EDUCATION -- DEALING WITH DIVERSITY

By ROBERT M. PRICE

A feeling of pride pervades our country in the afterglow of Operation Desert Storm. In our reflections one particular fact, however, may all too easily be overlooked. The men and women who served our country so proudly in the Gulf crisis also serve as a profound example of the diversity of our country's population. Minorities accounted for more than one third of the men and women in the Army. Blacks, Hispanics, Asian and Native Americans were present in every branch of service and contributing to the victory.

Their presence and contribution are powerful reminders of a dramatic shift in the American population over the past decade. In 1980, one in every five Americans was a minority. Today, it's nearly one in four.

Their presence is also a dramatic reminder of the obligation we have in our society to deal with its enormous cultural, economic and geographic diversity. The U.S. Census recognizes 250,000 distinct groups of people in this country. Yet in the face of this diversity, the basic education system in this country essentially takes a "one size fits all" approach. Consumer product manufacturers and retailers have long since adapted to the reality of profound diversity -- not to mention individual tastes. It is, then, all the more ironic that we don't understand or deal with the implications of diversity for something as basic as education.

In his book, "The New Capitalism," author William Halal predicts: "...it will not be long before each person should have a complete medical history stored electronically to create a living model of the unique way their body behaves."
Well, technology exists today to "store electronically" and, more importantly to help teachers utilize, a complete learning profile for each student in order to realize that student's potential. It simply requires the public demand and education leadership to put it in place and use it.

Obviously, business has a vital interest in improving the education system. Given the changing demographics of the labor force, it particularly has a vital interest in improving the effectiveness of the nation's education system in dealing with diversity.

Business has been generous in its financial support of public elementary and secondary schools, donating an estimated $225 million in 1989, according to the Council for Aid to Education.

What is missing, though, is the strategic leveraging of those dollars. This can only occur if business leaders are involved in the strategic planning for education at the state and school district level.

A step in the right direction is a set of national education goals, established by President Bush and the state governors in 1989. The Business Roundtable, an association of the nation's 200 leading corporations, responding to the President's challenge, undertook a major program to support education restructuring.

The Business Roundtable initiative is significant because it, first of all, recognizes the diversity issue. The Roundtable's efforts themselves are structured on a decentralized state level basis. And each Roundtable company and CEO has made a 10-year commitment to work with state political and education leaders for reform.
With the encouragement of business, education leaders who take an outcome-based approach to education reform now have a much stronger voice. "Outcome-based" management, is essential in any system dealing with individual diversity.

And today's technology provides the means of actually dealing with diversity effectively.

The word "technology" generally conjures up visions of computer-based drill and practice schemes. Such things have their uses, of course, but technology is much more than that. It can assist in bringing expertise and exciting learning experience over great distance to the most remote areas. It can be used to strengthen communication among teacher, student and parent and it can better integrate museums and libraries into the learning process. It can aid the teacher in assessing individual learning strengths and weaknesses. Today, for the first time, technology provides teachers and school administrators with the wherewithal to deal effectively and economically with the tremendous range of student diversity they face.

The task imposed on our education system, especially the pre-college system, is greater than ever. We possess technologies which can help enormously in accomplishing that task. That will require careful, thoughtful planning if they are to be effectively employed. It will also require educators, parents, government and business to work together in making that plan. How well we do that between now and the next census survey in the year 2000 will determine the future success of American education, and for that matter, the American economy.

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