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The Blueberry Story: The teacher gives the businessman a lesson

“If I ran my business the way you people operate your schools, I wouldn’t be in business very long!”

I stood before an auditorium filled with outraged teachers who were becoming angrier by the minute. My speech had entirely consumed their precious 90 minutes of inservice. Their initial icy glares had turned to restless agitation. You could cut the hostility with a knife.

I represented a group of business people dedicated to improving public schools. I was an executive at an ice cream company that became famous in the middle 1980s when *People Magazine* chose our blueberry as the “Best Ice Cream in America.”

I was convinced of two things. First, public schools needed to change; they were archaic selecting and sorting mechanisms designed for the industrial age and out of step with the needs of our emerging “knowledge society.” Second, educators were a major part of the problem: they resisted change, hunkered down in their feathered nests, protected by tenure, and shielded by a bureaucratic monopoly. They needed to look to business. We knew how to produce quality. Zero defects! TQM! Continuous improvement!

In retrospect, the speech was perfectly balanced - equal parts ignorance and arrogance.

As soon as I finished, a woman’s hand shot up. She appeared polite, pleasant – she was, in fact, a razor-edged, veteran, high school English teacher who had been waiting to unload.

She began quietly, “We are told, sir, that you manage a company that makes good ice cream.”

I smugly replied, “Best ice cream in America, Ma’am.”

“How nice,” she said. “Is it rich and smooth?”

“Sixteen percent butterfat,” I crowed.

“Premium ingredients?” she inquired.

“Super-premium! Nothing but triple A.” I was on a roll. I never saw the next line coming.

“Mr. Vollmer,” she said, leaning forward with a wicked eyebrow raised to the sky, “when you are standing on your receiving dock and you see an inferior shipment of blueberries arrive, what do you do?”

In the silence of that room, I could hear the trap snap.... I was dead meat, but I wasn't going to lie.

“I send them back.”

She jumped to her feet. “That's right!” she barked, “and we can never send back *our* blueberries. We take them big, small, rich, poor, gifted, exceptional, abused, frightened, confident, homeless, rude, and brilliant. We take them with ADHD, 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 school!”

In an explosion, all 290 teachers, principals, bus drivers, aides, custodians, and secretaries jumped to their feet and yelled, “Yeah! Blueberries! Blueberries!”

And so began my long transformation.

Since then, I have visited hundreds of schools. I have learned that a school is not a business. Schools are unable to control the quality of their raw material, they are dependent upon the vagaries of politics for a reliable revenue stream, and they are constantly mauled by a howling horde of disparate, competing customer groups that would send the best CEO screaming into the night.

None of this negates the need for change. We must change what, when, and how we teach to give all children maximum opportunity to thrive in a post-industrial society. But educators cannot do this alone; these changes can occur only with the understanding, trust, permission, and active support of the surrounding community. For the most important thing I have learned is that 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.

Jamie Robert Vollmer © 2011

Jamie Vollmer is a former business executive and attorney who now works to increase public support for America's public schools. His new book, *Schools Cannot Do It Alone* is available at www.jamievollmer.com