United States and many of ours are from other countries. Most nations with whom we compete in world markets have school years averaging around 220 days a year or more, vs. 171 in Minnesota, and days that are also more intense.

In the past 10 years, I spent quite a bit of time on the international education committee for one of the major professional societies. Every dean or professor or representative from industry that I met in connection with that assignment was seriously concerned with the quality of U.S. elementary and secondary education — as well as higher education.

Yet, mere attendance at college is no index of educational progress. Over the past 30 years, we have seen a great upsurge in the number of graduates in political science, theater arts and business administration. Yet the number of graduates in the sciences has remained approximately constant for many years. Minnesota’s private colleges have about 20 percent of the state’s enrollment but graduate about half of Minnesota’s science graduates.

Obviously, there are many dedicated teachers and my heart goes out to them. Education has some excellent teachers — but not enough. If someone purchases a new car that has two flat tires, they will no doubt complain. But, if our courses are uninspiring or poorly taught or insufficient in terms of the material covered, that is a quality problem too. One of our daughters, who is an excellent high school teacher, made an interesting observation regarding student testing: “The people they should really test are the teachers.”

It is important for legislators to differentiate between what people in education really think vs. what the people who purport to represent them say in public. Representatives of the Minnesota Education Association would have us believe that what is needed is more money and more formal credentialing. Many people in education believe that the most useful thing we could do is to rid the system of some of the people who are less dedicated and up the expectations.

Yet, I can understand the concerns of people in organized labor and I can fully recognize the fact that today’s teachers are asked to put up with too much. Teachers should be given more latitude to discipline students. The public is entitled to a great deal more accountability on the part of the people involved in education — students as well as teachers. We should treat the good teachers well and then remake the system so it can be more effective at lower cost. In order to do this, we will need to address the work-time requirements, preparation, and retirement practices of teachers. If we retain only the competent teachers, make the work schedule similar to what other employees experience, institute more traditional retirement programs, and re-instill a sense of pride, the educational progress of students should increase with no more money being spent. If we cannot do these things, parents and students should be able to choose private schools.

I applaud the governor for his concerns in this regard.
How to cut college costs? Easy as Pi

MINNEAPOLIS STAR TRIBUNE -- June 16, 2002

The Star Tribune recently has run a series of articles on the cost of higher education and how college costs might be better financed. They all were interesting to me, a college professor and a father of five. I have roughly guesstimated that our family already has spent about $400,000 on tuition and we still have a junior in high school and a freshman in college. College tuition is costing more, and the time is upon us when those of us involved in education should examine our role in it. Perhaps there are some things we can do.

Over the years, I have taught or lectured at universities in the United States, four times in South America and in Europe. Our older children have taught at Stanford University, the University of Washington and Ohio State University. Among my friends at many other schools are many insightful scholars who are asking the question, “Are we doing things in the best way that we can?”.

We could take several steps to improve the cost-effectiveness of education. We could convert to a full work year, which most conscientious faculty members observe already. If education is important, which it is, why not work a normal-length year?

We could reduce the influence of tenure or hold systematic annual reviews, as several universities do now. We could reduce much of education’s non-value-adding overhead. And we could hold fewer meetings.

The paid time of most college faculty members simply cannot be accounted for by teaching or research. Professors at teaching institutions usually teach classes for about 330 hours per year; at research institutions, about 165. An ordinary work year in industry is around 1,925 hours. The word count for all of the published academic articles and books per year works cannot account for the full available faculty time and even this is highly skewed to a relatively small number of people.

In reality, many of us neither teach nor do research - very much. Instead, we meet. We have search committees and curriculum meetings and policy meetings and innumerable other meetings but very few decisions.

Many conscientious faculty members hate these meetings, and they avoid them because nothing ever happens and they have better things to do. This all works to the peril of the institution because it leaves the affairs of the university in the hands of people who like meetings.

The poem below was written during a protracted faculty meeting. I won’t say where. It illustrates the dilemma often created by the consensus style of management so prevalent in academia. As educators, we have responsibilities. Our institutions were not built to serve us but to serve students in as cost-effective a manner as we can. Collectively, we aren’t there yet. We have too much time off. We waste the time that we have. We don’t always expose our best scholars to the students. We rarely practice the cost-vigilance that has been necessary for survival in industrial companies. Perhaps the matter can be discussed further.

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The Committee on the Value of Pi

MINNEAPOLIS STAR TRIBUNE -- June 16, 2002

A long time ago at Fernpepper U,
Dean Quigley struggled with what to do.
Now the dean was a man of very good heart,
Gentle and kind and unwilling to part.
From his key objective of widespread bliss.
No contention, no challenges, just things left amiss.
Whenever a problem would need a solution,
A faculty committee was the key to resolution.

A new problem developed, which required much tact,
On the value of pi. Was it exact?
So Quigley decided it would be a great pity.
To resolve the matter without a committee.
He appointed 16, but this proved too restrictive,
And the committee grew more and became somewhat addictive.

Now, academic committees have key characteristics:
Include all opinions, ignore all statistics.
Deal only with emotion and tenure and rank.
Never, ever, be concerned about money in the bank,
Or whether or not the classes are good,
Or whether the students are paying more than they should.
One rule above all makes committees very nice:
Never consider an option that involves sacrifice.
Procedures like these which function so lowly.
Are why faculty committees get wrong answers slowly.

The committee faced the pi problem with glee.
“When we get done with pi, we’ll then take on E.”
They all agreed that pi was all wrong -
Too complicated, too messy and much, much too long.
Three-point-one-four-one-five-nine.
Two-six-five-three-five-eight-nine.
Seven-nine-three-two-three-eight-four-six.
This was truly a problem the committee should fix.
So the committee continued its arduous work,
Meeting weekly on release time, a wonderful perk.

One faction wanted the number reduced,
Because of the awkward trouble it induced.
To have a value of 2 would be much more astute,
Much easier to remember, to use and compute.
Others wanted the value increased -
Pizza lovers mostly, from out in the East.
Some suggested its length was ridiculous,
Preferring instead to be much less meticulous.

Some suggested not much could be rearranged -
Pi was a ratio that could never be changed.
“Pi is irrational, one can easily see.”
“That may be true, but then, so are we.”
But most concluded that it was absolutely imperative.
That pi be considered a faculty prerogative.

The contention soon engulfed both physics and theology.
Math and English, engineering and zoology.
Journalism and German and French and geology.
Chemistry, history, economics and psychology.
The debate continued year after year.
While Fernpepper slipped to a much lower tier.

Quality declined because of this digression.
And enrollment plunged to a deep recession.
Money became scarce, as we might have suspected.
And worthy projects were always rejected.
Younger faculty who showed the most potential.
Were let go - having tenure was essential.
Quigley passed on, as did three deans following.
But the committee continued, undaunted and wallowing.

Not all participated in the fervent debate.
Some continued doing work that was really first-rate.
They taught and researched and inspired the students.
Had new ideas and new concepts as they covered the rudiments.
But these able few could not reverse the trend.
And Fernpepper continued its trend toward the end.

The question we ask is, could we have saved it.
By taking strong action, if we had braved it?
Could we have made our classes much better.
Or focused our attention on things that really did matter?
If we had helped the students to find sufficiency.
Or done some things to improve our efficiency?
Could we have been more demanding of ourselves and our peers.
And exemplified greater scholarship those past many years?

At the time of the Pi Committee, we were all overjoyed.
But as of this writing, we are all unemployed.
And the name Fernpepper is remembered by only a few.
Along with Studebaker and Hudson and Dien Bien Phu

Note: Pi is the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter. It is about 3.14159265358979323846.
Let's make education a class act

MINNEAPOLIS STAR TRIBUNE -- February 20, 2005

The status, financial condition, needs and quality of Minnesota’s education system are likely to keep the Legislature busy this session, examining proposals for vouchers, starting the school year after Labor Day, funding increases for higher education, merit pay and other important issues. These deliberations are of interest to those of us involved in education and everybody else.

Clearly, all citizens benefit from the competence and dedication of so many people in education. First-rate scholars like John Adams, Ed Schuh, Andrew Van de Ven and Ann Markusen, from the University of Minnesota, J.T. Black of Auburn, Dick Chase of the University of Southern California and many others all shoulder the solemn responsibility of educating, stimulating and revitalizing our entire nation.

Minnesota’s private colleges, which supply nearly half of the state’s science and math graduates, have dedicated and effective educators as well: Mike Naughton, Meg Karraker, Tom Ippoliti, Mike Mikolajczak and others.

There is much good in education at all levels; at universities, technical colleges, and in the K-12 system. Last spring, I was privileged to serve as “Principal for a Day” at North High School in Minneapolis, where I witnessed first-hand the dedication of students, faculty and staff.

Yet the dedication of some students, some faculty and some staff cannot be generalized to all of education. The disparity in effectiveness and efficiency is enormous - within schools, between schools, and at different levels - quite often unrelated to the funding involved.

Educators cause some of this disparity because we too often consider what is good for us rather than what is good for students or the community. As educators, we have responsibilities. Our institutions were not built to serve us, but to serve students in as cost-effective a manner as possible.

In spite of some heroic efforts by individuals, education as a system is in need of much improvement. We have too much bureaucracy and too much time off. We often waste time with inconsequential meetings. Some administrators do little more than spawn busy work and consume resources.

Our best scholars are often not available to students. We rarely practice the cost vigilance that has been necessary for survival in industrial companies.

Indifferent parents who watch too much television, overzealous sports enthusiasts and citizens with competing priorities also detract. The motivation for this piece was in part provided by the proposal recently advanced in the Legislature to start school after Labor Day for the sake of the resort business. Given the fact that students who score at the median in science and math tests in Singapore would score at the 87th percentile in the United States, shortening Minnesota’s already abbreviated school year does not seem like a good idea. If education is important to our future, it deserves serious consideration.

Although some argue the need for more funding, generally speaking, educators are well-paid - especially on a per-hour basis. The annual compensation of K-12 educators is about twice the average for full-time workers who normally work 40 percent more days per year and retire about 10 years later. And, the defined-benefit retirement plans provided to K-12 teachers are generous compared with the defined-contribution plans common in industry.

At the college level, we should remember that there are now eight college football coaches making more than $2 million dollars per year and many who make more than $1 million. The head coaches at the University of Iowa and Iowa State are among the highest-paid people in the state. Does this activity really have the earmarks of being underfunded?

We spend a lot of money on education, but much of it never reaches the classroom. The projected cost of the lucrative retirement programs for public employees is attracting more attention. By 2008, Michigan teacher retirement programs, though less lucrative than those in Minnesota, will annually cost $1,200 per pupil. Yet the costs for retirements and time off seem never to be considered as we evaluate “funding” for education.
There are many hard-working and dedicated teachers who earn every cent of their pay and we should appreciate them. Still, the world economic environment is highly competitive. It is not surprising that some of these pressures permeate education.

We could ignore both the pressures and the facts. We could ignore the fact that students in several competing countries experience longer school years, more rigorous instruction and receive significantly more homework than students receive here. We could avoid updating our retirement programs in the face of rapidly increasing life expectancies.

We could let gradual drift take its ultimate toll - the infusion of greater cost and the compromising of results.

The governor or the Legislature are not the chief enemies of education. Most of the enemies are within; insufficient quality assurance, unenforced discipline, compensation systems excessively skewed toward older teachers, poor resource utilization, too much bureaucracy.

Nor are the perils facing education the result of union presence. The heavily unionized school district in Edmonton, Alberta, is one of the most innovative in the Western Hemisphere. Leading companies such as Southwest Airlines, Deere and Ford have been unionized for many decades and still turn out quality products and make good returns. But, with these companies, the threat of capable competition has motivated labor and management to work productively together. This has not yet happened in education, but it should.

I sometimes wish the Legislature could do something practical like make provisions to fire the very few less-dedicated teachers, bring sanity to the emphasis on athletics, close costly operations that contribute little to the state’s economy, allow the dedicated teachers to enforce their own discipline in the classroom, make the state’s public retirement schedule similar to that of Social Security, and levy a modest tax on television sets and video games to provide additional funding for the quality education we will need to compete.

Were these things to happen, my belief is that the people in education would rally in support. People in education want to be part of a class act.