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A Review and Critical Analysis of the book

***Making Schools Work* by William G. Ouchi**

Making Schools Work: A Revolutionary Plan to Get Your Children the Education They Need is a 2003 book written by William G. Ouchi (the founder of the Theory Z school of Public Administration) and Lydia G. Segal. It was published by Simon and Schuster of New York City. The book draws on research done by a twelve-member team over four types of schools with three school systems in each set and multi-year period, stretching in some circumstances from 1988 to the time of publication. In the book Ouchi does two things; he develops and shares in great detail a seven-point plan for making more effective schools (which draws heavily from the Japanese style of management) and he applies Theory Z to real-life situations, observes them, and draws conclusions.

The book itself is written for a very specific group of laymen; in this case, parents who are not educators. For someone then, who has a child in a school system who sees that change is necessary, but not someone who is currently a part of that system, though Ouchi does encourage that. The idea behind the book, as laid out in the subtitle is to serve as guide, clutched in a parent's hand as he or she navigates the pitfalls of school systems and attempts to create change for his or her children. In this way, the book does not work quite so well. I am a parent of two young children, one 11 and another 6, and I kept thinking about Ouchi's principles and suggestions, and how, if implemented in the systems in which my children are educated, that they would be graduated from that system before those changes had come to pass or had a change to work.

Overall, though, the book is very strong and engagingly written right from the very beginning. He begins – as I am finding, do many public administration documents – with a

dramatic case study, that of the Goudy School in Chicago, which was in dire straits and had been characterized by William Bennett (the United States Secretary of Education in 1988) the worst school in America. The action taken by the Illinois legislature at the time was to pass legislation that gave local control to individual schools, removing the top-down bureaucracy, and letting them control their own budgets. Ouchi then spells out how Patrick Durkin, the principal at Goudy, has, in the course of 14 years, completely transformed Goudy into a high-functioning school with high test scores and a high rate of graduation to the next level.

How was this done? Ouchi's argument for how is based on schools like this one, and can be summed up thusly: When a school leader is given control over the money available to the school – no more and no less – and can make on-the-fly, adaptable entrepreneurial decisions that fit exactly the needs of the system or district (no cookie cutter approaches or universally adaptable solutions) then these schools can be successful, and that the primary thing that hampers schools from success is the burden of bureaucracy, the yoke they must carry of top-down mandates. That said, it's not simply the removal of one and the automatic onset of the other; it has to be the removal of one and the immediate and deliberate implementation of the other. Ouchi spells out what he calls his “Seven Keys to Success” in the first chapter, then spends the next seven chapters (and the vast majority of the book) expanding upon them. They are:

KEY 1: *Every Principal Is An Entrepreneur*: He explicitly characterizes this as “the opposite of a bureaucrat.” The idea behind this is that as bureaucracy has evolved out of the need to deal in an organized way with the routine, it is not useful when dealing with schools, where the idea is create routine for the kids, but the process of creating that is rarely routine for the creators. That said, someone who is highly adaptable, and working in a highly adaptable

environment, is well suited to deal with non-routinized challenges on a regular basis. Ouchi further breaks this step down into four smaller steps:

1. Analyze your customers (Finding out, with hard data in hand, who the students are demographically, what their home lives are like, and so on.)
2. Design a staffing plan that fits your needs (Not just picking the right person for the right job and the right student set, but deciding what jobs will exist in your school in the first place.)
3. Arrange the schedule to fit the plan (School schedules need to be as flexible as everything else in the plan – the children need routines, but the form that these routines take doesn't have to be the same six periods or block schedules we've always used – they could be anything. This one is an exhortation of creativity when it comes to scheduling.)
4. Choose teaching materials to fit the students (Obviously, this can't be done until after #1. Essentially, this is re-stated as “don't throw out any teaching method.” Just because something has been deemed not to work under specific circumstances, does not mean it cannot be adapted to work under your circumstances.)

The rest of the first key is essentially a breakdown of what it means to become an entrepreneur in Ouchi's sense of the word, how to train and learn to be adaptable, make your own solutions, be creative, and reject bureaucracy. He uses Los Angeles and Chicago schools as a couple of places where good results have come of this, but not at a system-wide level. The most important point to him – and he reinforces it at the end of the chapter, is the oppositional relationship between entrepreneur and bureaucrat – you simply cannot do both in his opinion.

KEY 2: *Every School Controls Its Own Budget:* Ouchi's main point here, put simply from my notes is 'No one cares about their budget until they're in charge of it.' Once local

administration is in charge of its own budgets, and knows that anything additional will have to come from their own fundraisers, ingenuity or pockets, they tend to alter their priorities. These are not always the best or most productive decisions, but they are cheaper, and Ouchi shows, wash out and work over time. Two factors are explored within this chapter: The first is case study evidence of schools making decisions to hold classes in hallways and employ parents in order to save money (which sounds like shortcutting until you realize that it makes the classes bond better socially and increases overall parental involvement) and the second is the procedure behind Weighted Student Formula.

Weighted Student Formula assigns point values to certain qualities that could predict that Student A would need more financial allotment than Student B. For instance, if Student A meets the baseline qualifications of English as a primary home language, white, middle income and from nearby, and Student B fits all of that except that he's African-American, he will be assigned a point value for being in the racial minority, and more funding might be allocated for him based on that. This system has allowed a tremendous amount of flexibility to local school authorities and made it so that their money goes where they know it needs to go instead of being randomly distributed by a faceless, non-local administration that's miles away and has never met their students. This also helps them avoid hidden costs of things like busing, centralized food preparation and off-site office staff.

Putting the money closer to home definitely seems to be a major factor in creating successful schools, on average, successful districts controlled 70% more of their own funding than unsuccessful ones. Local money also seems to reduce the amount of corruption, either because there are smaller amounts involved, fewer layers of government, or more oversight. Or

perhaps, it is because people become less apt to steal when they see every day the damage that will inflict upon the faces of their neighbors.

KEY 3: *Everyone is Accountable for Student Performance and Budgets:* This is Ouchi's way of saying that the current American system of holding teachers solely accountable for the passing or failing or test scores of a student is ridiculous, and that everyone involved, from the parents to the teachers to the administration to the students to the testers should be held accountable, as that is the only logical and scientific way to locate and repair the problem. In this, he seems to hold to the Japanese business maxim, "Fix the problem, not the blame," which is not a very American idea. We seem to be far more interested in the individual and who we can scapegoat successfully than we are identifying and dealing with an actual problem. Dr. Ouchi espouses several ideas in this book that are wonderful, sound, logical ideas that seem to forget that there are political wars to be fought in this country, and that the darker side of human nature must be battled like dragons at every turn. This is the first of those that while theoretically great, probably is stillborn in his mind or on the page.

He does use this chapter to compare the process of "fresh starting" (the process of firing everyone and starting afresh) what's deemed a failing school to alternative methods and finds "fresh starting" lacking. I would agree with him here, being married to an educator and having weathered a "fresh start," there's nothing fresh about it, and it frequently not only fixes nothing, but motivates people to only to keep their jobs, not to educate students.

KEY 4: *Everyone Delegates Authority to Those Below:* Key 4 is fairly self-explanatory, and embodies the Theory Z idea of the triangle turned upside down, it's completely vertical structure thrown over for one where everyone delegates as part of a system that checks and

supports everyone in it. This results in more people overseeing a thing, which guarantees fewer mistakes and more input, along with a structure that creates more chances for change and adaptation. Everyone learns from everyone else, and the system is interdependent, with no single section or feature spinning off to do its own thing.

KEY 5: *There Is a Burning Focus on Student Achievement:* And he's not kidding. His “burning focus” line is hyperbolic, but Ouchi stands by it throughout the chapter, evoking the imagery of a burning focus again and again. He begins the chapter by walking the reader through the history of “No Child Left Behind” with its Texan origins involving H. Ross Perot and George W. Bush, and then comparing the score-oriented results tracking of schools to American organized sports or game shows. His argument is that people, and especially Americans, who are socially trained in this direction, like things we can keep up with and track, like scores. How frustrating would Sunday football games be if you couldn't check the score periodically to see how the hometown guys were doing? So the American propensity to tie success into scores (especially those we can track and measure and graph semester after semester) might be easy and gratifying to us, but it's not particularly useful as an indicator of student success, which, after all, is meant to be the point.

So he suggests a number of things that are better at measuring achievement and success better than test scores, such as clustering kids who are like-minded or who have like achievements, individual programs, mainstreaming, and so on. Here again though, is an idea which will have major issues being born into an American educational system: to ask us to reject test scores is not part of our cultural programming – Ouchi himself builds the chapter on this acknowledgment. I myself am not a fan of standardized testing or its resultant data - I believe its

unfair, not representative and rife with bias problems, but I live with an educator and have a gifted son. Otherwise, I doubt I would have an opinion. For most people, there would have to be a tried and tested(!) replacement for test scores that a layman was able to track without help before the largest mass of people would every consider anything else as a replacement.

He closes out the chapter with these words: “A burning focus on achievement means using good data to provide an individualized response to each child, with a consistent schoolwide approach. When it's done right, as we've seen in these examples, it works.” You can clearly see by this point how all Keys of his process are not only necessary, they build on and work in conjunction with one another, much like the management systems he favors. Ouchi stresses this over and over again, through the course of the book – you cannot pick and choose the Keys to Success, you have to have them all, or there is no success. This is because they are all useful and address a singular problem, but also because they're interlocking.

KEY 6: *Every School Is a Community of Learners:* The focus of this key is on harmony. Harmonious movement and cooperation between every moving person and part of the school's system of support is the key to keeping things moving efficiently and directed at the goal of focused learning. John Dewey is apparently the father of this idea. Ouchi admits right off the bat that the only way to achieve this idea is with hard, cooperative work. Once again, though, he breaks that work down into microsteps that can help a the reader make a plan for change in his or her affected school system:

1. Identify the Needs and Desires of the Community of Families (Once you accept that a child is unique and therefore in need of some tailored, specialized instruction, you can extend this idea to the families and clusters of families in your school's area. This helps a school from the jumping-

off point, when they're looking to find their direction and raison d'etre.)

2. Organize into Subunits that Permit Intimacy and Community (In recognition of the fact that not everyone is necessarily completely comfortable around everyone else and that it is simply logistically impossible for a person to know everyone in his / her community, Ouchi recommends these “subunits” which provide smaller, more intimate communities for people with something in common. These can be as simple as a “Freshman Academy” made up of only freshmen, or based on something like testing, like the Spectrum advanced reading program that my son is in at his school.)

3. Foster a Strong Community of Teachers (This is basically the same non-top-down lateral system of responsibilities and support applied in microcosm to the teachers within a system that Ouchi has previously applied to administration and bureaucracy. The teachers support each other, share lesson plans and resources, and have the same delegation structure described earlier. In this way “they're all in it together” and when the school does well it's really a credit to all of them working together as their efforts are indistinguishable from one another.)

KEY 7: *Families Have Real Choices Among a Variety of Unique Schools:* This is meant to be taken as literally as it sounds; Ouchi thinks that anyone who wants to go to any school should be able to apply capitalistic competition and choice to that equation, and we need to implement vouchers and fold in private religious education.

This, at least to me, is where the practical, real-world broad application of Ouchi's theory completely falls apart. His examples for workability have been Canadian systems and US big-city ones, and when you apply real school choice to places like that, it might work. It also provably works with very small groups of people, where they community funds the school,

maintains it, and it serves a very small slice of the total population. However, in mid-range sized systems, the politics of the people involved are very much a factor. Ouchi's argument is simply to throw all of that out – he doesn't even really cover it, and when he does address it, he takes the attitude that when people realize that they can get a better education product for their children, they'll come around. He argues against teacher's unions on the grounds that in a system where the teachers govern themselves and the money is local, they'll be merit reviewed twice a year and treated like any other state employee, and so won't need unions. He also argues against tenure, on the grounds that it is wasteful and unnecessary.

So he wants teachers to achieve and share and support one another, thus providing their own support network, and taking away the one that he sees as bloated and counterproductive, which it often is. He's not down on unions in general, and goes out of his way to defend them near the end of the book. He just thinks teachers won't need them when everything else has been made better through the 7 Keys. The point, however, is that without tenure, there are those who would fire good teachers for irrational reasons, and without their unions, teachers are unprotected from all kinds of things that have nothing to do with collective bargaining, which would also be out the window. Politicians and people seeking to place blame aren't going to stop finger pointing at teachers just because things are okay right now, and unions and tenure protect good teachers as well as often rewarding bad ones. It's a short-term and unrealistic solution, and it was a disappointment to find it near the end of the book.

Ouchi knows it will be controversial, and so addresses that by saying things (society) will be different once all seven of his Keys are in place, but this moves us into stalemate. We must make changes to make advances, and the advances are necessary to show that we need more

changes, but no one will make the changes without corrections and protections already in place.

As I say, unfortunately, this is where a well-intentioned plan falls apart.

After concluding his 7 Keys, Ouchi wraps up the book with an exhortation to parents of school-age children to engage in “revolution!” He spends about 60 pages laying out in detail some things he thinks parents ought to do to get better acquainted with their child's school, district, teachers, administration and so on. In the style of the bureaucratic administrator, he lays out measurement criteria, general things to look for, and a yardstick for determination. True to form, there are seven rules for this, too. He urges parents to follow the money, make changes to the top-down administrative system, and to change structure before culture, but there is only the barest, most generic description of how to do this.

It's one of the great weaknesses of what is otherwise a very strong and organized book with a solid plan of action for changing schools – just when you think his plans are workable and could really do a lot for schools in your community, you realize that Dr. Ouchi does a kind of end-run around things like gradual societal change by using phrases like “after attitudes change.” Well, when does that happen? Once again, we are in the Catch-22 presented by the inception of the change creating the change itself, but where is the impetus? Even in the case studies Dr. Ouchi himself uses, they made change out of necessity, once they were in huge trouble, and it worked, and that's how they became a case study for the book. Nothing guarantees that it will always work, and nothing says that these rules, these Keys, come with a universal adapter for any school situation.

In the final analysis, I think that Dr. Ouchi is a very sound analyst with good data and great ideas about how to change schools, and that his application of Theory Z to the way things

are done currently would certainly help. I don't, however, think he has very realistic ideas about the ideas and attitudes of people in mid-size American cities, or a complete grasp of the American political conversation when it comes to education.