

# Schools cannot be run as businesses

As part of his education plan, Gov. Carcieri wants to cut \$8 million from the state's public education budget.

His justification consists of the usual criticism that our state's test scores are down in some areas and that our per pupil expenditures are too high given the result of these assessments. (Quick note: State tests are only administered for math and English and only cover six days of the entire school year.) Unfortunately, the governor's plan lacks a true understanding or recognition of our state and nation's social problems that have a direct impact on the quality or results of our education system.

Surprisingly though, Mr. Carcieri was originally a math teacher in East Greenwich prior to heading Cookson America. Yet he seemingly can only look at our public schools from the perspective of a CEO in the business world. In other words, Mr. Carcieri doesn't see rising quarterly profits (increased test scores in this case), so he assumes failure. This is unfortunate due to the fact that public education and private industry are two very different environments that require vastly different decisions to effectively run. Consider the following example why this is a problem:

A former business leader of the ice cream industry, Jamie Vollner, was made aware of these differences when he joined a corporate group that advocated reforming public education.

In one of his speeches to the faculty at a local high school, Mr. Vollner was proclaiming the efficiency and success of the business world in producing fine products, while criticizing the ineffectiveness of public schools to provide quality and successful students.

During his presentation, an English teacher raised her hand and asked whether his ice cream business produced good ice cream.

Mr. Vollner replied smugly, "Best ice cream in America, ma'am."

The English teacher then asked, "Do you use premium ingredients?"

He responded, "Super premium! Nothing but triple-A."

The teacher then asked, "When you are standing on your receiving dock and you see an inferior shipment of blueberries arrive, what do you

do?" Mr. Vollner's ice cream business was famous for its creamy blueberry ice cream.

Mr. Vollner then replied, "I send them back."

"That's right!" the teacher barked, "and we can never send back our blueberries. WE take them big, small, rich, poor, gifted, exceptional, abused, frightened, confident, homeless, rude, and brilliant. We take them with attention deficit disorder, junior rheumatoid arthritis, and English as their second language. We take them all. Every one. And that, Mr. Vollner, is why it's not a business. It's school." (Jamie Vollner wrote about this exchange in *Education Week* magazine.)

This diverse assortment of blueberries validates why the business world mentality is inadequate by itself to reform or improve education in this state. Consider that the business model is designed to produce a product or service, like a car, TV, or an accounting audit. Public education, on the other hand, is designed to produce the producers.

For example, public schools create the people that design the items we consume or implement the services that we purchase or use. Teachers teach the designers of these new technologies, not just the various parts or machines. This is vastly different and more complex. In addition, the original raw material is not always perfect like the "grade triple-A" blueberries of Mr. Vollner's ice cream business.

We are not dealing with perfect blueberries and cannot change this fact unless we drastically implement overarching public policy or legislation to deal with our social inequities. This is separate and out of the control of our schools as they are set up today.

Therefore, Gov. Carcieri's pro-business recommendations should be taken for what they are: Business industry reform, not education reform.

Many critics of public education today assume our schools are still the way they were when they attended decades ago. In those "good ol' days" classrooms used to have 40-plus students in them with one teacher and everything turned out OK.

I imagine that these are the same people that walked uphill to and from school in the rain,

sleet, and snow. The prevailing perception is that long ago our education system was successful with little money, therefore, the same should apply to today's schools.

The problem is that today is a different society than that of the past. Many more of these blueberries/students come from broken homes than they did in those "good ol' days." For example, the divorce rate has risen 400 percent since the 1950s. According to the conservative Heritage Foundation, in 1950, 12 percent of the children born into this country entered a broken family. On the other hand, today, the number has increased to almost 60 percent.

In addition, the same report indicated that parents spend 60 percent less time with their children today than they did in 1965. Also, the U.S. Census Bureau report concluded that 6.9 million school children — nearly 20 percent of those between the ages of 5 and 14 — regularly cared for themselves without an adult around. Much of this is due to the fact that Americans work nine more weeks per year more than most other industrialized nations and two incomes are almost essential.

Aside from the declining domestic or household factors affecting our youth, the economic situation also paints a bleak picture. For example, the poorest 60 percent of Rhode Islander's make \$23,000 or less per year, which for a family of four is only a few thousand dollars over the federal poverty rate.

This would help explain why 35 percent of our public school children are eligible for free and reduced lunch. In addition, there are almost 30,000 Rhode Island workers unemployed and this does not count the people who have left the labor force. Also, bankruptcy cases are up 32 percent nationwide since 2000.

Exacerbating the socioeconomic and household problems that our public schools face today is that our federal government only contributes about 4 percent of our entire state education budget. Yet Washington mandates, through federal law, that all local towns educate all children, even those with costly disabilities. In other words, federal courts protect every child with a special education plan and our public schools must be compliant by fully funding any assistance they need to give them an adequate education.

Consider that the City of Warwick's average per pupil expenditure for special education was over \$32,000 in the year 2000. It is no wonder the cost of educating all children is rising; yet Gov. Carcieri proposes to remedy the problem by cutting funds to our schools.

In conclusion, Gov. Carcieri's business model for education is ineffective and shortsighted. Short-term industry outlook will have a detrimental affect on the long-term efficacy of our public school system in producing quality graduates in the future.

It is unfortunate that some of the applicable business wisdom, like that "one needs to spend money in order to make money," has escaped our governor. Another common industry practice in our country's history that seems to have eluded Mr. Carcieri is that, when major businesses fail, our government usually steps in to bail them out.

Let's not forget the Savings and Loan debacle during the 1980s, or the recent post 9/11 airline bailout by our country's government. Imagine what our schools could do if this formula or ideology was applied to our public schools rather than the current fiscal austerity programs have reduced spending and services.

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