
POLICY PERSPECTIVES

from



Jal Mehta and the Futures of School Reform

The Harvard project, Mehta's book and his visit to Minnesota

By Ted Kolderie • November 2013

"If we keep on doing what we've been doing we're never going to get there."

-- from ***The Futures of School Reform***
project of the Harvard Graduate School of Education

Jal Mehta, the coordinator of this project and an associate professor at HGSE, was in the Twin Cities area October 24-25 -- talking about the five alternate futures these policy experts see as possible.

He was invited here by Education|Evolving, which is working to broaden and deepen the policy discussion in Minnesota -- in the conviction that good decisions require a full discussion, especially about the 'how' of change.

The HGSE project involved some of the major figures in American education policy. Bob Schwartz, long involved with the 'standards' movement. Richard Elmore, a senior professor at Harvard, who gave the others his new view that "learning outside school is exploding; learning inside school is imploding". Rick Hess, from the American Enterprise Institute; Tony Bryk from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Paul Reville, Gov. Patrick's 'secretary of education (not the commissioner) in Massachusetts; Mike Smith, undersecretary of education in the Clinton administration. (Most of the above have been in, or have hosted, Education|Evolving meetings.

The notes that follow are Ted Kolderie's notes of what he thought was most significant for the developing education-policy discussion here in Minnesota.

The five 'futures' envisioned by the HGSE project are:

- 1) Transforming -- Turning education into a knowledge profession. This one he sees as not changing the structure or governance much. Mainly it's the 'better teachers' and better teacher-education, teachers using a research base of knowledge; the making teaching more like medicine.
- 2) Replacing -- This builds a new set of schools outside the district sector and 'scales up' that new sector as rapidly as possible. This includes the kind of diversification Paul Hill at the University of Washington recommends in his 'portfolio' strategy, and the kind of effort we see now with the Charter Management Organizations developing and promoting 'high-performing' (mostly elementary) schools for low-income urban students. The latter is what's now being promoted by Cities for Entrepreneurship Education with its 'harbormaster' effort, which has some presence in Minnesota.
- 3) Reassembling -- Or, perhaps better, 'unbundling'. The idea (apparently associated in the project mostly with Rick Hess) is that students would go to different organizations for different learning. Teachers specializing. More learning online. Students moving based on competency.
- 4) Expanding -- This is the vision that gets beyond school, beyond academic learning; that stresses the extent to which the achievement gap is generated outside school; Basically this picks up the role of poverty in low achievement; looks to improve students' lives outside school; stresses the importance of building an outside support system..
- 5) Dissolving -- This one keys off Elmore's observation that this is the best time in history to be a learner, unless you're in school. It seems an extension of #2 and #3; basically arguing that the traditional institution is simply unable to adapt and is going to be replaced -- by something. "The future of learning is not the future of schooling."

Mehta, at the end of the HGSE book, summarizes it this way: "If we want significant improvement, we will need to do at least one of the following: (a) *change who is doing the work and what they know*; (b) *create new institutions to replace the function of the current ones*; (c) *change the elements, roles and structures in which people work*; (d) *expand the boundaries of the work beyond schools*; or, (e) *create an entirely new educational infrastructure around the principles of student-agency and open access to knowledge*. Without change in at least one of

these dimensions we will not achieve the kind of significant improvement that we profess to seek as a country."

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I have to say: It was a mistake not to have asked Jal to draw more heavily from his own book published this year: **The Allure of Order**. In this book he puts into perspective the fundamental assumption, approach, in American education policy over the last 100 years; the endless "effort to order schools from above". As Mehta wrote, it was an effort . . .

"to reduce variation among schools in favor of greater centralized standardization and control. Power shifted upward, away from teachers and schools The 1960s reforms asked schools and districts to become accountable to their states; the most recent reforms have built federal reforms on top of these state efforts".

By comparison with other nations (Finland, for example), Mehta writes, "America has a weak welfare state, a decentralized education system, a segregated and unequal social geography, an underprofessionalized educational field -- and very high expectations for its schools." In this context the accountability efforts are sure to fail.

"Improving teaching and learning requires the development of skill and expertise: Simply increasing expectations does little to bring about results. Teachers, perceiving policymakers to be remote from the realities of their schools, resist efforts to control them from afar." Policymakers then increase the pressure. A 'downward spiral' results.

As Mehta said several times during his visit: When a reform fails to change the system the usual reaction is to blame the reform rather than the system.

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This effort to 'rationalize' education is so much a given in everyone's thinking that few of us are even conscious of it.

"To overstate only slightly," Mehta writes, "one might say that the overarching lesson of **The Allure of Order** is *that the entire educational sector was put together backward*. The people we draw into teaching are less than our most talented; we give them short of nonexistent training and equip them with little relevant knowledge; we send many of them to schools afflicted by high levels of poverty and segregation; and when they don't deliver the results we seek we increase external pressure and accountability, hoping that we can do on the back end what we failed to do on the front end."

The Allure of Order is published by Oxford University Press. Joe Graba downloaded a copy to his Kindle or iPad the other day for about \$12. Have a look for yourself -- at Chapter 3, "Taking Control from Above", and at Chapter 10 -- "Remaking the Education Sector" -- in which Mehta sets out his own proposal for how to get things right at last.

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Here are a few things I heard, listening to the discussions when Mehta was here.

- I sensed a fairly widespread reaction that some elements of each 'future' can be seen today in Minnesota. This isn't surprising. The five aren't all that sharply distinct. And the HGSE project made no choices, no recommendation, among the five; left everything open. So our local folks saw some efforts at improving the teacher cadre (Bush Foundation) and enlarging the role of teachers (Education|Evolving) . . . felt some of the 'replacement' strategy is visible (the term "our post-district future" has been heard at times) . . . people are quite aware that the digital electronics are moving more learning outside school . . . and so forth.
- A business-community person said again that firms feel strongly the schools and teachers should be accountable for turning out young people who can read and write and do math and think. They don't understand why this isn't happening the way it should be. There was of course a high consciousness about the achievement gap. That led to a discussion about success with reading. Someone said: There is a known way to teach reading effectively. All the beat-the-odds schools in Minneapolis use that approach. Q: Why don't all the Minneapolis schools use it? A: The central office doesn't believe in it. Q: Well, why doesn't the board insist on it? A: The board doesn't get information about that; doesn't discuss questions like this. Q: Then why doesn't somebody on the outside insist the board insist on it? This seems a kind of scandal. Scandals do often make headlines. Where are the headlines? Why doesn't some of the angst about 'the achievement gap' go to work on this -- seemingly simple -- problem?
- At another point the discussion came to the central question about how change and improvement happens . . . picking up on the central point in Mehta's book about the policy effort having been always to drive change and improvement down from the top -- or, perhaps better, into the system from the outside. Why do we accept so passively that the K-12 system is an inert system? If it is, if the challenge for the policy effort really is to force change and improvement in from the outside, then the job will be endless; will consume huge amounts of time and energy and political

capital *forever*. Would it not be more practical to make a concentrated effort to turn K-12 into a self-improving system?

The discussions only barely began to think about how that might be done. This seems clearly a high-priority item on the policy agenda for Minnesota.

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Education | Evolving means to bring others here over the next several months, offering other perspectives on education policy . . . focusing on that most difficult question: How does the system change and improve?

-- Ted Kolderie
Education | Evolving