PS1 for 4/13/89 # Business and the Schools – An Odd Couple

A cover article in **Nation's Business** addresses the problem that so many young people are too illiterate to hire even for entry-level jobs, and challenges business to take on an effort to remedy the situation. Business is already spending $30 billion a year to teach new workers the skills they failed to acquire in elementary and secondary schools.

No one can dispute the appallingly poor product produced by the $200 billion-a-year public school industry. Secretary of Education Lauro Cavazos admitted in a recent article in **Principal** magazine that 27 million young adults are functionally illiterate, and another 40 to 60 million are only marginally literate. This means that about 77 million American adults can't read anything with a vocabulary more extensive than the couple of thousand words that pupils have been taught to memorize by the fifth grade.

Pardon me if I take exception to the whole notion that business can or should "get involved" in the public school morass. What business has done so far shows that it not only throws good money after bad, but compounds the problem by financing further failure and postponing real reform.

When business enters into some cooperative "partnership" with the public schools, business ends up being used as a fundraiser for the public school establishment, while the teachers' unions conduct the school as usual. A review of the examples given in **Nation's Business** of business "cooperation" shows that business is mainly used as a Sugar Daddy to give or get more money for bad schools.

In South Carolina, businessmen were used to persuade the legislature to vote a one cent sales tax increase. In Tennessee, the businessmen donated $400,000 for television ads to persuade the state legislature to vote for a sales tax increase.

Business has also been persuaded to buy equipment, to finance classroom projects, to "adopt" a classroom. To "sponsor" a school or a tutor, and to "recognize" an outstanding teacher or student. All those things, of course, mean donating corporate money for projects peripheral to academic achievement.

In the so-called Boston Compact, business donated $100 million over the last four years, and offered jobs for students upon graduation, on the promise that the schools would lower the dropout rate, raise test scores, and graduate pupils with a grasp of academic fundamentals. Businessmen have just called it quits and refused to finance a second four years because students' reading competency failed to improve.

Businessmen seem to lose all their usual business acumen when they go into negotiations with the teachers' unions. The businessmen simply fail to tackle the real problems: lack of accountability for results, the overloaded bureaucracy, the political power of the teachers' unions, the failure to teach reading by the proven phonics method, the filling up of the school day with offensive psychological curricula, the hostility to parents, and the high cost of $5,000 per student.

Some businessmen get so woolly-brained and intimated that they fall for the most outrageous tactic invented by the teachers' unions to create more jobs for their members: putting little children in school at age 3, commonly known as "early childhood education."

Those businessmen fall for what former Secretary of Education William Bennett calls "the 14-egg omelet fallacy." That's the notion that an inedible 12-egg omelet served up by a bad chef with a lousy recipe can be made into something delicious by adding two more eggs.

Businessmen, faced up to reality. You are no match for the conniving, tax-salaried teachers' union negotiators who intimidate you by labeling themselves "the experts," speak a jargon you don't even understand, and play you for a sucker with a deep pocket they can pick. Here are a couple of suggestions for the next business "summit" with the education establishment.

Unless you hold the schools accountable for teaching pupils to read in the first grade, the entire rest of schooling – all eleven other grades – is a waste of time and fraud on students, parents and taxpayers. Administrators should be reduced by at least half. Public schools have 30 to 40 times as many administrators per student as parochial schools, which turn out at superior product.

Xerox board chairman David T. Kearns, who has made some constructive suggestions for reforming public schools, ridicules most businessmen's attempts to help education. He derisively called them "feel-good partnerships" because they are like doing your child's homework. It's a misdirected kindness.

Kearns accurately says that these business forays into education "hurt more than they help because they keep shoring up a system that needs deep structural changes. And the longer those changes are delayed, the greater the agony will be when the inevitable day of reckoning comes."