

# 1 4 How to Make the Schools Accountable

2 Interview with Albert Shanker \*<sup>1</sup>

3 PETER DRUCKER: Albert, you have been leading a  
crusade to **improve performance in the classroom**, to  
**make teachers and schools accountable for performance**,  
and to **build the school around the classroom teacher**. ...

4 How do you define performance in the school? ...

5 ALBERT SHANKER: The way to deal with this is to ask:  
What kind of human being are we trying to produce?

6 Most educators deal with the question very narrowly in  
terms of test scores, SAT scores, or narrow performance.

7 But essentially performance in education occurs along  
three dimensions.

8 One, of course, is knowledge.

9 The second dimension, I would say, is being able to enter  
the world as a participating citizen and perform within the  
economy.

10 The third has to do with the growth of the individual and  
participation in the cultural life of society. ...

11 Unfortunately, we don't do a very good job of even  
getting close to measuring these gains. ...

- 12 PETER DRUCKER: But it makes sense to say that unless a person has those tangible, measurable, knowledge skills, a foundation is lacking.
- 13 Somehow, one has to set priorities for defining what achievement is. ...
- 14 ALBERT SHANKER: I think the priority is to assess achievement longer range.
- 15 When you measure small gains each semester or each year, you get down to things that don't mean very much.
- 16 Rather trivial things that a student can study for an exam.
- 17 They don't mean anything a week later.
- 18 They're not even remembered later on. ...
- 19 PETER DRUCKER: I think I'm a living example of this.
- 20 My school grades were always excellent.
- 21 I learned very little and studied less, but I knew how to take exams. ...
- 22 ALBERT SHANKER: Let me illustrate **what learning is not and what it is.**
- 23 Teachers are required to give a course in Nature, so they put bird charts around the room.
- 24 They show flash cards and have the children give the names of the birds.
- 25 The end result is an examination where the students regurgitate the names of the birds.

- 26 But the kids don't remember the names very long; all that's there a few months later is a permanent dislike of birds. ...
- 27 In the Boy Scouts, when I was a youngster, they had a bird-study merit badge.
- 28 You actually had to see forty different birds.
- 29 You soon find you can't do that by walking across the street to a park.
- 30 You have to get up early in the morning and go to a swamp or woods.
- 31 You don't want to do it alone, so you find one or two friends who will go with you.
- 32 Soon you find that the birds you see out there don't look the way they do in pictures.
- 33 What happens over the months of going out with your friends and looking at these birds is **you begin to feel a sense of power.**
- 34 You can see birds around you that no one else can see. ...
- 35 A key problem for schools is to organize learning for youngsters in such a way that it doesn't become something memorized and instantly forgotten, but **something that becomes part of you.**
- 36 I have never met anyone who went through this experience in the Boy Scouts for whom it didn't remain a pretty lasting interest. ...

- 37 PETER DRUCKER: The implication of this is, first, that **you put the learning responsibility on the student** rather than the **teaching responsibility on the teacher**.
- 38 Is that central to the way you see performance? ...
- 39 ALBERT SHANKER: Essentially, the way schools are organized is to get a lot of activity and work on the part of teachers while the students sit and, you hope, listen.
- 40 You **hope** that they are remembering something.
- 41 And you create a few **punishments** or rewards in terms of grades or leaving students back.
- 42 Without that responsibility and without that engagement by students, the **results are very, very meager**. ...
- 43 PETER DRUCKER: For hundreds of years, then, our **emphasis** has been on **how well the teachers teach** rather than on **how well the student learns**? ...
- 44 ALBERT SHANKER: The school is organized on the **assumption** that the student is **a thing to be worked on**, not that **the student is the worker**.
- 45 A school is something like an **office**.
- 46 That is, the students are required to read reports and write reports.
- 47 It's more like an office than any other place.
- 48 But it's an office in which the student is given a desk and told, **"Your boss there, the teacher, will tell you what to do.**

- 49 But every forty minutes you will move to a different room and you will be given a different desk and you will be given a different boss who will give you different work to do."
- 50 Now, no one would organize an office that way.
- 51 The student is not being viewed as a worker who has to be engaged, but as raw material passing through a factory.
- 52 Well, of course, it doesn't work because that's not the way the process of learning goes on. ...
- 53 PETER DRUCKER: I've been a teacher-watcher since fourth grade, when I had the great good luck of two exceptional teachers.
- 54 And I've been a teacher myself since I was twenty.
- 55 I have yet to see a great teacher who teaches children.
- 56 All the great teachers I've seen made no distinction between children and adults.
- 57 Only the speed is different.
- 58 Whatever the task is, you do it on an adult level.
- 59 The task may be a beginner's task; the standards are not.
- 60 The fourth-grade teacher whom I still remember once said many years later that there are no poor students; there are only poor teachers.
- 61 That would imply that the job of the teacher is to find the strengths of the student and put them to work, rather than to look at the student as somebody whose deficiencies have to be repaired. ...

- 62 ALBERT SHANKER: When I taught, I was very rarely approached by a principal or assistant principal and asked whether the children were really learning or really engaged.
- 63 I had a very tough class, mostly youngsters that had just flown in from Puerto Rico, who had great difficulties with the language.
- 64 I was hoping that someone would come in to help me.
- 65 Then, the door opened one day and there was the principal.
- 66 After what seemed to me like a half hour, but must have been maybe thirty seconds, he said: "Mr. Shanker, there are a lot of pieces of paper on the floor throughout your room.
- 67 That's very unprofessional.
- 68 Would you see to it that they're picked up?"
- 69 Then the door closed and he went away.
- 70 The only thing that anyone was ever interested in was essentially a set of bureaucratic requirements. ...
- 71 PETER DRUCKER: One implication is that the school has to be focused on performance and results rather than on rules and regulations and, therefore, needs a clear definition of its mission. ...
- 72 ALBERT SHANKER: It needs that.
- 73 And it also needs a system to accomplish that.
- 74 One can't expect school board members not to be responsive to their constituents.

- 75 One can't expect a school superintendent not to be concerned with how he looks in front of the public and whether his contract gets renewed. ...
- 76 PETER DRUCKER: Now if I may move to your own work in your own organization, that big union you have built.
- 77 When you took national office sixteen years ago in 1974 as chief executive officer of what was then a fast-growing and very controversial union, which had a very difficult time in the 1960s, what was the first thing you did? ...
- 78 ALBERT SHANKER: The first thing I did was to try to move the union away from its orientation during the previous fifteen years.
- 79 Let me take one step back.
- 80 When I started to build the union as a teacher, and later as a staff member, the toughest thing I had to do was convince teachers that they had a right to pursue their own self-interest economically.
- 81 The notion of belonging to a union as against a professional association was just anathema.
- 82 However, by the time I became president of the American Federation of Teachers, it had gone too far in that direction.
- 83 Teachers were viewed as people who went on strike every year—not interested in the children, not interested in educational issues.
- 84 There was a tremendous backlash.
- 85 As a result of the GI Bill and the expansion of higher education in the United States, we also had a much more educated public that was far more critical of the public schools.

- 86 The image of schools and teachers had gone down and we faced threats of privatization, threats of tuition tax credits, of vouchers, of the public finding alternatives to public education. ...
- 87 The first thing I worked for at that time was to develop new alliances with the business community.
- 88 We had to have a magazine that was a professional journal, not a union journal.
- 89 We had to be viewed not just as people who have the guts to fight and to strike, but as people who are teachers and who have knowledge, because otherwise our entire industry will go down. ...
- 90 Our industry going down has a much broader impact than will it hurt the union, or will it hurt school boards.
- 91 Public education in this country is the place where people of different races and religions come together.
- 92 It's what we used to call the institution that "Americanizes," a rather old-fashioned word.
- 93 In this country if this institution goes down, it's not just a narrow problem for the American Federation of Teachers.
- 94 It's a broad problem, because our private schools tend to be Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Black, Hispanic, language-oriented, even politically oriented.
- 95 What would be the consequences for the future of the country if the overwhelming majority of children in the future were brought up only with their own kind?
- 96 So, our orientation had to move away from confrontation and, in a sense, toward saving the institution, which I saw—and which I still see—as one in great danger. ...



- 97 PETER DRUCKER: You know, Albert, you have talked about one of the key problems in running any organization—balancing long-run and short-run objectives.
- 98 When you moved in, you had to introduce a long-run objective in which the survival and success of the institution becomes the long-run critical point.
- 99 On the other hand, you had to maintain the intermediate goal of defending the teachers' immediate interest in next year's contract.
- 100 How do you balance those two? <sup>sm</sup>
- 101 ALBERT SHANKER: It's very tough.
- 102 We know that teachers need a union if they're going to engage in conflict.
- 103 But do they need a union to cooperate with management?
- 104 We don't know yet. <sup>sm</sup>
- 105 PETER DRUCKER: What you said just now is important.
- 106 It's important for the whole union movement and not just in this country.
- 107 In every developed country, the labor union is faced with that problem.
- 108 But it isn't just an issue for unions.
- 109 International charitable organizations get an immediate outpouring of funds by showing starving children in Ethiopia.

- 110 But it is terribly hard to get support to prevent the Ethiopian famine and to do development work, where results take eight or ten years.
- 111 That problem is likely to create a tendency in the staff to say, "Don't talk about long-range goals; it only confuses people.
- 112 Let's **play on the heart strings** and **show starving babies.**" ...
- 113 That's **self-defeating** in the end.
- 114 After five or eight years, people get awfully tired of it.
- 115 I've been working with **hospitals** where we have been saying for twenty years the **long-run goal** is to **get patients out of the hospital**, not in.
- 116 If we don't do it, the way medicine is going, we'll be in a severe crisis.
- 117 Everybody said, yes, that's the long-range goal, **but don't let's talk about it.**
- 118 Doctors **don't want to hear it**; nurses don't want to hear it; the donors don't want to hear it.
- 119 Most hospitals are in desperate straits because they were totally unprepared when the patients began to be treated outside the hospital.
- 120 But the few hospitals that actively worked on **creating outreach clinics** are doing well. ...
- 121 ALBERT SHANKER: That's exactly the experience we're beginning to have with some schools.
- 122 Those who are pursuing the long-term rather than the short-term objective find that the short-term objective falls into place.

- 123 In Rochester, New York, for instance, union and management stuck their necks out several years ago and decided to put in some very controversial programs.
- 124 They included experienced teachers training new teachers; peer review; deciding which teachers would train other teachers and evaluate them, and ultimately decide that some of them couldn't make it at the end of their probationary period.
- 125 We tried the same kind of program in Toledo, Ohio.
- 126 These are both districts that had a lot of conflict.
- 127 They'd had strikes; they had people starting to move out of the school district or into private schools.
- 128 And the radical turnaround in the relationship between the union and management and what they were willing to do to change the roles and relationships of people shocked the public into awareness.
- 129 People in the business community said, "We ought to support this."
- 130 Newspapers started to support it. ...
- 131 The result is that in each of these cities, the city governments and the local unions came to agreement on spectacular contracts in terms of salary.
- 132 The recent Rochester contract provides that in three years the top teachers will earn close to \$70,000 a year.
- 133 In the previous contract, the top was about \$40,000 a year.
- 134 That is now providing a spur to others.
- 135 This, now, is the way to start doing things very, very differently and to show a basic commitment to the enterprise. ...

136 PETER DRUCKER: Basically, the implication of this experience for non-profit institutions is to keep an eye on the fundamental, long-term goal.

137 Make sure you move toward it, and you'll gain credibility.

138 And be sure you define performance and hold yourself accountable for it. ...

139 ALBERT SHANKER: That's right.

140 I think the public may have given up on many of our public institutions because of a feeling that these people have their jobs, their security, their tenure, their Civil Service regulations; but **they've really stopped trying**.

141 **They're just doing** what they did last week and last year and five years ago, whether it works or not. ...

142 PETER DRUCKER: And in many cases, alas, they are right.  
...

143 ALBERT SHANKER: That's correct.

144 They are right.

145 But even an old institution like the school can be turned around.

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147 <sup>1</sup> \*Albert Shanker is president of the American Federation of Teachers AFL-CIO.