

Eulogy for Larry Lipsitz: Vision and Guts

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Written by:

Charles L. Blaschke, President
Education TURNKEY Systems, Inc.
703-362-4689 (cell)
Cblaschke7@gmail.com

When Larry started Education Technology, to which I was one of the original Contributing Editors over 50 years ago, he had a unique vision, recognizing the need for creative management of change to reap the benefits of education technology, even during in its crude form at that time. He also was very courageous in taking a leadership role to support technology which the Nixon Administration attempted to “kill” for political reasons. In 1971, he sponsored the Education Technology Conference held in New York (see September 1971 issue). He and I discussed the need for such an opportunity following the somewhat hastily put together news conference headed by Frank Carlucci took over for Donald Rumsfeld (who called the NEA a “Neanderthal organization”), as Director of OEO. Carlucci announced that the large performance contract experiment project in over 20 districts which OEO funded had failed. Indeed, as The Washington Post reported (February 3, 1972), Carlucci stated, “The results of the experiment clearly indicates that the firms operating under performance contracts did not perform significantly better than the more traditional school systems...It is clear that on the basis of these findings, there’s no evidence to support a massive move to utilize performance contracting for remedial education.” In December 2016 at the Princeton Club in New York City in a meeting room hall with Carlucci’s and Rumsfeld’s portraits hanging on the wall during Education Technology’s “contributing editor Karen Billings “moving on” from SIIA, I argued that these two political Nixon “hatchet men” sought to undermine the use of education technology in that performance contract project by “caving” into the National Education Association’s threat to lobby Congress to cut all funding for OEO if the “preliminary results” showed any positive results. I mentioned to Larry this immediately after that OEO press conference many of the results of student performance test scores at OEO in the 20+ performance contract cities had “disappeared.” I also mentioned that to Larry and to Ron Schwartz, former reporter at Business Week, who then worked for powerful Education Committee Head Congressman Edith Green. He suggested that Chairman Green should have the Government Accounting Office “investigate” TURNKEY (i.e., we were the Management Support Group for the project) as we had most of the student performance test results of both the performance contract and control schools in our office. We also had documents of some major problems in the districts in implementing the project, which began in September 1970 with only two months of planning and start-up time, including:

- The UFT “lockdown” of the Jerome Street School project in New York City which Fran Tarkington’s company had to “open” doors with chain cutters after several months delay.

- Allegations that control group teachers were provided test items during the pre/post assessment timeframe, among other roadblocks, both supported by organized teacher groups.

Headed by Joseph Frumpkin, GAO did conduct the investigation with which we obviously cooperated. As this was occurring, Larry held the Conference. Technology supporters, including some researchers and performance contract firms officials spoke. In the last presentation, Allen Calvin who headed BRL whose programmed instruction materials were used to varying extents by most of the participating performance contract firms (i.e., his firm was not one of the OEO contractors) raised his hand with a piece of paper stating that GAO investigation refuted OEO's claim. Reporters from the New York Times checked into the allegations, which resulted in a March 20, 1972 editorial entitled "Premature Discard...The flat assertion by the Office of Economic Opportunity that performance contracting has failed...is an oddly quick and sweeping judgement after only one year's experimentation...The sweepingly negative evaluations by OEO has earmarks of a subjective, if not downright political judgement rather than a scientific assessment...It's no secret that the organized teaching profession has been lobbying hard to discredit performance contracting...The suspicions aroused by OEO's rapid transit into and out of the experiment raised the question whether so politics-prone an agency is the proper vehicle for controversial experimentation." On February 28, Education USA reported in an editorial entitled Performance Contracting -- a Premature Obituary -- reported in the criticism of the OEO evaluation that it omitted the importance of "interface problems -- the dynamics of the relationship between outside firms and the school, including 37 instances of interface problems ranging from teacher resistance, management conflicts, poorest pre-test conditions, and threats to terminate contracts; in 8 of the 18 projects these problems seldom occurred and showed signs of success.

By publishing an article on the first major article on the Performance Contract Turnkey concept as a means to increase the quality of instruction through appropriate and effective use of education technology, Larry went way beyond the headlines of most media reports. His insights and constructive criticism should be heeded for those who experiment with and attempt to implement initiatives based upon some of the principles underlying the concept. If not for his guts to take on the Nixon Administration and those opponents of education technology used in the Performance Contract TURNKEY approach, among other initiatives to improve education, attempts to "bury technology" might have succeeded. For that we are grateful. And, as Paul Harvey of radio fame used to say, "the rest of the story" is in the Blaschke archives at The Bush School of Government & Public Service at Texas A&M University at: <http://bush.tamu.edu/mosbacher/research/>