

Albert Shanker's Call for Incentives and Rewards in Education

Al Shanker said some important things in Saint Paul May 9, 1991 as part of the two-day AFT/National School Boards Association meeting to look at the Saturn School.

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Up front it was an argument for technology; not new, but very persuasively argued:

* Other countries succeed by tracking kids. Germany sorts kids by ability-level at age 9. But we're (rightly) unwilling to do that. So from 5th grade on our teachers have to work with classes containing a wide range of ability.

* It is impossible to teach that kind of a group by talking. If the teacher talks to the average level s/he loses the bright kids. If s/he talks to the bright kids s/he loses the others. Unfortunately this is what most teachers in most schools do.

* Learning has got to be individualized. "The one-room school was a better learning institution than the classroom we have today." Kids worked at their own pace. The teacher coached. Kids helped each other.

* But we will not go back to one-room schools. And we cannot hire a teacher for every six kids.

* Technology is the out. To avoid humiliating the slower student. To let kids work together. To get away from teacher-talk. To let us avoid tracking.

But his main argument was for incentives and rewards. The system does not have them today. It has got to put them in.

Learning is hard work. In other countries students have to work hard. If they don't they don't get into college. Or don't get a good job.

Here you can get into college anyway. And employers never look at your high-school transcript. No incentives. So, no effort.

"And I'm convinced that we in education, too, are not going to do the hard things needed to change the schools unless we have to. Unless there are consequences.

"Something has to be at stake. There is, in other fields: Your organization could fail. People in these fields dislike change too. But they have to do it.

"We in education don't. Because for us nothing is at stake. If our kids do brilliantly nothing good happens. And if we don't push we can count on remaining popular with our colleagues.

"We have got to deal with this question of consequences for adults. Educators simply are not going to take the risks of change, against the pressures of everyday popular feelings, unless they have to."

“We do need something to happen that is truly revolutionary.”

Shanker is always great at explaining what needs to happen, and why it needs to happen. His problem -- as at the MFT Quest session in 1985 -- is in being clear about how it's going to happen.

Sure enough, the first question Thursday night, from a teacher down front, was exactly that: “How does this happen?”

Again, Shanker's answer was important for our current discussion:

“I'm not an optimist. I don't expect unions to come out for incentives and rewards. I can do it, because I'm retirement—age.

“But we're not going to have what we have now much longer. It doesn't work, and everybody knows it doesn't work.

A lot of educators don't think they're affected . . . think they're not threatened by the pressures that are building. They're dead wrong.”