

FROM THE EDITOR

The Bottom Line



“You know,” the man said to me at a Rotary meeting, “if I ran my business the way you run your schools, I would be out of a job.”

Sound familiar? I thought so.

This particular occasion was in a small North Carolina town, and the businessman saying this to me was my former boss. Changing his perception—and that of others in the room—was difficult if not close to impossible, so I started by agreeing with him.

“You’re right. I don’t know of any business that pays its CEO like we pay ours,” I said. “After all, what CEO would run a business with 2,500 employees, 30 buildings, 25 restaurants with breakfast and lunch service, and a 300-vehicle transportation system for a measly \$145,000 a year?”

“Oh, I forgot to mention one other thing. What if that person also was in charge of the education of 15,000 minor children, many of whom come from low-income, single-parent homes? More than 1,000 of those kids also have disabilities that range from mild to profound, and only 50 percent to 60 percent of the total in the system enter kindergarten with a good chance of reading at grade level in three years.”

At that point, my former boss was quiet, as were the others seated at our table. The uncomfortable silence that followed showed me two things that I have taken with me to this day.

First, as Senior Editor Del Stover points out in “The Bottom Line” on Page

16, school leaders can learn a lot by focusing on solid business principles and mirroring them when possible.

In the story, Del interviews Jerry Weast, superintendent of Maryland’s Montgomery County Schools, who sums up the issue nicely. “What a successful business does—and what translates to us—is that we actually need to focus on the outcomes we want to achieve,” Weast says. “A successful business focuses on a core product or service. We also focus on an outcome—getting kids college-ready or high-wage work-ready.”

The second thing I learned from that Rotary experience is that public education does a lousy job of tooting its own horn. I realize that public relations are not first on the job description, but they should be right up there on the list.

Instead, educators often spend so much time on their core work that they forget to tout the accomplishments, challenges, and needs of their students and schools to business leaders and to the community at large. And sadly, people rarely notice when you’re doing a good job, choosing instead to focus on the negative.

Think of it this way: In the end, the gulf is not that great between good public relations and good customer service. And when you’re dealing with something as vast as public education, isn’t good customer service what it should be all about?

Until next month ...

Glenn Cook, Editor-in-Chief