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"It is more important to get it right, than to get it first."

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Essays:

Tipping Point 2

New Perspectives:

RiverView Academy 5

Masters Ranch & Christian Academy 6

Ventures In Peace 6

Whitted Cleary & Takiff 7

Seen N' Heard:

Page 8

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Why Do Children Learn?

By: Lon Woodbury



The mainstream theory seems to be that children in school will do as little as possible. That left to their own devices, they will just play and goof around. To deal with that perceived mentality on the part of the children, educators have developed a highly structured authoritarian system with all kinds of rewards and punishments to motivate the students, depending on how well they do on standardized tests. The major decisions on curriculum, time allowed for various activities, testing, rules and expected deportment are made at the top. These decisions flow down to the teachers who do their teaching within the confines of these administrative decisions. The students have very little say in the whole matter, being considered in some ways as a product.

Public education currently dominates the country's education system and the basic philosophy was adopted about a century ago, modeled after the organizational miracle of the time, the industrial factory. At the beginning of the 20th century, the organizational system of the factory was producing miracles in production based on a rigid top down system of decision making for mass production. Part of the breakthrough was that not only components to be assembled were interchangeable as were the finished products, but the workers were interchangeable also. The average worker at that time was not well trained, and often spoke English as a second language, so this factory model was considered a miracle because it brought together hundreds of relatively untrained workers into a cohesive whole, capable of unbelievable production. The world had never seen anything like that before.

With the factory model being so successful, it makes sense that the early 20th century developers of public education adopted this very successful organizational scheme and philosophy to expand the benefits of education to everybody. It worked well for many years, but it began to show weaknesses about fifty years ago, and efforts to tweak the system have increased every year. School consolidation to take advantage of economies of scale, state and later federal aid to education, major upgrading of buildings, increased spending on education and the addition of numerous support experts at the school, district, state and federal levels to administer all these additional resources changed the public school landscape in every way but the underlying assumption, that students will not learn unless they are forced to by educators through a system of rewards and punishments.

The irony is that the original model adopted by industrial factories has changed radically over the last century. A better trained work force has contributed to various systems of shared decision making between the workers and management, radical changes in technology has reduced the need for an extensive middle management, and increased world-wide competition has forced a close look to justify every expenditure.

At the same time, in public education, decision making has been increasingly centralized to local administrators, and to state and federal administrators. Middle management continues to

CONTINUED: **CHILDREN/ 2**