Outsourcing Public Education

Public education in the United States could be on the verge of radical alteration as a result of a “flattening” world. Many public schools have been ravaged by persistent financial woes, volatile labor relations, crumbling buildings and facilities, social issues that overwhelm school personnel and resources, and the continued use of outmoded teaching and assessment methods. Public schooling quickly has become the last resort for parents who cannot afford the option of private education, while those with means do whatever possible to avoid the public schools.

Although there have been many superficial changes to public education over the years, the traditional factory model continues to persist. Charter schools have been proposed as a less oppressive alternative within public education that allow opportunities for innovation more difficult within conventional schools. However, in an effort to stifle the growth of charter schools, the public education establishment attempts to use its political clout to constrain charter schools by adopting policies and procedures, in the name of accountability, that are more consistent with the factory model. Due to the convergence of advanced technologies in computers, software, and communication, our public schools eventually will have to face global economic reality that has the potential to radically alter the dynamics of education in America.

Is Outsourcing the Solution?

India, with its abundance of math and engineering graduates who are willing to teach from a distance, has become an increasingly popular source of tutoring services in the United States. The major reason, of course, is cost. These highly talented English-speaking tutors are willing to provide their services for less money (about $20 per hour) than their American counterparts ($45 to $80 per hour). Many of these foreign teachers come with extraordinary credentials. They are all highly educated, come from math and science backgrounds, and have prior teaching experience. Finding American teachers with comparable credentials would be extremely expensive if not impossible.

So what’s to stop America from outsourcing education, an American institution that, some would argue, is most in need of improvement?

“Good Morning” from India

Teachers in India could teach entire classes. Online college courses and cyber schools have demonstrated that students are capable of sustained beneficial exchanges via the Internet. The teachers would have audio and video connections with their American students, and because wages in India are so much lower than in the United States, schools could afford to offer more classes with smaller class sizes.

Foreign language students could meaningfully benefit from outsourcing teaching to foreign countries, and not necessarily India. There are many people in the world who are bilingual and there is no reason why every American taking a foreign language couldn’t have his or her own instructor. Through interaction with people from other cultures, our knowledge of foreign cultures would dramatically increase and foreigners’ opinions about Americans would be shaped by actual conversation.

Outsourcing education would not only make it easier for parents to gain access to an abundance of highly trained teachers for their children, it also would be possible for parents to select teachers who reflect their parental values.

Because a teaching career has been viewed as lacking the five P’s—power, perks, pay, position, and prestige—by many talented students, a lot of our least academically prepared students have pursued education as a career and, of course, found their way into the unionized and protected work environment of the public schools. In the areas of math and science, the talent pool is even shallower.

As it is currently organized, it is obvious that our education system is incapable of helping enough of our children develop the high-level knowledge and skills that they need to succeed in today’s flat world. Today our children are living in a complex, dynamic, and hi-tech world; however, the schools they attend are still operating much like they did a century ago. The problem is that as long as we continue to educate people in usual ways, they will carry on the present way of doing things. Our public schools are still structured for an industrial economy.

Lou Gerstner, the former chief executive officer of IBM, stated: “Transformation of an enterprise begins with a sense of crisis or urgency. No institution will go through fundamental change unless it believes it is in deep trouble and needs to do something different to survive.”

Outsourcing could well be the “crisis or urgency” that leads public education in America to fundamental change.

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Here’s Your Chance to Speak Out

The author argues that public education is in need of a major overhaul and that outsourcing is the solution. Do you agree? Is the concept of outsourcing education a threat to the U.S. school system?

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