

# Team Teaching

***Teachers are an under-utilized resource in most school boards.***

**By Jim Williams**

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Becoming a public high school teacher after nearly 30 years in business required that I adapt to a culture whose priorities, norms, and incentives are upside down. Public schools operate in ways that conflict with their core purpose—teaching children the basic knowledge and skills required to lead successful adult lives. These dysfunctional practices are a source of deep frustration for teachers because they understand that it's the students who are shortchanged.

Consistently, research shows that teachers are critical to improving student achievement. School officials celebrate teachers with motherhood-and-apple-pie ceremonies, but in practice they do not treat teachers as scarce, valuable resources.

A situation early in my business career contrasts vividly with my public school experience to date. I worked in a distribution operation located in a fast-growing market. Our corporate office was out of state.

The explosive growth in my area was not typical of the rest of the company, whose policies and procedures reflected a mature, stable business. Our boss recognized our market's potential and told us he would provide the tools we needed to succeed. And then he'd get out of the way.

He asked everyone for his input concerning efficiency and effectiveness, and when my co-workers and I made suggestions that produced a positive business outcome, he modified production schedules, adjusted staffing, and acquired the necessary equipment.

Our boss recognized that many of the practices followed throughout the rest of the company had been interfering with our ability to accomplish what was possible in our market. His willingness to work with us created a sense of mission for my colleagues and me, as well as creating a local culture that emphasized results rather than procedural compliance.

Moreover, our disproportionate financial contribution to the corporation's profitability earned us not only absolution, but recognition and appreciation.

I hope that the increasing emphasis within public schools on measurable outcomes will bring more local discretion for school-based leaders. To build high-performing schools, they need the ability to shift focus away from process and procedure and toward empowering teachers and relentlessly emphasizing student achievement.

But that hasn't been my experience to date. For example, by failing to include teachers in reaching significant instructional decisions, and using "top-down" communication methods, public school officials too often treat teachers more like hourly industrial workers from a bygone era than high-value professionals.

Consider typical district-wide efforts to improve student performance. Most often, the emphasis is placed on implementing standardized curricula and installing instructional programs developed outside the school. This practice ignores the considerable evidence demonstrating how achieving high performance in any field results from engaging people on the front lines.

More than 20 years ago, business organizations began to understand the dramatic potential of collaborative management practices. I learned the value of collaboration while trying to address a major operational problem in my previous firm.

We were losing money on our customer delivery operations, while simultaneously creating significant customer dissatisfaction. Partly out of desperation, I looked to collaborative management practice, which I had recently read about. I formed a working group of hourly employees to look into the problem.

This group included representatives from every part of the business: delivery drivers, our dispatcher, warehouse clerks, and customer service representatives. We met on Saturday mornings (people were paid for their time) and looked at the problem.

The seriousness and creativity these people brought to the discussions was quite impressive and, in less than a month, we completely overhauled every function in our delivery system. Within two months, our costs were under control, we were making money, and we greatly improved customer satisfaction.

This approach to managing organizations is now widely accepted practice in most places. Unfortunately, this kind of genuine collaboration with teachers to address significant public school performance issues and outcomes is conspicuously absent.

There is a large reservoir of dissatisfaction on the part of teachers in public schools, and that dissatisfaction presents a significant opportunity for school reform advocates. I'm optimistic that reformers can build support for alternative models of public education among this genuinely-critical group of stakeholders.

In the end, I would argue that choice-based school reform would significantly improve most teachers' situations. The challenge for reformers is to find ways to describe the inherent limitations of the existing system (which are quite familiar to experienced teachers) and then to present concrete ways that charter schools, and other educational alternatives, could benefit teachers.

*(Adapted with permission from "[Culture Shock](#)", in [The Education Gadfly](#), Sept. 29, 2005. Mr. Williams teaches both special and general education high school students in Northern Virginia, entering the profession through the [George Washington University Fairfax Partnership Project](#).)*