

If Kids Don't Want to Learn You Probably Can't Make 'em

Ted Kolderie's notes from Jack Frymier's visit to Saint Paul

2001

If Jack Frymier is correct . . . and he's not alone in thinking what he does . . . Minnesota could usefully — actually, will have to — refocus its effort at improving public education.

Understand first: This is a person who has spent his life in public education; as a teacher, administrator, professor (at Ohio State University for about 25 years) and researcher (a senior fellow at Phi Delta Kappa, the professional teaching society, for the past 15 years) He has not been in the political controversies about reform. His work has been in teaching and learning; with teachers and with kids.

This is where education is failing, he says: in the relationship between teachers and students. This is where 'improvement' has to focus.

Frymier had two long discussions in Saint Paul late in October, with groups of educators, legislators and others involved with efforts to improve education; looking to improve their understanding of where their efforts should now focus.

His case is straightforward:

- o Students learn when they're motivated to learn. If they want to learn, they will. If they don't, you can't make 'em. Any successful effort to improve learning will therefore be fundamentally about improving students' motivation.
- o Motivation is an individual matter. Kids differ; in personality, in background and experience, in sociability, in creativity, in intelligence, in their interests. Different kids are motivated by different things. No effort at motivation will succeed unless it works with these differences.
- o 'School' is not very well tuned to the differences in students. Teachers may know kids less well today than in the past. Schools are pressed now to be interested mainly in what kids know and can do; less in who they are. Kids move around; are moved around. Schools are larger: As Ted Sizer has pointed out, high-school teachers especially have far too many students to know any of them well. Schools are age—graded: Students are with a teacher for a year; next year, have another.
- o Curriculum materials are not often adapted to individuals.
- o Teaching methods are not often varied according to the needs and interests of the individual student. Some teachers do this, but many don't. Teachers work mostly with kids in groups; most are obsessed with 'classroom management'. Most teachers talk too much (as Professor John Goodlad also reported from his research, in *A Place Called School*)

Adapting materials and methods to individual student needs is a teachable skill. It just isn't very often taught where teachers are trained.

- o Teachers aren't given much opportunity to modify 'instruction' in this way. The curriculum is 'sequenced'; teachers are not encouraged to modify the order in which things are taught, or how much time is spent on what. Students are not free to pursue a topic that interests them: The schedule calls for the course to move on.

- o There are no rewards and few opportunities to teachers for trying to modify 'teaching' in this way, so that learning becomes interesting to the student and becomes the responsibility of the student.
- o Because 'school' takes this form most academic subjects are not of interest to most students, Frymier says. If it weren't for the extracurriculars there would be a revolution by kids in school.

This is a serious indictment of what is happening. Coming from a responsible educator it needs to be taken seriously.

It puts many things in perspective.

- o It clarifies that the problem is not just outside school. The problems in society are real and make a difference: changes in the family, changes in the youth culture. But 'school' is also a part of the problem; failing to do what it could and should to help kids learn.
- o It clarifies that schools, and teachers can appropriately be held accountable for low student performance. Both have long insisted they are not responsible for what the students learn. But they have said they can be and should be held accountable for 'best professional practice'. Precisely. Frymier's point is that it is with professional practice that schools are failing. The low student performance is the result of this failure.
- o It clarifies that efforts should focus on what motivates students to learn. Except to the extent schools can get kids to want to learn it will make little difference, say, to introduce standards for student performance or to change 'the learning program' Whatever the standards and whatever the learning program the key — in the diverse classrooms of American schools — will remain the teacher's ability to adapt the program to the individual students.

Frymier was clear: A lot of adults do not want to do this. They do not want to begin with individual differences and with student-motivation. They do not relate well to the idea of beginning with what interests kids, and with kids are. They have thought of 'objectives' as adults' objectives, and have defined success as the student satisfying the teacher. Many people would be uncomfortable with the idea that the concept of 'success' should be the teacher meeting the students' needs.

His argument is not for letting students do whatever they want, or against setting standards for students (though he believes that it is a mistake to drop out things like honesty and responsibility as objectives, and to narrow expectations just to academics)

It is simply that, as a practical matter, kids will not learn unless they are motivated to learn; that the job of schools and teachers is to get them motivated, and that if we are serious about students learning we will have to be serious about arranging 'school' so it does motivate students. At the moment it does not.

What to do, then? What does this mean for policy? (Frymier is candid that he does not much work with policy)

One popular answer is to "get tough". Tell kids they won't get a diploma: That'll motivate 'em.

There is a place for 'getting tough' . Schools and teachers — and kids — are unlikely to do the hard things that change requires unless they have to, as the late president of the

American Federation of Teachers, Albert Shanker, said in Saint Paul in May 1991. The state does now test performance and report the results. There are consequences, now, for poor performance.

But it is pointless, and unfair, to 'hold people accountable' without giving them at the same time the opportunity to change so they can do better. That's what Superintendent Don Helmstetter and his friends were saying a year ago. [See "School Districts Need Flexibility to Change", Minnesota Journal, Nov. 17, 1998.] That's what Jack Frymier is saying, about teaching.

Teachers, schools, need to be able to adapt materials and methods to fit the differences among students. They need to be free to do this. They need to have reasons to do this, in their own interest. Too many are not free to do this now.

So the answer to the problem with teaching is not in the classroom. It is with the people who control the classroom and the school.

Up front this is a question for district boards. They own the schools; they make policies for the schools.

But will boards give schools this freedom? The danger is that under pressure now about 'test scores' they will do just the opposite; will tighten up, will focus on academics only, will try to 'get tough' with schools where students do not learn, will try to tell schools what are the 'good' learning programs they must use, will try to tell teachers how to teach; will try to make kids learn.

If districts simply tighten up, then the state will have to act to cause the districts to provide the flexibility and incentives that schools and teachers need. The chartered schools and the idea of school-based decision-making are state policy moves in this direction.

Everything turns on whether the boards, and the state, will focus on the need to get kids to want to learn.

Maybe it is too much to hope that elected officials and the media will swing their focus away from the what-kids-ought-to-know discussion; "the grad rule" and "The Profile of Learning". Too many people may be too deeply vested in the notion that academic standards, and the threat of failure, are an adequate method for improvement.

But maybe not. Perhaps Minnesota will pay some attention to Jack Frymier's common-sense point: that nothing will work unless 'school' is re-arranged so that students [[want]] to learn.