
WHO IS THE “CUSTOMER” FOR K-12 PUBLIC EDUCATION?

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Introduction

As the Development Chair (fundraising) for the Montgomery Blair High School, I attended PTSA meetings with great regularity. I once asked the question, “Who is the customer for K-12 Public Education? As an Adjunct Professor of Entrepreneurism at George Mason University I am aware that the term “customer” means “one who pays for a service, a patron or buyer.” However, today when you go to the doctor you do not pay, your insurance company pays most often, yet you would argue strongly that you are the customer, not your insurance company.

So the first question is: ***Does K-12 Public Education have a customer?*** If the answer is “No,” then there is a huge problem. Without a customer, a supplier (in this case the public education system including teachers, administrators and funding sources) has no idea how to properly measure the quality of the service provided, has no idea of what services to increase, decrease or stop delivering in their entirety. Without a “customer” a supplier does not know if it is performing well, if an innovation is successful, if an innovation or change is needed and can not learn from the essential feedback from the customer as to how to improve its services.

It is more than a logical fallacy to say that K-12 public education does not have a customer. My definition of a “customer” is “the one whose interests are most served by the supplier and without whom the supplier would go out of business.” There are only three possible candidates as to who is the “customer” of K-12 public education.

The Customer

Having determined that K-12 public education must have a customer, who is that customer? One could argue it is a) the parents, b) the teachers and administrators, c) the employers of students or d) the students themselves.

Unless K-12 is only day care or a means to get the children out of the hair of the parents, then the parents are clearly not the customer. There could be no parents (due to a war or some catastrophe) and if there are children, then we would need to supply them with education. The parents are not the ones whose test scores we use to determine if the school is doing well. It is the students. Surely, the teachers and administrators are not the customers. They do not pay for school. Schools are not designed for their benefit and teachers and administrators are the suppliers of education, not the customer.

An interesting argument could be made that employers are the customer for public schools because they need people with math, English and other skills, plus discipline, and the purpose of the schools is to teach these skills to students for the purpose of meeting the employer’s needs. The grading of students is the way that schools communicate to employers how “worthy” the students are as future employees. This writer has been informed that in Connecticut the DuPont Company built schools in the 1920’s for African Americans and paid for the teachers since neither the state nor US government would do so. A dissertation is being written on this topic and may cogently argue that this is conclusive proof that employers are the customers of K-12 public schools. The argument of “employers” as the customers of k-12 public education, while interesting and supported by some evidence going back for nearly 100 years, is misguided. Employers today do not pay for schools and they are not the prime beneficiaries of the public education system. If schools fail to teach students, or, to put it another way, if students fail to learn anything useful in school, and the student wants to work and an employer wants to hire the student, employers will train the student as necessary to fill the job. While employers benefit

greatly from the K-12 public education system, they are not the customer; they are not the reason why schools exist.

The only logical answer for “who is the customer of the K-12 public education system” is the student. It is the student who we seek to train, teach and improve. It is the student whose test scores we use to determine success of the system. Without students, the very idea or existence of a school is absurd.

What Does It Mean That The Student Is The Customer

In this Age of Accountability new efforts to focus on test scores appear to make the K-12 public education system accountable for student performance. However, students have some choice in the matter. They can choose to work hard and earn higher grades or choose to work less hard and earn lower grades and have lower test scores. The teacher may or may not be directly responsible for how hard the student works. Clearly, the student, him or herself, is responsible for how hard they work.

Recently my daughter who is 17 went to the doctor and took some medical tests. As she was checking out, she noticed on the bill (which the insurance company was going to pay for) there was a \$20.00 charge for a test that she was not given. She insisted that the doctor’s office take the charge off of the bill and they did. Even though she was not paying for the bill, she wanted the doctor’s office to know who was the customer. She was the customer.

If it is the job of the schools to insure that the customer, the student, does well, then the supplier better figure out what the customer wants and figure out how to supply what the customer wants. My daughter wanted a bill that was accurate. The Age of Accountability has hit 17 year olds who will not stand for their doctors’ offices cheating insurance companies, even out of a mere \$20.00.

The supplier in any situation is and must be accountable to the customer. The customer can leave, and many students have left the public school system via home schools, charter schools, private schools, and many have just dropped out. My family left the District of Columbia to move to Maryland because our children, then in the second and 5th grades *demand*ed better schools. We moved to Maryland and got better schools.

Knowing that the student is the customer will totally change the way education is delivered in the K-12 public education system. Today companies are spending billions on “*Customer Relationship Management*” and those that understand what their customer wants and needs will be the winners. K-12 public education schools have never had a history of listening to students to find out how they want to learn, to find out what they want to learn and for that reason students in the K-12 public education setting have so little choice in what and how they learn that it is not surprising that there is not a good fit between the supplier and the customer in this industry.

The Customer

There is an old saying, “The customer is always right.” Clearly five and six year old children just starting school can not be expected to be right

all of the time. And neither can 18 year old seniors.

But, five and six year old children and 18 year old young adults are often right and the K-12 public school system needs to listen to them and needs to figure out new ways to supply educations the way the customer wants to get it.

If the K-12 public education system continues to ignore the fact the student is the customer, the customers will continue to flea via vouchers, via home schooling, via dropping out. Without a customer a supplier can not exist.

Without a growing customer base, a supplier can not flourish. The timing is critical for the K-12 public education system to begin to understand that a new partnership between the supplier (teachers, administrators and public funding sources) and the customer must be formed. New forms of real feedback must be established with formal student evaluations of teachers, formal systems where students have real input into how they are treated, how they are educated and how they are viewed.

Conclusion

In this Age of Accountability, suppliers are now accountable to their customers and the public at large. The K-12 public education system is not immune from this new era. Teachers and administrators will find that they will become accountable to students and treat them as customers or they will see vouchers empty their classrooms. This author does not want to see the day where the only payment a teacher receives is early retirement because the public education system was closed down due to the lack of customers.

If teachers and administrators continue to argue that “there is no customer” for K-12 public education, they may find that what they say becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy and one day there will be no students in their classrooms. On that day, and not a day before, will it be true that “there is no customer” for K-12 public education. Let us hope that day never arrives, but we are heading in that direction through no fault of the parents, through no fault of the students and through no fault of the employers who want to hire well trained students. We are heading in that direction because the K-12 public education system refuses to recognize who their customer is and refuses to treat their customers the way suppliers need to treat their customers if they want to keep them as customers.