

Schools, Feedback, and Clients

“I take great offense, Grant, at your calling parents and students ‘clients’ - that cheapens our mission....”

“The last thing I would want is to have more of a parent say in how schools are run...”

“Grant, please don’t use the word ‘client’ when talking about students and parents - many faculty find such talk offensive.....”

These comments are only three of many similar remarks I have heard in the past few years when I talk about assessment in terms of feedback, and one part of feedback as assessing the client’s satisfaction with school.

Oddly enough, the first comment came from a private school teacher, where parents pay \$20,000 per year for their students’ education. I wonder if this teacher would be happy to find his doctor offended by patients who wanted a say in whether the medicine was or wasn’t working?

And how should we explain the hissing by teachers when I show in workshops an overhead of the new parent feedback form that must be used in the Rochester NY schools? (Parent feedback must be gathered, summarized and analyzed by each teacher as part of all teacher-supervisor talks). Last week, a teacher who saw the form responded: “Well that kind of feedback seems more subjective and less legitimate as feedback.” Less legitimate? Hmmm. Methinks they do protest too much. I’m glad my lawyer and financial planner do not hold their view.

Time to wake up and smell the coffee. We value learning but we are oddly resistant too feedback. We need to admit the painful truth: schools are not yet accountable and need to be. Good intentions are not enough. Assessing the “value added” results of schooling are central to school reform, and client feedback is a vital part of that assessment.

Yet many well-meaning educators talk as if schools are really run for the teachers. In one district I know, the principal of an elementary school, via the PTO newsletter, explains each spring why it is inappropriate to ask the child’s current teacher to recommend a teacher for next year. The principal argues that such a recommendation would be “unprofessional” and disruptive. Huh? That view would confound the professionals I work with and their clients: foundation heads, graphics designers, publishers, and videographers, lawyers and doctors - all happily make recommendations based on their professional expertise; we expect no less of them.

“Grant, I thought you were on our side! I can’t believe that you would lend credence to the rabble rousing of those who would happily kill public schools!”

I’m puzzled: this is friendly advice. Sure, every principal has some horror story about dreadful parents, but extreme cases do not an argument make. History is clearly on the side of our clients – and, yes, our critics. Whether we like it or not, the charter school movement, vouchers, for-profit schools, schools within schools reflect the public’s desire to have the same kind of voice and choice in education that they (and we) take for granted in all other walks of life. When we seem impervious to clients or feedback, we alienate our friends - the parents and community members who are our only hope.

Do I think it will be easy to run a school where students give formal criticism of teachers regularly? (Note: Harvard students publish and distribute a written critique of every teacher and course each year). Will it be easy to let parents choose from among different literacy programs to reflect interest in either a phonics-emphasis or a whole-language-emphasis? Where students can request teachers based on their style of teaching? Of course not. I have no doubt, in fact, that there may be wholesale upheaval in school over the next decade as the voice of clients gets louder and more insistent (just as many doctors quit when the influence of HMO’s and clients increased).

But unlike many of my friends, I believe that our profession and our children will be the better for it in the long run.

Grant Wiggins, November 1997

Steve: Then add the new letters to the editor, below