

Permission to Forget

And Nine Other Root Causes
of America's Frustration
with Education

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Lee Jenkins

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With great admiration and love I dedicate this book to Sandy my wife, the mother of our sons Todd and Jim, and the grandmother of Jasmine, Zeke, Samantha, Joshua, Jesse, Jade, and Zeph.

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Preface

If you are looking for a book bashing today's teachers and administrators, this is not the book. *Permission to Forget: And Nine Other Root Causes of America's Frustration with Education* outlines problems that were built into American education prior to today's educators graduating from college.

It is well known that society at large creates many problems that children bring to school. For example, as a first-grade teacher prepared to read a farmyard story, she checked with her students to be sure they understood what a "pen" was. One student eagerly raised her hand and explained that a "pen" is where her daddy is. This book does not outline society's ills and how they affect student learning.

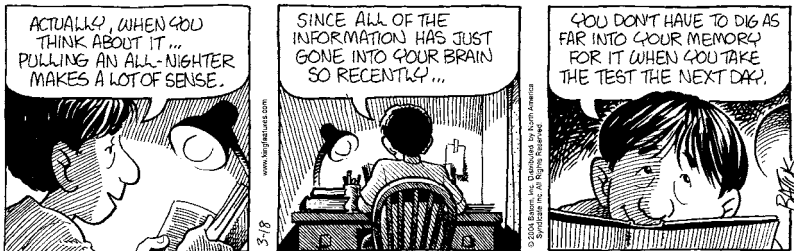
Nor does this book attempt to describe the issues that are caused by legislation and can only be corrected by legislation. For example, many students in California have five different school superintendents: one for grades K–8 (or maybe K–6), another one for grades 9–12 (or maybe 7–12), a third one (usually elected) in each county office, a fourth one elected as state superintendent, and a fifth one appointed by the governor (as secretary of education). In addition there are school boards for the first four superintendents. This book does not address the chaos that legislature has the responsibility to fix.

What *Permission to Forget: And Nine Other Root Causes of America's Frustration with Education* does do is describe the deep-seated problems built into America's classrooms that educators can solve. These issues are not on the surface, but are buried in the unconscious operations of daily school life. Lloyd Dobyns and Claire Crawford-Mason wrote, "In order to get quality education, you have to get to the root of the problem. The root of the problem is the poor management system that most schools have in the United States."¹ The management problems described in this book do not distinguish between management of the classroom, management of the school, or management of the school district. Management is management is management regardless of the age of those being managed or the number

being managed. Writing about business, Russell Ackoff stated, “Western managers generally believe their poor performance in the global marketplace is due to factors that are out of their control. This belief provides them with a basis for rationalizing their disinclination to make fundamental changes.”² Writing about educators, Kathleen Kennedy Manzo stated almost the exact same thing. “In too many classrooms . . . achievement levels off, and some students continue to fail. After giving their best, many teachers conclude that other factors are undermining their efforts.”³ Because schools inherit so many problems caused by society and legislatures, employees easily can become disinclined to solving any problems. As this book will outline, however, educators have tremendous power to bring about substantial improvement in schools, in spite of the worst aspects of our society and ineffective legislation.

If you are not an educator, don’t be critical—help remove these frustrations from the lives of children and educators. If you are an educator, do not be defensive; you didn’t create these problems, but you can remove them from your sphere of influence.

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Introduction

The Juran Institute produced a series of *Quality Minutes* on video in the 1990s.¹ One of them describes a problem with the Jefferson Memorial: the granite was crumbling. What was frustrating to park officials was that none of the other memorials were having this same problem with their granite. So the question was *why*?

Question: *Why* is the granite crumbling on the Jefferson Memorial?

Answer: It is hosed off more than the other memorials.

Question: *Why* is the Jefferson Memorial hosed off more than the other D.C. memorials?

Answer: The Jefferson Memorial has more bird dung.

Question: *Why* does the Jefferson Memorial have more bird dung than the other memorials?

Answer: It has more birds.

Question: *Why* does the Jefferson Memorial have more birds?

Answer: It has more spiders for the birds to eat.

Question: *Why* does the Jefferson Memorial have more spiders than other D.C. memorials?

Answer: It has more flying insects for spiders to eat.

Question: *Why* does the Jefferson Memorial have more flying insects than other D.C. memorials?

Answer: The lights are turned on too soon at the Jefferson Memorial, thus attracting the insects.

Solution: The lights were turned on later and the granite stopped crumbling. By asking *why* enough times, usually at least five, one can find the root causes of problems.

Readers will see that the root causes of today's frustrations with education are interrelated and firmly entrenched within America's system of schooling. My book *Improving Student Learning: Applying Deming's Quality Principles in Classrooms* and Quality Press's Continuous Improvement Series were written to solve these root causes.² Maybe the books were written in reverse order, but *Permission to Forget: And Nine Other Root Causes of America's Frustration with Education* is published to describe the issues solved by the earlier books.

1

Permission to Forget

Students learn in first grade that they have permission to forget much of what their teachers are teaching. How do they learn this? Six-year-olds learn they have permission to forget through the Friday spelling tests. The process is well-known. New spelling words are assigned on Monday, various learning activities transpire Tuesday through Thursday, cramming takes place on Thursday evening, and a test is given on Friday. Numerous words spelled correctly on Friday are forgotten on Saturday. In fact, one teacher told me she gave the same spelling test two hours later and was shocked to find out how much was already forgotten.

ROOT CAUSE #1

***Granting students permission
to forget***

Any educational institution that encourages cramming is unintentionally giving students permission to forget. Likewise, any initiative that purports to significantly improve education must take cramming out of the equation. This has been accomplished many times by implementing the strategies outlined in *Improving Student Learning: Applying Deming's Quality Principles in Classrooms*.¹ It must be recognized, however, that without my earlier book, many teachers still figured out a classroom system to stop giving permission to forget during the year of their responsibility. So these students

waited until summer to forget. This same permission to forget resides in all or nearly all United States schools.

Teachers certainly do not intentionally give this permission. As a former school administrator I've interviewed hundreds of teacher applicants. When asked, "Why do you want to be a teacher?" none ever said, "My professional goal is to help children with their short-term memory." Even though short-term memory is not teachers' aspiration, it becomes the students' cycle—cram, receive a grade, forget, cram, receive a grade, forget.

I don't want to discount the importance of short-term memory. It does come in handy. For example, because of my career of writing and speaking I spend considerable time in hotels. On more than one occasion I have checked in late, gone to my speaking engagement the next day, and returned to the hotel only to have forgotten which room is mine. Invariably, when my short-term memory fails me, there are five people in line to register and I waste time waiting for somebody to inform me of my room number. So short-term memory has a place; it is not, however, the purpose of formal schooling.

EVIDENCE OF PERMISSION TO FORGET ABOUNDS

The evidence that permission to forget is embedded into American education comes from many sources:

- Grade 1–8 math textbooks normally set aside the first one-third of the pages for reteaching of the prior years' content. It is assumed students forget.
- I often ask educators in my seminars what percentage of the school year is spent teaching content students should know prior to entering their course. The answers are typically from 25 percent to 50 percent with some percentages even higher.
- A major school district had a large dispute over when to start the new school year. The educators desired mid-August and the business community advocated the Tuesday after Labor Day. When the educators were asked why starting mid-August was important, they replied that finishing the semester before Christmas was the issue. Then they were asked why finishing the semester before Christmas vacation was important. Educators replied that if finals are given before vacation, students perform much better than if finals are given after vacation. It seems that educators don't blush when confronted with the fact that students don't even remember for two weeks what they are taught. As I said in the preface, this book is not about

bashing educators. Permission to forget is so ingrained in the thinking of educators it is not given a second thought.

- A sixth-grade student, his father, and his teacher are having a conference. Teacher says, “Dad, your son needs to learn his times tables.” Dad, looking over at son, says, “I thought we did this last year.” Son replies, “I didn’t know you meant learn them like *that*.”

- A second-grader brings home his spelling words with a couple of misspelled words. Mom states, “I see you did pretty well, but you missed two words. Let’s work on the words you missed.” Son replies, “No, Mom, I don’t want to.” “Why not?” Mom asks. “These are important words that you misspelled.” “Well, Mom,” says son, “these words are never coming up again. I don’t need to know how to spell them.”

- California curriculum leaders had a great concept for organizing U.S. history content. It doesn’t work, but the concept is exemplary. Curriculum designers were attempting to overcome the problem of fifth-, eighth-, and eleventh-grade U.S. history classes all starting with European exploration and ending about the time of the Civil War. The same content is taught three times. The proposed solution was to teach fifth grade up to the American Revolution, teach history from the U.S. Constitution to 1900 in the eighth grade, and continue up to the current time in the eleventh grade. Why doesn’t the concept work? Students forget the prior taught history so eighth and eleventh grade teachers have little residue of knowledge from which to build.

In a 1998 *Kappan* article, “Seventeen Reasons Why Football Is Better than High School,” Herb Childress wrote, “Students picked up enough information to pass the test, did their work well enough to get the grade, and then totally forgot whatever it can be said they had learned.”²

Ronald A. Wolk wrote, “I took two years of high school algebra, geometry, and trigonometry, and forgot most of it before the ink on my diploma was dry.”³

Edward Deci has researched this subject. He reported, “People employing tests to motivate learning are unwittingly defeating the desire to learn in those people they are attempting to help . . . It seems that when people learn with the expectation of being evaluated, they focus on memorizing facts, but they don’t process the information as fully, so they don’t grasp the concepts as well . . . those who had learned expecting to be tested had forgotten much more . . . Evidently, they memorized the material for the test, and when the test was over, they pulled the plug and let it drain out.”⁴ Students know their algebra II teacher will not demand they remember the content they were taught last year in geometry.

FINANCIAL AND INSTRUCTIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF PERMISSION TO FORGET

The instructional implications of no longer giving students permission to forget are obvious. The financial impact is huge. The cost to operate America's public schools is over \$2 billion per day. Many propose adding 30 or more days per year of schooling. The cost for these 30 days is \$60 billion per year. It is safe to assume that at least 30 days a year are currently devoted to rework because students have permission to forget. Eliminating permission to forget will come at a cost because staff development is not free. Staff development investments are slim, however, compared to adding days of instruction.

In this volume I am not rewriting the details of *Improving Student Learning: Applying Deming's Quality Principles in Classrooms*, but will state a few of the basics. When permission to forget is denied, students are always assessed on long-term memory, never short-term memory. For example, students in eighth-grade physical science are responsible for the information and performance content of seventh-grade life science and sixth-grade earth science. Every nongraded feedback and every graded evaluation draw from the entire previous year's content plus the current year's content. Students are informed in every grade that the expectations for their current grade are not going away. They need to file the knowledge away in their long-term memory because the content will come up over and over and over. Weekly assessments in eighth-grade science, for example, might be 10 questions from eighth grade plus four questions from seventh grade and four questions from sixth grade.

EDUCATION AND BUSINESS SHARE THE SAME PROBLEM

Probably the statement that most irritates me in regard to education is that "education needs to be run more like a business." The inference is that business does everything right and education does it all wrong, when, in fact, there are numerous examples of poor business practices. One example where I would have loved to have been more businesslike, was to be legally able to select the building contractors in town known to have a great reputation. However, state law forced me to accept low bid for construction projects. In one such example of a low bid, the heating/air conditioning contractor did not wrap the elbows of the pipes, only the straight portion of the pipes. When confronted by the inspector, he replied, "It didn't say wrap

the elbows, only the pipes.” Over and over the low-bid process rips off school systems. So, certainly freedom to select honest, quality contractors is one of the ways education could be more businesslike. Nevertheless, the blanket statement that children can be treated the way a car going down the assembly line can be treated is false and overly simplistic. So I was listening acutely when W. Edwards Deming addressed this topic.

Deming stated that the solution for education is *not* to be more businesslike because the root causes of problems in government, business, and education are all the same. In his seminars he often criticized business for making short-term decisions, such as decisions that are good for the quarterly report but bad for the business overall. For example, he described a manufacturing company that was near the end of the quarter and was about to show a loss. Pressure was on to ship orders before the end of the quarter to show a profit. One piece was missing from a supplier, but it was decided to ship anyway. This way the shipped products could be counted as accounts receivable and thus a profit could be reported for the quarter. Three weeks into the next quarter the manufacturer flew representatives to the various locales that had purchased the product to install the missing piece. This was done, of course, at great cost to the company’s long-term financial health.

Suggestions for business to stop their short-term thinking are abundant. For example, Myron Tribus writes, “One of the most important changes that could be made, without cost and at once, would be to make the retirement benefits of executives depend on the earnings of the company after retirement.”⁵ Tribus is attacking the issue of business executive “cramming” to get the stock price up prior to their final “exam,” which for them is their retirement package.

So, taking to heart Deming’s position that the root causes of educational problems are the same as the root causes of business problems, I began to search for short-term thinking in education. What about education is the same? It didn’t take long to realize that education’s prime example of short-term thinking is cramming. It is endemic.

Deming wrote, “No number of short-term successes in short-term problems will ensure long-term success.” The sentence for education is, “No number of successes on chapter tests will ensure success on high-stakes, standardized exams.”

When teachers first start the process of assessing students only on long-term memory, some parents have a concern. The issue is that their son or daughter is not answering 100 percent of the questions as formerly done with short-term chapter quizzes. When educators explain that they are overcoming the cramming/forget cycle, however, parents are understanding and supportive. They know from their own educational experience the futility of cramming.

HIGH STANDARDS AND HIGH SUCCESS RATES

My seminars begin with a comparison of a central business issue with education's number one issue. The business issue is the requirement to have higher quality and lower cost at the same time. Beginning with Deming's teaching in Japan in 1950, the world of business has slowly come to believe this is possible. Education's requirement, because of No Child Left Behind legislation, is to have both higher standards and higher success rates at the same time. Just as business assumed that higher quality meant higher costs, education assumed that higher standards meant lower success rates. Well Deming proved through Japanese competition that higher quality and lower costs were possible and education is embarking on the same journey.

Congress has mandated that education is to accomplish in 14 years what business is still attempting to accomplish after 50 years. Business is improving, but has not arrived yet. For example, *Business Week* reports, "For new cars, U.S. automakers have narrowed the quality gap with foreign brands, but they're still not in the top tier." It then reports defects per 100 vehicles with Toyota, BMW, and Honda above average and General Motors, Ford, and DaimlerChrysler below average. GM, Ford, and Chrysler's 2003 quality is exactly where Toyota, BMW, and Honda were in 2002.⁶ This superior quality is occurring at the same time that Toyota and Honda are manufacturing their cars in three hours less time than General Motors, four hours less than Ford and six hours less than DaimlerChrysler.⁷ For U.S. business leaders to convince legislators that they they have the answer to education's woes is inaccurate at best and possibly dishonest. Business leaders have not solved their short-term thinking problems and are not assisting education with its short-term cramming issues.

PLEASE BLAME PERMISSION TO FORGET FOR POOR RESULTS

It won't be long after readers have completed this chapter that they will pick up yet another article such as *USA Today's* headline story on Friday, May 10, 2002, "Kids Get 'Abysmal' Grade in History." The article goes on to explain that 57 percent of seniors could not perform at even the basic level, 32 percent performed at the basic level, 10 percent at grade-level work, and one percent were advanced or superior.⁸ It is my hope that when the next article is printed, readers will not think poorly of the history (or whatever other subject is named) teachers but remember that everyone (students and teachers) are performing exactly as the system dictates.

Teachers have taught the history that is tested on the national exams. Students have answered similar questions for their grades. The system has not required that students remember the course content beyond the end of the course, and guess what? They don't! Permission to forget is the norm.

CONCLUSION

Educators are held accountable for students' long-term memory as measured by standardized exams and performance in the university, the military, or in other occupations. Students, however, are held accountable for their short-term memory as measured by chapter tests, and Friday quizzes on the current week's curriculum. The education system has a major disconnect.

Key Recommendation

Seventy percent of every nongraded weekly quiz and 70 percent of every graded exam should include questions from the current course and 30 percent of every nongraded weekly quiz and every graded exam should be from the content of prior courses. For example, an algebra II quiz or exam should be 70 percent algebra II and 30 percent algebra I and geometry. In schools with an interdisciplinary curriculum in which all strands of math are taught each year, 70 percent of junior level exams should be from the junior level course and 30 percent from the prior two years' content.

This recommendation is true for all subjects. For example:

- Eighth-grade history exams should be composed of 70 percent eighth-grade U.S. history and 30 percent fifth-grade U.S. history.
- Eighth-grade physical science exams should be composed of 70 percent eighth-grade science plus 30 percent sixth-grade earth science and seventh-grade life science. (The exact sequence of science courses changes from state to state, but the concept is the same.)
- Ninth-grade English exams should be 70 percent ninth-grade content and 30 percent middle school content.
- Third-grade spelling tests should be 70 percent third-grade words and 30 percent first- and second-grade words.

J. M. Juran states "In the U.S.A. about a third of what we do consists of redoing work previously 'done.'"⁹

NO

Cramming
Short-term
memory

YES

Learning
Long-term
memory

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