



Success with Innovation Is the Key to Improving Learning—and to ‘Closing the Gap’

*A talk to Minnesota Association of Alternative Programs
By Ted Kolderie - November 20th, 2015*

MAAP is an association of individuals involved in Minnesota’s ‘alternative’ education programs; some in schools contracted to districts, some in schools in the Alternative Learning Centers and some in chartered schools.

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It’s good to be back with you; believers in the need for education to try new and different approaches to learning.

Steve Allen over there is holding two books with ‘Split Screen’ in the title: One with the blue cover, that I wrote early in 2014, and one just now out; much clearer and stronger. Both challenge the idea that has been at the core of education policy in this country for the last 30 or 40 years.

On the cover of the 2014 book you’ll see the famous puzzle with the box of nine dots, designed to test your ability at problem-solving. You’re asked to connect the nine dots with four straight lines. That can be done—if you run the lines ‘outside the box’. If you stay within the box it cannot be done.

American education policy has been trapped ‘within the box’ ... within the givens of traditional school and within the traditional notion of system change; operating on the theory that, as my associate Joe Graba says, learning can be significantly better without school having to be significantly different. Accepting K-12 as a static system, the effort has been to use accountability—standards, measurement and consequences—to press its organizations and their people to perform better.

Thirty years on, it is probably fair to say, few believe this strategy has been a spectacular success. Disillusioned, many if not most of those involved are looking for another strategy. Happily, there is one.

The effort must be to turn education into a self-improving system

That alternative strategy is obvious. It is to turn this static system into a self-improving system; one that changes and progresses the way our successful systems change and progress.

We do have successful systems. Look around; think about computing . . . communications . . . urban transportation . . . energy. It is clear what makes these systems successful. They are open to innovation. People are free to try new ideas; new products, new services, new business models. None is perfect when it appears; most are not at that point quality. But they are different. They have potential. So they do get picked up. They improve. And as they improve they spread. In time, some become the dominant new model.

I tell some of these stories in the book. Marty Cooper worked for Motorola. He was a dissenter. He wanted to take the car phone out of the car and make it portable. He fought for years with company officials who wanted a better car phone. Finally he got the company to market a cell phone. It weighed several pounds and cost \$4,000. He kept working to get the size down; get the price down. Today half the people in the world carry cell phones.

Innovation, invention, gradually improving and spreading, is systemic change.

This concept of change challenges traditional education policy

This alternate theory of action does, as I said, challenge the dominant theory at the heart of American education policy . . . which has envisioned systemic change as a grand transformation; politically engineered, or—accepting that is unlikely, politically—has settled for making minor improvements within the givens of traditional school.

Reactions—to the idea of innovation as key to systemic change—have been interesting.

- Many people, sad to say, are too occupied running the existing operation; do not have time to read or to think.
- The responses I have received are positive across a wide spectrum, from those in the district sector involved with traditional strategies to those involved with strategies that challenge the traditional system.
- Those I sense are ‘doubtful’ reflect what I say in Chapter 1: that education policy is tyrannized by the notion there must be a Right Way and that the job for policy is to find that way, to develop a consensus so everyone will then do things that Right Way. This is clear in the tendency for every idea suggested to be tested immediately by asking: Will everybody want to do that? Will it work everywhere? Can we trust everyone to do it well? There is no sense there can be two models, two approaches, running along in

parallel—the existing model, gradually improving, and innovations, also improving—though this is of course the way successful systems look when undergoing fundamental change. Hard-line phones and cell phones. Gasoline-powered cars and hybrids/electrics. Central station electric power and solar power. Incandescent bulbs and fluorescents/LEDs.

- It will clearly be difficult, as well, to deal with the assumption that change is something the boss does; that decisions about what's taught and how it's taught are 'a management right' *never* to be ceded to teachers in the classroom working with students.

With the concept of the 'split screen', of combining improvement and innovation, we are talking about a paradigm change. Paradigm changes move slowly, as all of you know. But idea-systems do change. What's important is to begin.

Innovation happens on 'the front lines', as schools try things

The place to begin is with schools and teachers.

Shortly after my book came out last year I came across Paul Kennedy's *Engineers of Victory*; the story of the innovations critical to winning World War II. I summarize these, and the lesson Kennedy draws from them, in Chapter 4. Grand strategy could not clear away the obstacles to victory. The critical innovations had to come from people on the front line; on the working level. The role of top leadership was to "create a climate of encouragement for innovation." That done, the obstacles were cleared away in about 18 months.

Think about that compared to the effort in education. With top leadership struggling to find the One Right Way this country has gone decades, now, still with no 'victory' in sight.

In education the schools and teachers are the 'front line'. They are the ones who will find what works—if they are given the encouragement to try things. The key is to motivate students. Chapter 4 quotes Jack Frymier, from his long experience in curriculum and instruction: "If students want to learn, they will. If they don't, you probably can't make 'em. So any successful effort to improve student learning will begin by improving motivation."

Yet ask in meetings some time: How many here will stand up to defend the proposition that school today is designed to maximize student motivation? See how many do.

You in 'alternative education' were the first to have that opportunity to 'do different'. After that came the Area Learning Centers. And after that the chartered schools. Together these form the sector of public education in which innovation is best able to develop. It's essential that you

keep on leading; pushing for the opportunity to ‘do-different’—especially in the interest of those students for whom standard whole-group instruction has been working least well.

Innovations will spread if the district sector lets its schools change

I am trying now to impress on those most focused on the improvement of mainline K-12 that what they hope for depends very largely on the success of the effort to innovate in the chartered, in the ‘alternative’, sector.

The district sector is trying to do innovation. But the cards are stacked against that succeeding. If you look at the little video illustrated in Chapter 9, showing the teacher individualizing his third-grade classroom, you will hear Tom Nelson—teacher, chair of the Senate K-12 Finance Committee, commissioner of education and superintendent in big East Metro districts—talking candidly about “the pressure for sameness”, both across the schools of a district and through time.

Already we do see innovations moving into the district sector from the chartered sector. One especially is being picked up by its teachers. A few chartered schools in Minnesota had organized on the ‘partnership’ model common in most vocational areas we call professional: law, architecture, accounting, etc. Contrary to conventional wisdom, schools operating on this model work. They have superior economics. They internalize accountability within the teacher professional group. Teachers in the district sector—and their union leadership—have become interested. Two weekends ago 220 teachers from 23 states met here for two days of “how to do it” discussion; half of these from the district sector. You can read more about this innovation in Chapters 9 and 11.

More of this can happen in the district sector if boards and superintendents will make a real delegation of meaningful autonomy to their schools and teachers, to shape the learning program for the students they have and that only they know. The state must now push the districts to do this. That is the next frontier for education policy in Minnesota.

Will you help us ‘inventory’ the innovation you have accomplished?

Very soon now some of us will begin an effort to emphasize the importance of the ‘alternative’/innovative sector of Minnesota public education. We will come to you, asking what it is you have been trying; what you have been doing differently. We mean for this to validate your sector by making it clear that what is happening there is essential for change and improvement in the mainline district sector.

We look forward to working with you on this.

Many thanks for the invitation today!