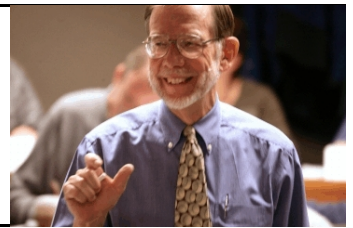


Bob

Behn's Performance Leadership Report

An occasional (and maybe even insightful) examination of the issues, dilemmas, challenges, and opportunities for improving performance and producing real results in public agencies.



On why all public officials—both executives and legislators—need to

Vol. 9, No. 12, August 2011

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Be Aware (and Beware) of Campbell's Law

The school year has begun. Yet, for most of the past summer, schools have been in the headlines. And not in the way that teachers, principals, and superintendents would like.

The headlines have not focused on a class of inner-city students who another Jaime Escalante (he of *Stand and Deliver* fame) taught calculus. The headlines have not been about biology students who discovered a new drug to cure Alzheimer's.

From New York, to Houston, to Los Angeles, to Washington, D.C., these headlines have been about cheating. But not student cheating. These headlines have focused on cheating by teachers and principals.

The biggest headlines have come from Atlanta, where investigators discovered cheating in 44 of the 56 schools that they checked. They found 38 principals plus another 140 teachers who had participated in this cheating.

The tactics for teacher cheating are numerous. Teachers can simply tell the students the answers. They can give students identical or very similar problems the week or day before. Or, after the tests are collected, teachers can erase a wrong answer and replace it with the correct one. Thus, the machines that grade these tests now also check to see if the number of erasures are statistically above the norm.

A tactic that is less easy to detect is for the teacher, when answering a student's query about a particular question, to carefully put a hand on the desk. If the teacher's hand has only one finger on the desk, the correct answer is number one. If there are two fingers, the correct answer is number two.

We should not, however, be surprised by these tactics. After all, we have put significant pressure on schools and teachers to improve test scores. Yes: Educators certainly affect how much students learn. Otherwise, why have schools? And educators certainly affect how well students do on standardized tests. Still, teachers

and schools are not the only influence. So when the pressure becomes personal—when a person's job and income are on the line—some people may resort to cheating. Why do you think all of those professional baseball players used steroids?

Over thirty years ago, Donald Campbell, the social scientist who focused much of his work on the evaluation of public policies, explained this behavior:

The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor.

I distinguish between "honest cheating" and "dishonest cheating." Dishonest cheating is illegal, and you can go to jail for it. Honest cheating is perfectly legal, but everyone thinks of it as cheating. In education, honest cheating is "teaching to the test."

As examples, Campbell offered both crime rates and education test scores, which he argued are "highly corruptible indicators."

The distortion and corruption about which Campbell worries comes, however, in two forms. That great American philosopher (and head of Tammany Hall) George Washington Plunkitt distinguished between "honest graft" and "dishonest graft." Dishonest graft was illegal, and you could go to jail for it; honest graft was perfectly legal, but everyone knew it was graft. Similarly, I distinguish between "honest cheating" and "dishonest cheating." Dishonest cheating is illegal, and you can go to jail for it. Honest cheating is perfectly legal, but everyone thinks of it as cheating.

In education, honest cheating is

called "teaching to the test." There is nothing illegal about it. No one goes to jail for it. Still, it illustrates how putting pressure on schools, principals and teachers to improve on very specific performance measures can produce the distortions about which Campbell worried.

After all, achievement tests do not—indeed, cannot—capture all of the theoretical concepts, cognitive capabilities, and analytical skills we expect that students will learn in school. Some concepts, capabilities, and skills will be easier to test objectively than others, and those will be on the test. And, teachers—being very human—will teach to this test.

Thus, educators often observe that the challenge in educational testing is designing "a test worth teaching to."

Still, research has shown, reports Daniel Koretz of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, that even tests "designed to be 'worth teaching to' can generate distorted incentives and inflated test scores."

So get over it. **Don't go looking for the perfect performance measure. It doesn't exist.** Don't waste countless meetings debating whose measure is without defects. All measures have them. Don't hire expensive consultants to create the penultimate measure. It doesn't exist.

Instead, start with a good measure (or two). Not great, not perfect, just good. From the beginning, try to identify its inadequacies. Recognize what problems the measure might create; then, as you implement your performance strategy, be alert for the emergence of flaws and distortions.

When suggesting, adopting, or employing a performance measure, all public officials should be aware of—and beware of—Campbell's Law. **B**

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