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THE CONCEPT OF PERFORMANCE CONTRACTING

by Dwight Smith

The concept of a public school district purchasing services from a private entrepreneur is not new to the educational scene. Transportation, hot lunches, maintenance and construction tasks — even inservice training — have been leased out to the private sector. What is new, though, is the recent phenomenon of contracting for instructional services, and more, on a guaranteed basis.

Just as the computer represents the newest in educational delivery systems with *CAI*, the *management systems approach* is becoming manifested in curriculum administration with the performance contract. While still too new for in-depth evaluation, instructional contracting has established its credentials in the private sector and particularly in the municipal governments' partnerships with the building industry with "turnkey housing."

There are many advantages inherent in the idea of "contracting out" an instructional component of the curriculum, not the least of which is the ability of a private contractor to manage, coordinatively, teaching personnel, materials, pupils, and evaluative audit outside the sometimes inhibiting political framework of the local school community. The *control* of the integral variables by the contractor may be the most significant success determiner; control which affords great latitude for initiative and a single mindedness in purpose.

The lineage of performance contracting may be delineated from a number of more or less related trends currently in operation in the educational community, the business world, and in society generally. The notion of *accountability*, for example, is strong nowadays in government, industry and in instructional fields. In the industrial sector we are apt to hear more and

more about "systems," "control" and "programming" for pre-designed results. And in education we are witnessing a steady growth in instructional technology, "prescriptive teaching" with heavy emphasis upon "outcomes," performance criteria and measurable results. Curriculum verification is becoming less an assessment of "in-put" as such, and more a matter of monitoring instructional effectiveness by means of I.A.A. (*Independent Instructional Audit*). These threads of influence, combined with a growing taxpayers' impatience with rising school costs, bring us to the threshold of performance contracting.

Teachers in the field of reading instruction probably ought to be interested in this innovation in school management since most contracts to date have been in reading instruction and/or computational skills. Reading teachers should want to know about instruments employed for pupil "entry" into the guaranteed contract as well as the evaluation process which will determine the final payment. Reading teachers should be concerned that a contract has *turnkey* provisions — i.e., the process of management and teacher training toward eventual local "take-over" of the systems employed by the contractor. Perhaps most importantly, reading teachers should be most vitally concerned with the definition of "reading" in the contract: what skills will be obtained?

It is believed by many curriculum leaders in the field of performance contracting that before a contract is written, the local district teachers and administrators should first study and determine in detail their own instructional needs and their own performance capacity for meeting those

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schools to assignments of children's writing.

Flora Arnstein's book, *Children Write Poetry: A Creative Approach* (Dover Publications) is somewhat different in scope and purpose. This book is filled with examples of children's writing with narrative material explaining how the teacher functions in guiding young poets to write or dictate as Edna (age 9) did when she said,

I feel "poemy" today.

I have poems all over.

And I don't feel like going home.

As indicated in the foreword, Flora Arnstein "... knows the way into the inner spirit of childhood where lies unexpressed beauty; and she knows how to entice that dormant power into attractive self-expression."

(Hal Cafone is an Associate Professor of Education at Oakland University. Ronald Cramer is an Associate Professor of Education at Oakland University.)



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needs themselves. Then the local staff should outline their own performance objectives in the critical skill areas; these specific objectives should then be translated into the specific guarantees of the proposed contract.

One final caution: performance contracting as a concept is only an administrative device, a systems vehicle for obtaining certain predetermined goals. It is not operant conditioning per se, nor differential staffing or contingency management. It could be all of these kinds of things, but not necessarily. Rewarding chil-

dren with candy is *not* unique to performance contracting. The contract itself is whatever is agreed to between the school district and the contractor. At this level of discussion, then, the idea of performance contracting cannot be argued in terms of any kind of pedagogy, but only in terms of its being a viable alternative for producing agreed upon results for children.

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