Kentucky.com™
LEXINGTON HERALD-LEADER

Kentucky voices: Education reform is futile without new set of principles

By Aaron W. Hughey
Posted: 12:00am on Nov 3, 2011; Modified: 6:40am on Nov 3, 2011

It is becoming increasingly obvious that education must be a central tenet of any viable strategy for sustainable job creation and economic growth.

Unfortunately, far too many Americans still have antediluvian notions about its evolving role in their lives. "School" used to be something most of us did during the first couple of decades of our lives.

For centuries this was the case. Once you acquired basic knowledge and employable skills, you were pretty much set for life.

Today, however, education is more of a cradle-to-grave proposition. All work is increasingly information driven. Constant training and retraining are the new norm; today's proficiency is tomorrow's obsolescence.

The chief culprits are technology and globalization, which make it possible to do practically anything anywhere in the world. In a fast-paced, knowledge-driven global economy, everything can — and often does — change overnight. You either keep up or are left in the dust.

At the same time, most of us have heard that old saying at one time or another, "If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got."

Well guess what? It's true — especially when it comes to education.

The problem seems to be that a lot of people with very good intentions are convinced the way to improve education is to keep trying different variations on the same theme. The ongoing campaign by many educational "reformers" to develop and implement national educational standards is a prime example of this kind of faulty thinking.

And pursuing the wrong credential can make your economic situation significantly worse. For example, charlatans, opportunists and fear mongers are already cashing in on the naïve who believe any job in health services or information technology will precipitate a higher standard of living.

At a time when the world desperately needs originality and imagination, why do we cling to this absurd notion that the best way to confront the immense social and economic dilemmas we are currently facing is through an even greater emphasis on conventionality?

Further, I am convinced that most of the people who use that tired mantra, "Think outside the box" have absolutely no clue what it actually entails. Even a cursory glance at any reputable history book reveals that society has never been very kind to those who truly deviate from the norm.

What most of the people who use this admonition tend to mean is, "Think outside your box, but make sure you stay within mine." But as Einstein once famously said, "We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them."

Again, the reality is that the fundamental nature of work is changing, which means our entire approach to education must undergo a similar metamorphosis. Our survival is increasingly linked to our ability to equip future generations with the capacity to effectively deal with the enormous challenges already coming into sharp focus.

So how can we do this? Well, we could start by emphasizing the following four principles:

■ Customization is more important than conformity. We desperately need creative, innovative problem-solvers — not greater homogeneity of knowledge and skill sets. An educational philosophy built on a cookie-cutter model will not provide our country with the talent necessary to compete in a global market.

■ Relationships are more important than rules. Some degree of order and uniformity are essential to any enterprise; this is the basis for a successful civilization.

Ultimately, however, our collective livelihood depends on our capacity to relate to each other in meaningful ways — and this should be the cornerstone of our entire approach to education.

■ People are more important than policies. Standardized procedures should exist solely to serve us — not the other way around. Significant progress is always made by those willing to take the road less travelled, whereas maintaining the status quo usually ends up being a dead end.

■ Individuals are more important than institutions. Our obsession with trying to force everyone into the same mold promotes unhealthy competition and essentially heightens mediocrity.

Responding aggressively to the specific needs of each student makes the outcome better for everyone.

If we build our educational system on these principles, the United States could effectively reclaim its global leadership in a number of critical arenas.

Education is indeed becoming the only path to true job security. But not education as we have thought of it in the past, or as some still think of it in the present. It's time to move to a new paradigm — one that will enable us to address the tremendous difficulties that lie ahead.

As they used to say at Apple, we need to learn to "Think different!"

Aaron W. Hughey is a professor of counseling and student affairs at Western Kentucky University. Reach him at Aaron.Hughey@wku.edu.

http://www.kentucky.com/