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Bill Cirone op ed column

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The story about blueberries

By Bill Cirone, Santa Barbara County Superintendent of Schools

Some may know the story of Jamie Robert Vollmer, a former business executive and attorney, who currently works as a consultant to increase community support for public schools. He actually became a “convert” during a presentation he was making at a teachers in-service program.

He was the keynote speaker at the time, and felt it was important to be brutally honest with the teachers in the auditorium. He told them that if he ran his business the way they ran schools, he wouldn't be in business very long.

He was an executive at an ice cream company that became instantly successful when *People Magazine* chose its blueberry ice cream as the best ice cream in America. He was representing a group of business people dedicated to improving public schools, so his heart was in the right place.

As he tells it, he was convinced of two things at the time he gave that speech to the teachers: first, that public education needed to change. He felt schools were designed for the Industrial Age and not in tune with modern needs. He also felt strongly that educators themselves were a major part of the problem, resisting change, protected by tenure, bureaucratic. He thought if schools looked to a business model, they could improve dramatically: zero defects, total quality management, continuous improvement, etc.

I love one line he uses in telling the story: “In retrospect, the speech was perfectly balanced – equal parts ignorance and arrogance.”

Everything changed for him after the speech when a teacher in the audience raised her hand. She praised his ice cream and asked about the premium ingredients. He responded with pride about all the particulars. “Mr. Vollmer,” she then asked, “when you are standing on your receiving dock and you see an inferior shipment of blueberries arrive, what do you do?”

He saw the trap had sprung, but replied truthfully that he sends the blueberries back.

The teacher went in for the kill, pointing out that teachers can never send back blueberries. “We take them big, small, rich, poor, gifted, exceptional, abused, frightened, confident, homeless, rude, and brilliant. We take them with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, junior rheumatoid arthritis, and English as their second language. We take them all. Every one. And that, Mr. Vollmer, is why it’s not a business. It’s a school.”

Her comments were well received by the audience, as you can imagine.

What was interesting was Vollmer’s instant transformation. He heard it. And he got it.

Vollmer has since visited hundreds of schools. He understands that they do not control the quality of their raw materials. He says schools depend on the “vagaries of politics for a reliable revenue stream.” He knows they are “mauled by a howling horde of disparate, competing customer groups that would send the best CEO screaming into the night.”

Schools must continue to improve. There is no doubt about that. But Vollmer is right that schools cannot do this alone. “Changes can occur only with the understanding, trust, permission, and active support of the surrounding community,” he writes.

“Schools reflect the attitudes, beliefs, and health of the communities they serve, and therefore, to improve public education means more than changing our schools; it means changing America,” he wrote.

His blueberries made a good story.

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