Performance Contracting Put In Proper Perspective

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Performance contracting as an educational panacea has received several boosts as a result of recent public relations coups on the part of Behavioral Research Laboratories which for the past year has had a contract to operate the Banneker Elementary School in Gary, Ind.

The Gary program was featured in a LOOK magazine article entitled "We'll Educate Your Kids — Or Your Money Back."

Hugh Downs on the Today show introduced a feature on Banneker School by saying unequivocally that Banneker children were learning better than other children in the Gary schools and that they were learning it at a lower per pupil cost.

LOOK has folded and Hugh Downs has left the Today show, but Behavioral Research Laboratories is still very much in evidence and hustling for business on the basis of its public relations windfalls.

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Performance contracting, under which private concerns are presumably paid according to how well they improve pupil performance as measured by standardized tests, was denounced as educational hucksterring by both the AFL-CIO and the American Federation of Teachers when it was first proposed by the Office of Economic Opportunity.

Actually, the facts about performance contracting, as they begin to unfold, are quite the opposite from the impression given in the Gary publicity.

It is one of the marks of a huckster to imply sweeping guarantees for his product that are actually negated by the fine print of the contract. This is clearly what happened in Gary.

Quite simply, what the public was led to believe was that BRL would guarantee to bring every child in Banneker School up to national norms in reading and in mathematics or the school system would get its money back.

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This impression was created by a vast amount of advance publicity and was perhaps most explicitly stated in U.S. NEWS AND WORLD REPORT which, in its issue of Oct. 12, 1970, stated:

The school board gets the company's assurance that each child in the predominantly black school will meet or excel the national norms in all subjects — reading, math, foreign languages and the sciences.

If impartial tests — to be administered by a third party — show that the company has failed, Gary will get its money back.

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No responsible educator would make such an outlandish guarantee and one might suppose that no responsible editor would lack the good sense to examine the fine print of the contract before publishing such nonsense.

But then the widespread incidence of gullibility is one of the reasons hucksters tend to make more money than teachers.

In fact, the test scores of Banneker pupils published by the center for Urban Redevelopment in Education indicate that of the 149 sixth graders enrolled in the school — the only pupils covered by the guarantee the first year — only 33 students were performing at the sixth grade level in both reading and math at the end of the school year.

Of these 33 students, 13 were performing at the sixth grade level in both reading and mathematics when they entered the Banneker experiment and another 13 were performing at sixth grade level in one or the other of the two subjects.

All in all only seven students were actually brought up to grade level in both subjects. Surely this is something less than an educational miracle.

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Inasmuch as BRL is in the business of making money, it was of course not paid on the basis of the glittering guarantee which U.S. NEWS AND WORLD REPORT understood to be in the contract.

Instead BRL was paid on the basis of the number of sixth graders who advanced the equivalent of at least one year in reading and math.

According to Price Waterhouse and Co. which audited the contract, only 43 students achieved this more modest objective, less than one-third of the sixth graders covered by the guarantee.

Actually, the CURE report shows only 33 students who achieved the specified results.

The detailed reports on BRL's first year at Banneker abound in contradictions and this is only one of them, although it is, after all, a $27,200 contradiction.

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BRL has achieved much of its reputation for its Sullivan reading materials. It is therefore significant that in reading alone only 43 of the 149 sixth graders showed the required year's gain in reading.

The Gary press releases state the figure at 47, but there is no support for this slightly higher figure in the CURE report.

Of these 43 pupils, 13 were already reading at the sixth grade level when they entered the program.

Even more surprising is the fact that 14 pupils who started the year at the sixth grade reading level either made less than the guaranteed progress or actually lost ground during the course of the year.

Again the facts do not sustain the miracle described in the press releases.

All in all the published test scores for the Banneker students contain such a mass of inconsistencies, improbabilities and incongruities that they raise questions stronger perhaps than ever before about the value of standardized tests and grade equivalency scores as dependable measures of educational outputs.

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The Banneker test scores consitute less a basis for payment than a vindication of the statement by Dr. Henry Dyer of the Educational Testing service that grade equivalency scores are "psychological and statistical monstrosities."

Did the Banneker children learn better than other children in the Gary system?

The answer to this question is quite simply that no one will ever know. The Banneker children were given a special test which has never been administered to any other children in the Gary school system.

There is thus no conceivable way of comparing the performance of the Banneker students with that of other students in Gary.

The usual practice in educational experiments of establishing a control group of students for comparison purposes was not employed in Gary.

The success of the Banneker experiment can therefore only be judged in terms of the performance of the Banneker students themselves and that performance in no way measures up to the publicity which has emanated from the Gary school system and BRL.

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To say that the Banneker project saved money is even more fraudulent than the claim that it improved learning. The advance publicity on the Banneker experiment stated that BRL would receive $800 per pupil, minus the refunds for pupils who did not reach national averages.

Again the publicity did not take account of the small print in the contract. The aggreement between the Gary school board and BRL stipulated that BRL was to receive the equivalent per-pupil as the average for the entire Gary school system.

This turned out to be not the widely publicized figure of $800 but $924, a difference of nearly $100,000.

The $924 figure, however, was the average for the entire Gary school system, kindergarten through 12th grade. Averaged in are the much higher costs of secondary schools.

Although Superintendent Gordon McAndrew has persistently refused to provide figures on per-pupil expenditures for elementary schools, the best available estimates are that average per-pupil costs in Gary's elementary schools for the year were $765.

After refunding fees for the sixth graders who did not achieve a year's progress, BRL received an average per-pupil fee of $830, or $65 more than was spent in the other Gary elementary schools.

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Actually, under the terms of the contract, even if not a single pupil in Banneker had reached grade level or achieved national average performance in reading and mathematics, BRL would still not have been in the midst of a financial disaster.

The total forfeit in that case would have been $111,184. This would have left BRL with a net fee of $626,486, amounting to an average per-pupil expenditure of $784.

BRL would thereby still be left with approximately $20 per pupil more than the average for Gary elementary schools during the same year.

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Others who have been involved in performance contracting have been more candid in admitting the failures of their free enterprise schemes.

Educational Turnkey Systems, Inc., a Washington firm headed by Charles Blaschke, formerly with the OEO, has designed a majority of the performance contract programs which have been in operation.

In Education Turnkey News, subscriptions to which cost $60 a year, Reed Martin and Peter Briggs of Blaschke's staff write that, although the hope was the companies would come up with new and creative approaches to education, "no significant new approaches have been offered by the firms. Each project now has the same old wine in new bottles."

Martin and Briggs conclude pessimistically: "The public may find in the majority of cases it is simply paying a higher price for a company to put last year's product in this year's favorite package.

"Last year, costs were relatively low and guarantees were high. These factors represented the firms' desire to 'buy into' a project to establish their reputation."

And this, it should be emphasized, is the conclusion of two men who have personally been involved in the design and implementation of more than half of the performance contracts now in existence.

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Texarkana, Ark. developed the first performance contract and it was widely heralded as a major educational breakthrough.

Then the project was jolted by scandal when it was proved that the contractor, Dorsett Educational Systems, had been seeking to increase its profit by "teaching to the test."

More recently, Martin and Briggs, in the article quoted above, charge even greater deception on the part of the Dorsett firm.

"It was not only the so-called teaching to the test," they report, "that made the Texarkana project misleading. Much of the early enthusiasm grew from the fact that the students who seemed to be achieving the best were the first to be tested. The results were understandably dramatic but did not really furnish a sample of what was going on in the overall project."

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In the wake of the scandal, the Texarkana school board fired the Dorsett firm and hired Educational Development Laboratories, a division of McGraw-Hill, to carry out the second year of the performance contract.

In a press release dated Sept. 17, 1971, Educational Development Laboratories confesses:

"The achievement gains as measured by standardized tests were disappointing. Only 24 per cent of the students made the target level of one or more years in growth in reading and math."

At least Educational Development Laboratories can be credited with candor not matched by Behavioral Research Laboratories in Gary!

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The American Federation of Teachers has exposed another case of teaching to the test which is even more flagrant than that in Texarkana.

In Providence, R.I., New Century Corporation, the performance contractor, introduced in the last two weeks of class a cram program, approximately 50 per cent of which consisted of items included in the Gates-MacGinitie reading achievement test used to measure pupil progress.

After studying the evidence, Dr. James Wardrop of the Center for Instructional Research and Curriculum Evaluation at the University of Illinois wrote:

The conclusion is inescapable: New Century was teaching the word associations required to respond correctly to items on the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test. The coincidence between teaching materials and test items cannot be attributed to "chance."

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Faced with the evidence, Providence's school superintendent, Dr. Charles Bernardo, shrugged it off, saying that it is clear by the relatively poor performance of the children that the final test results were not affected.

"The evidence," Dr. Bernardo concluded, "tends to show that the contractor was no more successful in producing gains in reading scores than the Providence staff has been."

The Office of Economic Opportunity has funded $6.5 million in performance contracts for local school districts. Preliminary results from the first year of the experiment have now come in.

John Mathews, writing in the Washington Star of Sept. 20, 1971, reports? "The first results indicate it costs private companies more than regular school system to teach basic subjects to failing students."

Despite the mounting evidence of failure and deception, performance contracting is still thriving. Even the Dorsett firm has survived the Texarkana scandal and landed a new contract in Colorado.

Parents can help children improve their reading skills

By B. JOSELOW

WASHINGTON — The ability to read does not suddenly happen when your child enters the first grade. Many different kinds of learning and a great deal of practice must take place before reading becomes easy for him. The parent can do much to help the child in his first half-year of school.

To become a successful reader, your child must learn how to listen and speak. His teacher will encourage him to develop these skills. He will hear and respond to sounds in the classroom and on the playground. He will probably listen to records and follow the directions which may tell him to hop, skip, jump, form a circle, sit in a row, or any number of things.

Others will listen while he speaks. He will name objects in the school room. He will share experiences with other children about his pets, his walks to school, or his school work.

During his first few weeks of school you may be able to help him with language development by listening to his descriptions of what happened at school, by listening to stories he makes up, by talking with him about the things he sees and hears, and by reading stories to him and answering his questions about them.

A first-grader needs to be able to hear all of the sounds his language uses, and his teacher has many ways of making these sounds familiar to him. She will read stories and poems, and she will encourage the children to use rhymes and jingles in the classroom and on the playground. She may ask your child to finish lines with words that rhyme or sound the same in order to teach the idea of words that sound alike.

At home you might help your child with sound awareness by saying, "I see something that sounds like ball starts. What do you see that starts like ball?" a balloon, a book? You might also ask him to bring you a number of things in the room which start with the same sounds, such as pan, pen, pencil, paper, etc. These and other similar games will help him develop sound awareness.

From the words that sound alike, the teacher will give your child words that look alike or look different. Your child will move naturally into this task if the proper readiness for it has been made. He will learn to sort objects, animals, etc. into common groups by pictures, words and printed symbols.

He will discover the likenesses and differences and in these objects such as color, kind and sizes. These experiences will help him understand the word families, such as name, tame, game, same, etc.

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The teacher will have him match words that look alike. You may want to try this at home with letters, words, or groups of words that you have cut from the newspaper. They can be matched by placing them on a table or by pasting them in rows on paper. Headlines rather than small type are best for this.

Your child also will be taught several skills which help him to figure out new words by himself. These skills are called word recognition skills and are: sounding out words (phonics), noticing the way a word is put together (word structure), and being able to use the meaning clues in the story.

First grade children learn phonics by learning letter sounds singly and in groups. In order for your child to use phonics, he must be able to hear the differences in sounds and see the differences in printed words. Once he has mastered phonics he will be able to recognize words that start the same, such as take, tall, and Tom, and words that end the same, such as head read, and word.

Word structure is the study of the parts of a word and what they mean. This skill will help your child from the first grade on and will be expanded every year.

It means learning the difference between root words and their added parts. This will help him read words like help (the root word), helped, helps, helping, and helpful. He will learn to join two words together to make one word, such as today, doghouse, and backyard. He will read words like can't, let's, I'm, and other contractions.

His first lessons in reading stories or articles will probably be in preprimers. These are usually paperback books containing many pictures and few printed words. The sentences will be simple but meaningful.

In these books, your child will learn to read to get the main idea or notice important details, to understand the order in which something happened, or to decide what made it happen. He may be able to read and summarize the story or article. These are the same reading skills he will need for studying all through school.

At home, you can help your first grader practice by having him read aloud to you. Many good children's books are available at public libraries and in stores.

This is not too early for your child to have his own small library and in stores.

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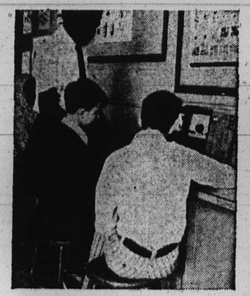

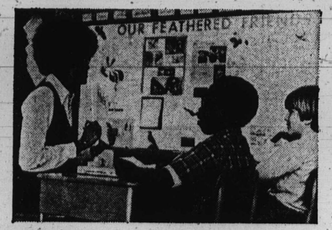

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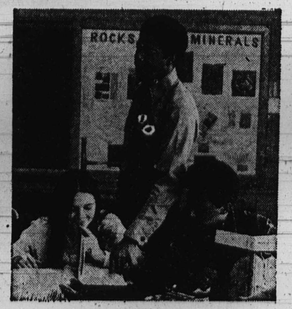

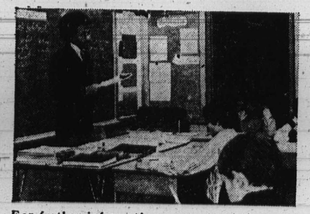

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