
Tim Carman’s stated objective of *Strength-based Teaching: The Affective Teacher, No Child Left Behind* is to help US teachers create educational environments that promote high achievement for all students, resulting in a narrowed achievement gap. Carman successfully addressed his three general themes: (a) dispelling educational myths that hinder progress in academic achievement, (b) helping school communities develop school improvement plans (SIPs) through the use of standards-based education (SBE) models, and (c) discussing the consequences of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The book’s arrangement proved useful, consisting of a preface, five chapters, an epilogue, two appendices, a bibliography, and a brief biography.

According to Carman, the two main criteria for standards-based schools (SBS) should be (a) academic content standards are clearly defined and made known to students before instruction begins, and (b) student achievement should be determined through the use of a variety of assessments including performance-based assessments at a specific point in time (p. 49). While some EC-16 educators may bristle at Carman’s moral imposition that standards and accountability best meet the goals of increasing academic achievement for non-US born students, teaching veterans will appreciate his detailed account of how legislators abounded teachers in an ever-narrowing partnership with America’s corporate interests. Carman advocated a schooling model as a network of responsive communities working together through a common assessment timeframe, but with an evaluation menu that could be used to locally determine options for coordinated progress checks. Although the accountability standards required under NCLB were meritorious, Carman argued that SBE remained the best vehicle to meet the demands of the increasing number of newcomers in US schools and ensure that our educational institutions are responsive to the communities they serve. He also described the controversial *Pygmalion in the Classroom* theory that teacher expectations strongly influenced student achievement.

Carman continued in subsequent chapters to explore the many challenges schools face today as parallel to those faced in Colonial America when the country also experienced an influx of large numbers of immigrants. In Chapter Three, *Growth as a Moral Responsibility*, Carman stressed inward changes that were necessary to ensure the success of the transformation to standards-based schools. He reinforced this argument by discussing how current brain research revealed that when individuals feel threatened, a primitive part of the brain in the limbic system, is activated, creating a reflex of fight or flight or freeze. This ancient reflex is counterproductive to learning. If the focus is on his deficiencies, a student will likely feel threatened and psychologically retreat, causing him to cease learning and be motivated primarily to defend himself. Chapter Four, *The Prodigal Child Returns Home*, proved to be the most redundant chapter, which served mostly to re-emphasize the negative status of schools and the compounded effects of NCLB legislation.

The novice teacher will find the final chapter, *The Courage to Care*, useful as Carman cautioned the new teacher of a natural tendency to try to do too much and how important it is to find a balance in life that can sustain oneself over a long career. He identified the basic set of beliefs required for school success: (a) challenge without threat, (b) strength-based teaching, (c) power of positive relationships, and (d) putting kids first (p. 185). He
also advocated a written curriculum with clear academic goals and purported data-based decision making, which included developing a school profile including the strengths of the school, demographics, and assessment results. The moral tone presented throughout the text continued as he recommended character education as a prerequisite to academic achievement. He concluded the book by framing the role of the teacher as a manager, suggesting the implementation of such status icons like stationery, door plaques, caps and gowns to be worn in graduation, and stronger financial incentives. In the epilogue, Carman shared his personal experience with a stroke caused from chronic stress. He emphasized the necessity of finding a holistic balance among physical, emotional, and spiritual domains within educators. The two appendices provided steps for gaining consensus and teambuilding activities to promote strong relationships with others.

Overall, Carman provided the reader with a rich historical context for the current state of American schools and a humanistic approach for school improvement. He infused inspiring stories to reinforce his points and frequently grounded his ideas with pertinent tidbits of wisdom. He effectively dispelled several myths that continue to hinder progress in academic achievement. He provided guidance in developing a school improvement plan through the tenets of standards-based education, and he candidly discussed the impact of NCLB.

Perhaps Carman’s most salient argument in initiating improvement in our educational system is the use of capacity-based, not a deficiency-based approach. His years of experience in education add validity to his challenge of common assumptions and inspire critical thinking on the part of the reader. Carman also emphasized the power of unconditional love and the power of relationships at all levels in US education. He asserted that educators frequently lost sight of this basic truism and often find themselves just surviving in the schools. He encouraged teachers to develop close professional relationships with students, at a time when many teachers and students are feeling cautious and mistrustful of the other. Another of Carman’s strengths was his emphasis on a standards-based curriculum to result in greater equalization for all students. He maintained that clearly stated goals took the secrecy out of school achievement and clarified the standards for everyone affected. This aligned with the merits of a backward instructional design approach, beginning with the end in mind.

Although Carman’s book provided insight into the current status of our schools, a few aspects weakened his presentation. The images of two cartoon-like characters pumping iron weights on the book’s cover mismatched the sophistication and depth of knowledge within the book. The dense historical events and policy review lacked clear dates and organization, which threatened to limit the number of novice teachers who may also benefit from the text. Whereas Carman acknowledged his commitment to social justice within the text, some of his terminology reinforced status quo marginalization. For example, he referred to children who have been traditionally underserved in schools as “shadow children” and those children who have traditionally achieved under Eurocentric rule as “sunshine children”. These naïve and unsophisticated terms underscored and reinforced a deficiency-based view of underserved children, which he purports to oppose. Further, he inadequately addresses multicultural education by suggesting it just be added

on to the character education curriculum. This book dedicated to strength-based teaching should include, at a minimum, a brief review of the tenets of sound instructional design and strategies. His providing *questions for deliberation* at the end of each chapter, a single instruction to keep a journal for reflection, lists of steps throughout the text, and two appendices with some activities was laudable, but insufficient for a claim of interactivity.

This book has value to an array of professionals. The educational leader may find value in the consensus and team building activities. Pre-service, novice, and seasoned teachers may all gain valuable insight into his explanations of the political nature of education within a historical context and be reminded of ways to stay psychologically healthy while dealing with the stress inherent in the educational landscape. Those readers who are not in the field of education may find the book helpful in gaining knowledge into the current state of education as well learning some feasible steps for improvement. An emergent theme of hope will engage most readers. The complex, broad, scope of the book may prove laborious reading for those with specific agendas.

This text would seem to be most appropriate for teacher education within a discussion of philosophy of education due to the rich sociopolitical and historical context of education and the exploration of various assumptions and beliefs that heavily impact education.

Overall, this book is an effective stimulus for continued dialogue for the necessary conversations and steps that need to be taken to address the vast needs of American schools. It offers a candid look at NCLB and a sociopolitical context of American education, as well as a humanistic approach to improvement as it reminds us of our continued responsibility to provide a free and appropriate education for all.