

We cannot get the schools we need by changing the schools we have

Remarks by Joe Graba

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Below are notes of two presentations by Joe Graba. The first was to Minneapolis Rotary on October 19. The second was to a group of key 'education legislators' at Alexandria MN on December 14.

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Minneapolis Rotary – October 19, 2001

The growing importance of knowledge in our society has been visible for a long time. But in the 1970s the slope turned up sharply, perhaps as a result of the growing specialization of our nation in an increasingly global economy. Knowledge became more and more the key strategic asset: for companies, for the state, for the nation.

Business was concerned about the knowledge-base of its employees, and its concerns attracted the interest of the political leadership to the condition of education, of the schools. After the Nation at Risk report in 1983 governors emerged as leaders in an effort to improve: Jim Hunt in North Carolina, Lamar Alexander in Tennessee, Bill Clinton in Arkansas, Rudy Perpich in Minnesota. This escalated the pressure on the K-12 institution.

In the almost 20 years since that report billions have been spent in the effort to improve the schools. In 1989 the president called the first national summit meeting of governors. It has been a huge effort. But today almost nobody thinks we have made the progress we need to make. I'm inclined myself to feel that the gap between our needs and our ability in K-12 to meet these needs has widened. This is hard for me to say. It was 40 years ago this fall that I started as a science teacher. I have been in a variety of positions in the system: teacher, administrator, legislator, dean of a college of education. I come to this conclusion reluctantly. But I think this is where we are.

If you look at the national effort to date you see it has been an effort to change the schools we have. And we have not changed them very much. I think – and I often say – that this is because, while everybody wants the schools to be better, almost nobody wants them to be different. Yet we have a new situation. We've introduced a set of disruptive policy changes: setting standards and measuring performance and saying all kids now have to learn. We never did these things before.

Folks, if we want to get the kind of learning that will do this job successfully, we will need some schools that are very different. And I am convinced that we cannot get these different schools by changing the ones we have. We will have to create the different schools new.

A lot of people have observed and commented on the difficulty of changing organizations. Few have been able to explain why it is so hard. But two books recently have helped. One is The Innovator's Dilemma, by Clayton Christensen at the Harvard Business School. The other is Creative Destruction, by Richard Foster of McKinsey.

Most organizations, Christensen says, are able to improve incrementally what they do. Radical – as opposed to incremental – change comes only through the creation of new

organizations. What he calls 'sustaining' innovations improve existing methods. But occasionally there are innovations that, if adopted, would disrupt existing methods, would require fundamental changes in the way the organization operates. Almost no organization, Christensen finds, is able to adopt the disruptive innovations.

These innovations find a niche market somewhere else. And they improve. And then move up market. And threaten the established firms. We see examples of this all the time. The airlines disrupted the railroads; took the passengers away. I never heard of "Great Northern Airlines". We got "Northwest Airlines", a new organization.

Why can't the existing organizations change? Foster talks about every organization having a culture that becomes its "invisible architecture" and that is almost impossible to change. This is truly startling. It says that what are assets at the peak of an organization's performance become liabilities when disruptive change occurs. The process that helped the organization do well in the earlier period constrain it from responding when it needs to respond.

Christensen also points to the influence of the mainline customers of the organization. They do not want it to change. He studied the disk-drive industry, in which no firm that was dominant at one stage made it successfully to the next stage. And this is not hard to understand. The customers who had invested in 14" disk drives wanted better 14" drives: They were not interested in 8" drives. Also, when they first appear, the new products seem lower in quality as well as different.

What does this mean for schools?

Well, suppose you were a superintendent. A new idea for school is proposed. It would conflict with the culture of your existing organization, so nobody inside likes it. Nor do your mainline customers want it. What would *you* do?

I have to say candidly: All of us here are a part of the problem. We are products of the mainline system. The traditional schools served us well. Most of us would prefer that the existing schools just get better. We would resist changing what we knew and liked. So the country ends up spending billions and we still have the schools we knew.

Trying to change existing schools forces us into incremental change. The mainline customers and the forces inside resist radical change. I've seen this: As a legislator and later as an administrator I helped start and run the Minnesota's Council on Quality Education, which underwrote innovative efforts in districts. We could innovate, but we found the innovations did not spread and that they were not sustained when the financing ended.

Christensen points to what Dayton's did when it went into discount retailing. Dayton's became the only department-store firm to make it successfully into discount retailing. The brothers set up a separate, wholly owned subsidiary; Target Stores. And Target did not report to the 'stores' division: It reported directly to the corporate board. As we all know, Target grew very rapidly and over time this changed the parent company; even, now, its name. Wards and Sears and Penney's tried to change their existing stores. This did not succeed, and they are now closing stores.

The key to change is to create a new operation outside the old culture. Sears could never bring itself to create a competitor to its mainline operation. In education, too, we need to set up new operations outside the existing culture. The schools we have serve many students well; and these should continue. Note that Dayton's didn't close its department stores. They set up a new operation and let the customers choose.

Some of the leadership in public education sees this. Paul Houston, who heads the American Association of School Administrators, tells people not to confuse the church with the faith. Public education is a faith; a set of principles. The existing districts and their schools are 'the church'; the institutional form. If we keep the faith, in that sense, it is OK to change the church, Houston says. The church is not the faith.

I'm now trying to convince school boards, superintendents, and unions of the need for a revolution in public education. It is really tough. And this does not surprise me. The resistance inside is why the charter sector is so critical: The charter law lets others start new schools, with new cultures. It is hard: It takes vision and skill and tremendous energy. But the effort is important and it needs all our help.

Again: This has not been an easy journey for me. I have many friends in K-12. I am not critical of its people. But I am frank that the existing system cannot change itself – and that meaningful change is urgent. Every year thousands of young people come out unable to participate effectively in our society.

I hope you will help us to build a public education system that will serve this country well in the 21st century.

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Legislative task force – December 14, 2001

I wish state policy could do more with the potential created by the recent changes in information technology.

We need to put in perspective how enormous this change is.

When I first chaired the Minn. House K-12 Education Finance committee in 1973 I worked out the formulas on my slide rule. I told the Speaker I would stay on as chair for the 1975 session only if he would promise to buy me an electronic calculator. There were no computers available to legislators at that time.

'School' is a steadily shrinking proportion of the learning opportunities available to kids these days.

I grew up the first 10 years of my life without electricity in the house. Almost everything I learned I learned from listening to people talk: my parents, my teachers in a small country school.

My children grew up with radio, with television, with early CDs and VCRs.

Their children are growing up with those technologies plus computers, CD Rom and the web. We all hear stories of parents who have to lock up the computer to keep their three-year-olds from being on the computer too much of the day. This has been the case with my grandchildren.

Increasingly the new learning opportunities available are technology based. This is true of learning opportunities for pre-schoolers, for school age children and also for adults.

But 'school' is an island where paper is used extensively and where kids still learn by listening to adults talk, as I did when I grew up.

On this basis traditional 'school' will not, cannot, make it. It is less and less attractive both to its students and to the talented adults it needs to attract.

Any enterprise in the 21st Century that is not using the new information technologies to the fullest is in serious trouble. We have got to maximize the use of these technologies, both to personalize learning for students and to deal with this unsustainable gap between revenues and costs.

The old course-and-class model works for maybe half the kids. We need some schools that are radically different, using different approaches to learning if we are serious about helping every student become a successful learner.

This is a challenge for state policy leadership. Because we cannot get the schools we need by trying to change the schools we have.

Let me say that again: We cannot get the schools we need by trying to change the schools we have. Major change comes only from new organizations created outside the old culture.

The problem is: Those of us in decision-making positions were probably served well by the traditional system. So we are loyal to that system. We have a hard time feeling that it should be changed . . . radically changed. So our notion is usually to try to change and improve the organizations we have.

We have to acknowledge the impact of "culture" on the existing organizations ability to change. The culture of an organization severely limits its ability to implement fundamental change.

If we insist on trying to change the schools we have we will be locked into incremental change. With incremental change we will not be able to get the fundamentally different schools we need to reach the other half of the students.

Teacher-ownership and project-based learning are examples of different ways of arranging 'school'.

To get to different models of learning, and more quickly, we will have to find a way to create some 'new organizational space' outside the existing culture.

[Discussion followed.]

o You can't just create some new schools and feel that's enough. As soon as a new organization is created it also creates a culture. The newly created charter schools will create their new cultures, to be successful; and then will themselves be constrained. The only answer is to keep creating new.

o I understand the risks this will create for you, as policymakers. There is a fear of failure, and there will be failures. And there are people who will exploit these failures, to try to make a case against change. But not to change is also failure.

o Your job as policymakers is to make available the broadest possible opportunities for people to create innovative models, outside the old culture. It will be a multi-year agenda. Not all the new schools created will be creative. Most charter schools are not good with information technology: New Country School is probably the best, with now a workstation for virtually every student, using the World Wide Web.

o We waste resources in the traditional methods, in-group pacing. I just knew when I was a science teacher that a significant number of the kids would finish the year's work by Christmas if I would just get out of the way . . . let them move at their own pace. The system couldn't handle that much variation in the 1960s and 1970s. Today the new technologies make that kind of learning possible.

o Using the technology well would be a big source of better performance and greater productivity. Without this use of technology we will never get teacher salaries to a professional level.

o The new information technologies are going to change human societies as dramatically in this new century as the technologies of the "industrial revolution" changed societies in the 20th century. 'School' as we have it cannot be sustained in the present context. State policies need to encourage, and "school" needs to incorporate, the use of these technologies if public education is to serve our country as well in the 21st century as it did in the 20th century.