

Failure is Not an Option

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INTRODUCTION - Apollo 13

My wife and I just toured the Kennedy Space Center and were reminded of the crisis of the Apollo 13 where the lives of the crew were all at peril due to a hardware failure while they were on their way to the Moon.

The staff on the ground was told to come up with a solution to save the lives of the space travelers. They were given the imperative "Failure is not an option".

Fortunately the staff came through and all the crew members were saved.

POINT ONE - No Child Left Behind - The Program

Democrat U.S. Senator Ted Kennedy and Republican President George W. Bush came together in an unprecedented agreement which we now call "No Child Left Behind".

The theory behind the program is that some students go through public school without an adequate grasp of math and or the English language and with that deficiency, these students are being "Left Behind" by our Public Schools.

The program was set up so that students throughout the country would be measured with the same standard. Students would pass or fail based on how well they did on standardized tests.

Schools would be measured based on how the students do. The school grading was based on the percentage of students who pass the standardized tests.

The students were not expected to all get 100% on their tests but 100% of the students were expected to get a passing grade on the standardized tests. Thus the 100% pass rate relates to "No Child Left Behind".

The standard then is that all students achieve a minimum standard of "adequate" when given the standardized tests.

Of course the Federal enabling legislation allows a certain amount of time for Public Schools to get to the point where 100%

of the students have an adequate education in Math and English.

It was initially established that 58.4% of the students could pass the "Adequacy" test for math in 2001 so that was made the "baseline" for math. (It was 60.7% for English)

The Federal law mandated that the percentage for both Math and English go to 100% by 2013. At that point, "No child will be left behind."

Getting to that 100% mark was left entirely up to the individual Public School Systems. The only thing the law said that there would be a "sliding scale" for the goal so progress could be assessed for all the intervening years. For 2005, the initial goal was 70% for both Math and English but was later changed to 67% for Math and 69% for English.

Goal Setting

Let me make an analogy of this concept with business. The business concept is called "Breakeven Analysis".

In business, there are Fixed Costs (such as rent) and Variable Costs (such as raw materials used). Gross Profit is defined as Sales Dollar Volume less the Variable Costs. The Breakeven point is the Sales Dollar Volume at which the Gross Profit just covers the Total Fixed Costs.

The problem in business with Breakeven Analysis is that store managers tend to see the Breakeven Point as the goal rather than the minimum. This is disastrous for business because when the goal is reached, there is no profit. Profit only comes over the Breakeven Point.

Schools seem to make the same mistake in regards to the No Child Left Behind program which uses a minimum standard of "adequate". When this standard is set as the goal, you get the same result as a business using the Breakeven Point as the goal.

It is generally accepted that standard of performance range from "total failure" to "excellence" where "adequate" is somewhere in between. I would put it in between "poor" and "fair" where both "good" and "excellence" are decidedly better.

When you shoot for "adequate" and you just miss it, you get "poor". When you shoot for "excellence" and you just miss it, you get "good". If your really miss "excellence" you get "fair", which is still better than "adequate".

We should change our thinking to go for a standard of "excellence" even though the minimum standard of No Child Left Behind is only "adequate".

Fluvanna On Target

When I looked at the minutes of the September 2006 Fluvanna School Board I was frankly disgusted that the discussion was "how well we did" because our Black students in our High School reached the recently "dumb downed" Math Standard of Adequacy.

I say "dumb downed" because the standard was originally set for 70% but was changed to 67%. We reached the new standard in both the Elementary with 68.75 and the High School with 69.23. Middle School "just missed" with 53.84.

But compared to the original standard of 70%, all of our schools are below that standard.

But this all misses the concept of the program. The tests being given to the students measure their performance with a pass standard of "adequate". The school then gets a rating based on the percentage of students who reach the minimum standard of "adequate".

So for putting this in the language of the No Child Left Behind program for Math, over 30% of our Black Students in all our schools are being "Left Behind". For English, its over 29% of our Black Students in all our schools are being "Left Behind".

While students other than our Black Students are doing somewhat better, for Math, over 14% of our White Students in all our schools are being "Left Behind". For English, its over 13% of our White Students in all our schools are being "Left Behind".

The School System seems proud of its progress in regards to this program. After all, we are pretty much on target towards 100% by 2013. We are only about a year behind for some of our students and a few years ahead of schedule for the school system overall.

But Not Good Enough

I disagree. I believe there is no excuse to allow a large portion of our students to be "left behind" for the next five years or so. We should be going for 100% now; not when we do some new construction or hire some new "specialist". What, do

you think we need "basics" specialists? This is ridiculous.

Can we not identify ourselves who is not making the grade? Do we really "need" the government to tell us which students cannot read, write, and or add?

Answering the Critics of No Child Left Behind

Now I have heard two main criticisms for the No Child Left Behind Program. The first is that it mandates a certain result but does not fund what it mandates. The second is that it causes school systems to divert funds from one method of teaching to this specific program so teaching is now done for the test.

Both criticisms have the same answer. Public School's primary mission is to teach basic literacy not to make "productive citizens". Basic literacy is more or less defined as "reading, writing, and arithmetic". All the federal law says is "do this first and do it for all students".

There is a Crisis

There are a lot of very creative ideas out there for the education "industry" but they ALL must take secondary roll to the "prime directive" - Teach all students basic literacy.

Perhaps the law doesn't measure accurately. But I have not seen any school system parade out a group of students who have flunked the competency tests in Math or English and said "these students failed the test but really do know their Math and English."

All the school systems acknowledge that a certain portion of the students are still illiterate after we spend about one hundred thousand dollars (\$100,000.00) in teaching each student including the students that are still illiterate. They instead come up with reasons why the students do not learn. They blame the student, the family, the community, the race of the student, the history of the race of the student. Everyone is at fault except the system.

Fix the Crisis First

I am less interested in why it does not work than I am interested in making it work. I like the concept of fixing things with plan A, Plan B, and Plan C. Plan A you come up with yourself. If that does not work, we go to Plan B in which we work with you to develop. If that does not work we go with Plan

C. But you do not have to concern yourself with Plan C because you will not be part of it.

I see our schools falling behind with their Plan A. We need to work with the schools to develop a Plan B. But if that does not work, we will need to find a Plan C. Failure is not an option.

POINT TWO - Excellence For Those That Want It

Literacy for all may be a dream but it is one that is held by all. But this is only half of the dream. The other is Excellence for those that want it. We may be living in the woods but you can get to anywhere from here.

Getting the astronauts safely home was the emergency equivalent to our No Child Left Behind program. But that was not the mission of Apollo 13. The mission was walking on the Moon. That mission was put on hold because of the emergency but the emergency did not supplant the mission, it only delayed it.

We now are not only making regular missions to outer space but we now have humans constantly manning a space station that circumnavigates earth every ninety (90) minutes. Each mission adds another piece. In just a few more years it will be the third most visible object in the sky; Sun, Moon, then Space Station. And it will be visible during daylight. Now you can see it mornings and evenings.

The equivalent of our space program to our school system is Excellence for all who want it. You are more likely to be rich with Excellence than with sports or the lottery.

Planting Dreams

I remember in my youth those whole school Assemblies where different programs were put on that went far beyond the teaching curriculum. There was a program on static electric where you could see sparks fly with thousands of volts being generated with friction on a moving belt. There was another program about preserving foods using atomic radiation. These were programs to plant seeds of dreams within young students.

When the dream is planted, Excellence is the path. One does not take a "mind expanding drug" or use a "mind expanding machine" as in the movie "Forbidden Planet". Desire for the dream creates the will to find a way to fill that dream.

Our late President Kennedy did not give people the dream to

work in the space industry. He gave the dream to go to the Moon.

So when you are working for your own dream and you believe in your dream, then for you too, failure is not an option.

CONCLUSION

Just as we aim for the Moon but we first make sure everyone comes back alive, we aim for Excellence in Education but we first make sure that no child is left behind.