

The current theory of action contains a critical flaw

This is the Introduction to Creating the Capacity for Change: How Governors and Legislatures are Opening a New-Schools Sector in Public Education. Ted Kolderie wrote this book -- published now by Education Week Press -- in 2004. Here the author puts into sharp relief the essential premise of the prevailing strategy. It assumes the country has a performance problem. It takes both the arrangement of the K-12 institution and the conventional notion of school as given. It sees the problem as one of getting the existing institution and the existing schools to do-better, and -- especially as enacted in No Child Left Behind -- looks to a new framework of accountability to make that happen. It is, as someone has said, the concept of 'excellence through regulation'.

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This country is trying hard to improve its public education but not thinking clearly enough about how, realistically, to get that done.

By introducing standards and measurement and consequences we have directed, commanded, the schools to improve. With its legislation in 2002 the national government is talking tough about accountability. But talking tough does not by itself make things happen: It is not usually productive to order people to do what in truth they cannot do. We need to think more clearly about the institution being able to do what it is being ordered to do.

The national discussion about improvement – so largely about standards and leadership and resources – tends to see as a problem of changing organizations what is in fact a problem of changing the institution. At bottom the problem is not one of organizational capacity. The problem is one of institutional capacity. The current arrangement of K-12 public education neither makes it possible to transform the existing districts and schools into something very different, nor significantly encourages the appearance of new organizations able to do better. We have a system problem.

It may seem surprising that we have failed so far to get to the heart of this question about the capacity to improve. Clearly anyone giving an order should want the other party to be able to comply. But the discussion has taken the traditional institutional arrangement as a given, and has gone directly to questions about 'improving the capacity' of districts and of schools, and about enhancing the instructional skills of teachers. The assumption is that the

clarity and coherence provided by new curricular frameworks, stronger leadership, better training, tougher accountability and richer financing will overcome whatever disincentives to change and performance are inherent in the present arrangement of K-12 education as essentially a regulated public utility. It is assumed these organizational improvements will be made, can be made.

This strategy began to emerge in the early '90s: national action to stimulate state action to stimulate district action to improve schooling. It was visible in national legislation in 1994. Then in the late '90s developments in national politics cleared the way for more dramatic steps. After 15 years of little progress, the public and its political leaders were in a mood to get tough with the organizations, to 'make 'em' improve.

In national politics education had long been understood to be "a Democratic issue": Money was the measure of commitment (and presumably the key to success) and Democrats would always top what Republicans were willing to spend. But by 2000, with education the public's number-one concern, the Republicans saw that to win the presidency they had to capture that 'issue'. The strategy was to try to make accountability trump money. And they did it. Once in office the new administration, using the national government's (seven per cent) contribution to K-12 finance as the lever, moved immediately to persuade Congress to enact the president's campaign slogan about "leaving no child behind". As it passed into law early in 2002 the idea was to require that all kids score well on standardized tests and to threaten either the kids or the schools with sanctions should they fail.

We do not know that this can be done. Pretty clearly it never has been done, in this country at least. No one demonstrated following A Nation at Risk in 1983 that it could be done. It was simply assumed that poor schools could and would be turned into good schools like caterpillars transformed into butterflies, with poor students turned into good students. There was no other concept in the policy thinking. The language of the discussion makes this clear: It is all about renewing, reforming, reinventing, restructuring, revitalizing, remodeling, reengineering, reconstituting; endlessly, 're-', 're-', 're-'. There has been little serious consideration that the absence of accountability and the ineffectiveness of leadership and the chronic demands for more revenue and the deficiencies in teacher practice are the result of a fundamental incapacity in the institutional arrangements.

This is the central issue now for policy: whether it is realistic to assume that law and regulation can overcome the constraints of faulty system design. Even if conceivably they might, the uncertainty makes such an assumption clearly a risk. Remember: The bar is set very high. We are talking seriously about educating all students to high standards. This asks a lot of the organizations we have. It may be that within the present arrangements the job cannot be done.

In a conversation in the spring of 2003 I put the concern about this risk to a leading proponent of standards-based systemic reform. He thought a moment. “It is a one-bet strategy”, he said.

A one-bet strategy is always a risk. It is a serious risk to be taking on something as important to the nation and to its people as public education. And it is not a prudent risk to be taking since it is not a necessary risk to be taking: We do not have to limit ourselves to trying to get existing districts to change existing schools. We can be moving at the same time to create the different and better schools new.

Because it is not a necessary risk it is not an acceptable risk for policy leadership to be taking, with other people’s children. It is troubling that the public is being given so little sense of the risk that the current strategy might not succeed.

Success will require changing the old arrangements

Almost certainly it was necessary politically for those who shaped the current national strategy to accept the existing institutional arrangements. If ‘systemic reform’ had not been seen as accepting this framework the major players in public education – the superintendents, boards and teacher unions - would not have listened. Proponents had to assume that districts, told what standards to meet and held accountable for results, could and would change and improve the schools they own and run; had to bet all the chips on the districts getting us the schools we need by changing the schools we have.

A theory is a statement that if we do X then Y will result. It is critical that the theory be valid; that Y in fact result when X is done. The concern rising from the experience so far is that - as now arranged - the institution will not produce the results we want, even when directed to do so.

The problem, the critical flaw in the current theory, is those existing arrangements. The regulated-public-utility arrangement has made public education an inert institution, lacking the capacity to do what we now need it to do. As a result the process of improvement has become largely an effort to push improvement into the inert institution. We have been treating public education like a patient in intensive care, supported by casts and pulleys, hooked up with tubes and wires flowing in nourishment and stimulus from the outside. We have been trying to do for the organizations the good things they did not do for themselves.

This is basically ridiculous as a strategy. Why, if we want the districts to change, would we leave in place the constraints that make it so difficult for them to change? Normally we arrange our institutions to be self-improving institutions, so the organizations within them

become self-improving organizations. This means structuring the institutions so their organizations will do, themselves, the good things that need to be done: set standards, measure performance, impose consequences, control costs, improve practices, prepare leadership and innovate with new technology. And do these things on their own initiative, in their own interest and from their own resources.

About 1984 William Andres, then just retired as CEO of Dayton-Hudson Corporation, was asked by the governor to head a task force on productivity in Minnesota state government. Andres asked others more familiar with the public sector: "Is productivity something you do, or something that happens if you do the fundamentals right?" If you paused to think he would explain: "I was in retailing. In retailing turnover is very important: Stores that turn over their inventory rapidly are more profitable. Every so often a store manager tries to 'do' turnover, and quickly that store isn't profitable any more. So in our company we decided a long time ago that turnover is something that happens, and we concentrate on doing the fundamentals right."

That puts much in perspective about the strategy for education. We are trying to 'do improvement' when we should be working to get the fundamentals right. We should be arranging this institution so its organizations make and are able to make, themselves, the changes and improvements needed. We should be restructuring the K-12 institution so it too becomes a self-improving institution. This means we cannot take present arrangements as given. The flaw in the theory of action, that confines policy to efforts within present arrangements, will have to be fixed.

We need to think now very soon - broadly, and carefully and sensibly and above all with realism about the way organizations and institutions behave.

This book is an attempt to do that. The solution will be difficult to implement but is essentially simple. It is to restructure the K-12 institution to make it possible for new schools gradually to replace existing schools; for different and better schools gradually to take the place of low-performing schools - while at the same helping the districts to do what they can to improve the schools they run. This 'two-bet' strategy will hedge against the likelihood that an effort confined to paying, exhorting and commanding the districts to improve will not succeed.

In the 1990s governors and legislatures, following the old rule about always changing a losing game, began to enact laws creating a new 'open sector' in public education, partly inside but substantially outside the district framework. Moving beyond the district required them to withdraw the exclusive franchise that the old public-utility arrangement gave the local board to offer public education. It required being open to the idea that more than one organization can offer public education in the community.

This book describes that new state effort. It will say something about the need for the new schools to be different from the schools that exist today, to have any real chance of educating the students now not learning well in traditional schooling. But as the photo on the cover should suggest, this is not really another book about better schools and better learning. It will not go into questions about learning as an educator would. It is about strategy, about method; is mainly about how to arrange the K-12 institution so it will provide reasons and opportunities for those who are educators to develop and sustain a diversity of quality schools.

Part One explains what it is about the traditional arrangement that makes the K-12 institution inert, that constrains change. Part Two explains what changes will be required in the system for K-12 to become a self-improving institution. Part Three explains what specifically state policy leadership will need to do, and how it can deal with the arguments thrown up against system-change. Part Four then asks how quickly the changes can get made and explains who specifically will need to do what specifically.

Change will not be easy. The interests within K-12 will not want to see their institution re-arranged. For understandable reasons they will try as they usually do to hold policy to incremental changes within existing arrangements. But others, outside the institution, have a different interest. It is their children that are at risk, their nation that is still very much at risk.

These others outside K-12 – and the state policy leadership that is their agent - are the primary audience for this book. I do hope, though, there will be some educators, and more than a few, who will read it and who will say: Yes, this is what has to happen; it is time.

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