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DEANS OF BUSINESS

Rethinking education to move Maine forward

By Joseph McDonnell, Special to the BDN

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President Barack Obama recently overturned central provisions of the No Child Left Behind law to allow states to design their own school accountability and improvement standards. The president's action was prompted by criticism from educators and parents that the law hamstrung teachers to "teach to the test," which left little time for more creative activities. It remains to be seen whether this new flexibility will result in more imaginative ways to teach and to ensure learning.

As state educators rethink their approach, they might learn from the world's best businesses to improve the learning experience for their students. By creating a great customer experience, Apple earned a reputation for innovation.

Apple's co-founder, Steve Jobs, recognized that the company was not in the electronic device business but in the customer experience business, which inspired the company to create elegant, easy-to-use products. By focusing on the design of its products — their look and feel — Apple provides customers with a highly satisfying experience, knowing that such experiences attract loyal customers.

Apple, Disney and Amazon all create great customer experiences. These companies understand intuitively that the key to their success is creating such experiences. And coincidentally, this is precisely what educator John Dewey urged schools to do years ago — create educational programs to give students engaging learning experiences. Dewey distinguished between the everyday experience, the humdrum and the aimless, and "an experience" which has a unity that gives it a name — that meal, that movie, that trip. There is something integral or complete about "an experience" because it has a beginning and an end. It's the satisfaction that comes with completing an activity or resolving a problem. As Dewey describes it, an experience ends in a consummation rather than a cessation. The best educators create such experiences for students, engage their interest in challenging situations and give them an opportunity to increase their understanding by investigating and resolving these problems. In Dewey's view, education is a process of discovery rather than a rote task of memorizing concepts discovered by others.

The No Child Left Behind legislation emerged because policymakers wanted evidence that students were learning, which is a goal shared by teachers and parents. It's understandable that they turned to standardized tests as an easy way to compare learning throughout the nation. But

it's no easy task to create tests that measure desired learning goals. And in this case, the unintended consequences undermined the good intentions of the legislation.

What are our learning goals? Surely, we want to educate students to be curious and not just compliant — to discover a world with the tools of science and mathematics. We want to nurture creativity to prepare students for a world that values innovation. We want students to gain insight from history, an appreciation for the arts and an awareness of other countries, cultures and traditions. We seek to educate students to think critically, write clearly and speak persuasively. We want to build character and to instill a sense of social responsibility for a life of civic engagement. And we aim to develop habits of mind for lifelong learning and healthy habits of body to maintain productive and fulfilling lives.

But how can we measure the achievement of these goals? As I tell business students, employers want to know you can make a significant contribution to their organizations. And perhaps the best measure of your capability is to show projects you have done which are relevant to the work you might do in that organization. Artists have portfolios that provide proof they can produce works of art. If an art student tried to demonstrate her capability solely by showing test scores, we would hardly be convinced. We want to see the portfolio of sketches, sculptures and paintings.

But isn't this true of all students from grade school to graduate school? Business students ought to be able to show samples of business plans they've developed and financial and market analyses they've performed — a portfolio of their work. And the same is true for primary and secondary students who may show a science project, a story written, a picture painted, a math problem solved or a video of a role in a school play.

As state educators rethink ways to measure student achievement, they might extrapolate from the most creative companies to encourage teachers to create engaging learning experiences that result in portfolios of student work.

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