TEACHING TO THE CHOIR

SFR Talk

WITH PETER BASTON
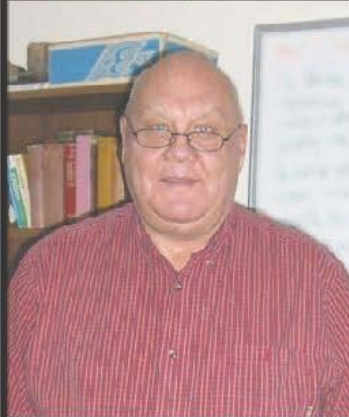
COURTESY PETER BASTON

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Peter Baston, a longtime consultant who grew up shuttling between England and Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), is borderline fanatical when it comes to ensuring businesses operate at maximum efficiency. But IDEAS, Baston's consulting firm, has, for the past decade, set its sights on bringing the same management practices to education. Its latest idea: a public, interactive, three-dimensional computer model of a school, complete with clickable information on everything from population and test scores to construction costs.

SFR: How did you get into education consulting?

PB: When we see a problem in a system, no matter what industry, we look around for the same sort of problems in the same sort of systems. [During] a conversation I had, back in Houston, I got the argument that education is unlike anything in the world. I said, 'No, it's a system.' And there was great silence because somebody at the table said, 'Nobody's really explained it that way.' When we moved out to Santa Fe, I was asked to sit on several committees in different schools, and that's when my mind was really opened up to the [fact that] these guys really don't have even basic skill sets to make some of these decisions that they're making.

What's lacking?

You cannot manage what you don't measure, and you cannot measure what you don't see. Most school systems can not even see the data on the things that are wrong. We see local system administration piled on top of state administration piled on top of federal administration—huge numbers of managers in multiple parts of the system, all looking at different numbers to address a problem. And the biggest problem I see within all the school systems we've seen is total lack of transparency of information.

Even within, say, Santa Fe Public Schools?

Even school district employees! An executive of a company would insist that information be delivered to him in a meaningful format. We did presentations at several school board association meetings, and a question I asked every single seminar [was], 'How many people in this room, as members of a school board, understand the information in front of you at every single board meeting?' Out of 60 to 70 people, and this is the same across the US, not one hand went up. That's saying something.

So…where do we start?

Access to information is the first step. We've got to open up the dialogue a lot more. I don't buy the argument that it's the teachers' fault or the administrators' fault or the principals' fault or even the kids' fault. If we're going to do educational excellence, what does that consist of, and how does that go together? And what are the processes that we need to make it work? And I don't think that conversation is even on the table.

Your ideas—which include an interactive, fact-embedded computer model of a school district— are the highest-ranked proposals on the US Department of Education's Open Innovation Portal.

I was flattered. It was an acknowledgment from our peers that the ideas we've put together have a lot of benefit, despite some of the derogatory information that's come back from the education system, which says, 'You are not an educator, so you are not entitled to talk about this.'

What about budget constraints?

I grew up between two different worlds, Africa and Europe. In Europe, I couldn't fail to notice that they had huge resources, but they did very little. In Africa, we had very little resources and had to do a lot. The US has become this way because if you develop a problem, you'll get millions of dollars for this problem. If you grow that problem, you'll get more dollars, and nobody talks about the solution. That's the big issue: There's money being thrown at the problems but not at the solutions.