

Following Up on System Reform By Innovating with School and Schooling

By Ted Kolderie

It's easy to see why people might feel education policy has hit the wall.

No Child Left Behind is neither reauthorized nor reformed. Growing numbers of schools are reported as 'failing'. The despair about high school seems universal. 'Education' is absent from the presidential debates. Few governors clamor to be "the education governor".

This causes people to question the strategy, to ask: Are the system reforms failing? With standards and accountability why is performance so flat? Are 'charter schools' fulfilling their promise? Why, Sol Stern asked in *City Journal*, is choice not showing better results?

They're not failing. It is simply becoming clear we cannot think of system reforms as themselves improving achievement. Kids don't learn from standards, from accountability, from choice or from charters. It is an error to relate learning to changes in the 'architecture' of K-12. Someone could compare scores in one-story vs. two-story buildings: What would that prove? Kids don't learn from structures. Kids learn from what they read, see, hear and do. For achievement to improve, school and schooling have to improve.

The system reforms make improvement increasingly necessary and make change increasingly possible. But they are only half the strategy. To meet its goals this country must next undertake a serious effort to develop better forms of school and schooling. It is time, Education|Evolving argues, to redirect K-12 policy toward innovation. There are five important reasons.

1. We have not been moving significantly to change traditional school and schooling, with attention so fixed on system reform.

Most of what passes for change and improvement is "inside the box"; marginal changes that look for 'what works' within conventional givens. Some advocates of system reform do not want to change traditional school. Some reforms, as implemented, have strengthened traditional school. The general public is

comfortable with traditional school. We see its picture everywhere: a classroom; kids at desks or tables; a teacher in front of a blackboard. A Microsoft ad run nationally, plugging computers, shows kids and desks and the blackboard and not a computer in sight.

People in curriculum and instruction have been writing, speaking and consulting about different and better ways for kids to learn. But they find it hard to get their ideas adopted. You can almost see a waiting room; people seated all around. On everyone's knees is a black box. All wait for the door to open so they can tell the people who run the system how much better kids will learn if you would use my black box. Cobwebs grow; dust settles. The door does not open.

Some argue school does not need to change; say we need students to work harder, teachers to teach better, principals to lead and manage better; want traditional school to be more rigorous. But trying harder with the traditional model will not do the job. It is time to be open to new conceptions of school and different approaches to learning.

2. Traditional school was not designed for the job that now has to be done; cannot ensure that all students will learn.

Traditional school never did graduate all its students; never did educate all students well. That was tolerable when its assignment was to provide opportunity and to expand access. Now the assignment is switched, to 'achievement'. No one knows whether students will learn in the traditional model -- built on the notion of "delivering education" and on the technology of teacher-instruction -- because we tell schools, "They have to".

Motivation is the issue. If achievement is essential then effort is essential, and if effort is essential then motivation must be central. Conventional school is designed almost to suppress motivation. At the secondary level its course-and-class model is a bus rolling down the highway, moving too rapidly for some and too slowly for others. A teacher points out important things along the way. But a student cannot get off to explore what she finds interesting: The bus must stay on schedule. Most high schools are large. A teacher might see 150 students a day. This makes close relationships between teachers and students, and among students, difficult. Relationships matter, for motivation.

It would be a risk to bet everything on traditional school succeeding. It would not be a necessary risk, since we could simultaneously be trying different models. So it is not an acceptable risk to be taking with other people's children.

3. Different and high-potential models of school and schooling, keyed on motivating students and teachers, clearly are now possible.

High school is obsolete. The logical response to obsolescence is innovation. New forms of schooling are both necessary and possible. Already innovators are developing alternatives to the 'batch processing' model of traditional school, with students individualizing their work, learning increasingly from projects, taking courses online and using digital electronics to do research. The revolution in the storage and manipulation of information has enormous potential to change the paradigm of schooling from 'teaching' to 'learning', increasing motivation by capitalizing on the interest young people have in these technologies and on their considerable skills. Teachers' work can upgrade to planning, advising, evaluating.

Teachers and students are the workers on the job of learning. Deborah Wadsworth, when heading Public Agenda, used to quote Daniel Yankelovich: There is an additional level of effort workers can always give you if they want. The challenge is to elicit that 'discretionary effort'. Maximizing student and teacher motivation could pay off not only in higher achievement but also in improving the economics of K-12. A professional model might elicit the effort from professional teachers that the public-bureau, boss | worker, model cannot. The more authority teachers have the harder they work for kids And the extra we get from students comes for free: Student effort we do not compensate.

4. Quite radical changes in school and schooling can come into K-12 if we will be practical about the process of change.

In most sectors change begins as some new model appears. "Early adopters" pick it up quickly. Most do not, since the early models are not very good. (Early cellphones resembled a brick.) Rapidly, quality improves. For a while the old and new run along together; people gradually shifting. Over time tractors replace horses; airlines replace passenger trains; computers replace typewriters.

It has not been like this in education. Suggest changing school and you'll hear: "Not everyone agrees with that" and "That would not work everywhere". The assumption has been that change is imposed, universally and politically. Such a process requires consensus. In that process little changes, and that not quickly.

We could run a 'split screen' strategy; letting different forms of school and schooling be adopted by those who want them while assuring those who prefer traditional school they can continue in conventional school, gradually improving. The traditionalists would have only to agree not to suppress the innovative. Over time this less-political approach would change schooling and the institution faster and with less controversy. Some might dislike seeing differing models in use. But diversity is appropriate as well as practical: Young people do differ -- in their backgrounds, interests, motivations and aptitudes.

5. New school|ing will require a willingness also to rethink the concept of 'being educated', of what's to be learned and how to assess it.

The traditional concept of education as the mastery of subject-matter content is deeply rooted. But a changing world requires some adjustment of our notions about "what students should know and be able to do". Clearly children should learn how to read well. There should be standards. Performance will require assessment. But for the 21st century we might need the skills measured by the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA): the ability to think critically and creatively, to communicate, to work well in teams, to know how to learn.

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Twenty years ago the public-utility framework of K-12 offered no real opportunity for innovation. Today it does. The un-bundling of public education, largely through chartering, makes it possible to create new schools. New schools are the logical site for innovation. New schools can be created within districts as well as in the open sector. Boston, Chicago, Baltimore, Los Angeles and other cities are moving with new-schools programs. States should encourage this; enlarge this opportunity. Foundations and the federal government can help with financing. Civic and political leadership needs to affirm, above all, that 'different' is legitimate.

Innovation and the strategy of change through gradual replacement will make K-12 at last a self-improving institution. Lacking internal dynamics it has depended on others, outside, to push improvement into its districts and schools. Long term that cannot be sustained: The country has too much to do. Public education must be enabled to change and improve on its own initiative, in its own interest and from its own resources.

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