Learning Has To Improve.
OK. How?

The biggest push ever to improve school and learning is under way. The strategy now being so strongly pressed might succeed. But equally it might fail.

The apparent consensus behind it is a concern. This is tough to say, but those arguing simply to improve traditional school might usefully contemplate the dilemma that -- as John Lewis Gaddis recounts in <u>The Cold War</u> *-- George Schultz by the mid-1980s was explaining to Gorbachev:* **"With the system to which you are committed you cannot achieve the goals to which you are committed"**.

Other strategies are available. So the question now is which strategy to select.

This paper -- expanded notes of remarks by Ted Kolderie to the Knowledge Alliance retreat in Albuquerque August 3, 2010 -- sets out two alternatives to the command-and-control strategy now widely, generally, accepted. We invite your comments.

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I'll set out a theory of action different from what you've heard so far.

'Continuous improvement' works within 'the givens'. By and large it looks toward improving traditional school and traditional teaching; tries to make the present model perform better. In the language of the trade it's 'sustaining innovation'.

What I'll say contemplates breaking with the givens of traditional school. It's the idea of continuous innovation; of a search for (even radically) different models. It's a strategy aimed at turning K-12 into a dynamic, <u>self</u>-improving system.

In concluding I'll offer a third scenario. Which *is* a real possibility. It envisions change flowing *around* what's now school; bypassing the traditional system.

Accepting the 'Givens' vs. Stepping Outside the 'Givens'

The current effort is to make the traditional system and traditional school perform better. Because K-12 is an inert system, changes and improvements have to be pushed in from the outside. So nor surprisingly this approach feels a bit like **NCLB 2.0**.

There're two reasons to be concerned about such a strategy

First: The effort to do-better with traditional school has not gone all that well so far. People point to small movements in the scores. But results are way short of what the country needs -- and of what is possible. "Running faster, only to fall further behind", as Paul Houston used to say. This country should be, could be, getting far more than it is from both its students and its teachers.

Second: Nobody can be certain that incremental improvement *can* succeed. There's hope the new standards will cause students to do better -- as perhaps they will for the 60 per cent with whom school has always done well. (Though innovation might do even more.) <u>The question is whether trying-harder with traditional school will succeed with the 40 per cent who have *never* done well in traditional school</u>.

It might not. And certainly to bet all the chips on that one approach succeeding would be a risk. It would not be a *necessary* risk, since we could at the same time be exploring new approaches, new models, for the students most in need. And since it would not be a necessary risk it would not be an acceptable risk to be taking; with the country's future and with other people's children.

It's good to ask:: "What works?" Certainly it's good to improve traditional school. But we can also ask: Might a truly different way of doing things work even better? Ask, in 1920, "How can we get somewhere faster?" and one answer was: Improve the train. Another was: Develop the airplane. In the 1960s one way to improve communication was to improve the telephone. Another was to develop the internet.

The big gains come from innovation. And -- with learning as with transportation and communication -- this requires thinking beyond the existing givens; beyond traditional school. Requires exploring the potential for radically different approaches to learning.

What <u>Are</u> the 'Givens' of Traditional School?

It'll be good at the start to remind ourselves what are the 'givens' of traditional school and traditional learning:

- A place: a building, corridor, oak doors, little slit windows; in the room a teacher, 30 students at desks or tables.
- Bounded in time: year, week, day.
- A teaching paradigm. The teacher the worker, "delivering education". The technology is teacher-instruction. (Hence the conviction now that the #1 need is to improve teach-ers and teach-ing.)
- Courses and classes. Per Ted Sizer: "batch processing".
- A boss/worker model. Teachers directed by administrators.

When we contemplate getting outside those givens, big new vistas open.

- *Learning* becomes the paradigm. The student becomes clearly a co-worker.
- See the student as worker and motivation becomes central. Cf Jack Frymier: "Students learn when they want to learn. If they want to learn, they will. If they don't you probably can't make 'em. *So any successful effort to improve learning begins with improving motivation".* Motivation matters also for teachers.
- The need for motivation makes it essential to innovate, since traditional school is no way designed to maximize the motivation of either students or teachers.
- And the need for innovation brings into focus the importance of digital electronics: to break up the course-and-class model of traditional school and to customize, personalize learning. To let those students who need more time have more time; to let those who can go faster go faster. In other words: To improve student learning and the economics of traditional K-12 at the same time.

We see three dimensions of innovation with respect to school; learning.

1) <u>The organization of school</u>: the roles people play; the relationship of teachers and administrators, especially -- but also the role of students.
2) <u>The approach to learning</u>. Breaking up the course-and-class model. Personalizing learning; varying the pace. Letting students specialize.
3) <u>The definition of achievement</u>; what it is the workers are trying to accomplish. Broadening beyond what's in the common standards.

Innovation: The Potential, and the Obstacles

The tough question is how to make K-12 into a self-improving system.

The answer is to create and gradually expand a significant sector of new schools in which teachers are free to explore non-traditional approaches to learning, adapting these to the individual needs and interests of the students they have enrolled.

The implementation issues will be clearer if we begin with a sense of the obstacles.

* Per Joe Graba: "While everybody wants school to be better almost nobody wants it to be different".
* Albert Hirschman's extension of this simple truth: "We dare not believe in creative discoveries until they have happened".
* The fact that school -- where students and teachers come together -- is controlled by others, outside. Cf conversation with MASA head, Charlie Kyte: "What you're talking about is what boards and superintendents are least likely to do".
* The conventional wisdom -- to push 'improvement' into K-12, to standardize and nationalize improvement, with little thought to changing either system or school.

What argues most powerfully *for* the 'innovation' strategy is the reality of the way most systems actually change.

These successful systems are user-driven. They are open to innovation; to the entry of new 'products' and new business models. People are free to adopt these. Some do. Many at first do not. No one his obliged to take up the innovative. Equally, those wishing to stay with the traditional model may not suppress the innovative for those who do want that. Over time successful new models improve. And spread. At some point a transition is completed. As, from horses to tractors; typewriters to computers; analog TV to digital TV. Gradually. With political conflict minimized.

The key question is how to get such a transition started.

New Givens: 'Getting the Fundamentals Right'

Most efforts at reform move directly to efforts to 'do something' about "problems" clearly visible. For example: After the **Nation At Risk** report dramatically highlighted the need for improvement the instinctive response was to propose actions that did

not call into question the -- existing and traditional -- public-utility framework of K-12; the district arrangement with its 'exclusive franchise'.

A few dissented: some of these because they wanted public financing of private education; Minnesota because people there were convinced that success required turning K-12 into a competitive public system open to innovation. Out of that conviction came chartering; an *institutional* innovation.

In about six years chartering spread around the country through state legislation. This new sector has been important as an R&D sector for public education. Chartering -- creating public schools new -- now seems a permanent part of the strategy.

Today attention focuses on the school. Again the impulse is to try to improve performance without fundamentally calling into question the givens of the existing/traditional model.

The national discussion now seems to found the problem: the workers, the teachers and the students. As a result the effort at reform is now to get the workers to do-better. Tougher accountability for teachers. Higher standards for students. We are deeply into trying to compel better performance from both.

<u>Few stop to consider that what they dislike about teachers and students might be the result of a flaw in the design of traditional school.</u>

Monnet's conclusion is relevant here: It is useless to wear oneself out with a frontal attack on problems. They have not arisen by themselves, but are the product of circumstances. To disperse the difficulties they create it is necessary to change the circumstances that produce them.

If policy were to seek out those 'circumstances' that produce what we see as problems in education . . . to shift the focus away from symptoms and onto causes . . . we would immediately notice *the way authority and accountability are divided*.

People outside want to control the school, and to enforce accountability on the school. Boards of education say: "We're the ones who run the schools".

That does not and can not work: Schools, teachers, will not accept accountability for what they do not control. You wouldn't. I wouldn't.

Look at our deal with teachers: Today it's: "We don't-give-you authority and in return you don't-give-us accountability". Adults outside the schools decide what students should know. And what teachers should teach, and how. Without a professional role teachers lack motivation. Unable to adapt the learning program they are unable to motivate their students.

It is this denial of authority to the school that keeps K-12 from becoming a user-driven system. Nothing is more important than to fix this defect in the design of the system.

What If the Teachers Became the 'Users'?

Changing the fundamentals means bringing authority and accountability together *in the school.* There is no other way to combine the two. It is impossible to imagine enforcing accountability for student learning on those in district or state office.

The practical strategy is to start building a sector of autonomous, innovative schools in which teachers can decide the 'how' of learning for the students they have enrolled. School-based decisions are likely to be better. Only the teachers know the students.

E|E is beginning to envision a learning system in which *teachers* are the users of research and of technology: innovating as practitioners; replicating successful models developed elsewhere, and drawing from findings about 'what works'. Emphatically, deciding as professionals what to do; driven by their understanding of the needs of the *individual* students they actually have enrolled.

What if we were to turn the current 'deal' around, and say: *"If you will accept responsibility for student and school success you can have real authority over what matters for student and school success*?

That will challenge conventional thinking. Today the feeling is that teachers and their unions are the principal obstacle to reform. Emulating Michelle Rhee in D.C. has become almost the definition of 'reform'. But this new deal with teachers would be very much in the public interest.

It is the concept of the school as the unit of improvement -- long advocated by education researchers; John Goodlad and others. It runs against the givens of K-12 currently; which have decisions being made *for* schools, by others. But it promises major benefits.

- Given authority + responsibility, teacher behavior would change.
- Teachers would get the professional status/roles they have long sought.
- Teaching would become a better job; creating the potential for it to attract the high-quality candidates it is unlikely to attract on present course.

Many will not believe teachers will be interested. Not so. There is big change stirring out there -- even if not so far identified either by research or by journalism.

Look at the Public Agenda survey that found 58 per cent of teachers somewhat or very interested in working in a school run and managed by teachers themselves.

Consider. Minneapolis. It lost 15,000 students and the union 1,000 jobs while boards and superintendents dithered. The union local is now pushing to create new 'self-governed' schools that teachers would create and run; has even asked for and received a grant from the AFT to create a new nonprofit able under Minnesota law to authorize/create new schools in the chartered sector.

It can be done. Not overnight, of course. Big effects take time. But what's sketched out here is a possible strategy. We need now to compare it with the others available.

We Have Three Scenarios To Choose Among

Let's think of the major options as:

A: Continuous Improvement, through Command and Control
B: Innovation-based Systemic Reform
C: The Bypass

Continuous Improvement through Command and Control -- This is the scenario now being advocated so strongly, which works to improve the performance of the individuals and organizations in traditional school; basically within the givens of traditional school. Its definition of 'achievement' is relatively narrow; largely academic; rather dismissive of skills and knowledge outside the 'common standards'. It looks toward 'continuous' or 'sustaining' improvement on the existing model; looks to reduce variation, to standardize on 'proven' models. It carries forward the traditional notion that K-12 must change through a transformation engineered politically. K-12 being an inert system; improvement must be introduced from the outside -- increasingly from the national level. It tends to be dismissive of true innovation, partly

because its emphasis on 'evidence' is derived from research *on the existing model* and partly because of a sense that the spread of innovation will be slow, while transformation can be rapid. Its concept of innovation is therefore essentially 'replication'; requiring districts and schools to adopt what will be new *to them*.

Innovation-based Systemic Reform -- This is the scenario I have sketched-out. It can be thought of as the centrist choice among the three now before the country. The idea is to introduce dynamics that will turn K-12 into a *self-improving* system: increasing 'variation' through innovation; then reducing variation through improvement. The idea is for policy to ensure "*continuous innovation*" while running a parallel effort at "*continuous improvement*". Productivity comes from this cycling: first introducing a new model, then improving the new model. True innovation is a search; trial-and-error. The school probably cannot know, ahead, what will work; cannot prove, ahead, that what it tries will work. The schools in the innovative sector must be free to use different standards, different approaches to learning and different definitions of achievement. As different models appear, and spread, K-12 will begin to change as most successful systems change. The autonomy is critical: The schools must become different in order to maximize the motivation of both students and teachers -- and to capture the full potential of digital technology for both academic and economic performance. (This is discussed in full on the Education|Evolving website.)

Bypass -- This is not a strategy in the sense of action driven by policy. It simply recognizes that most large-system-change happens outside central planning and management; outside policy control. It was a conceit of city planners (and of the federal government in the 1960s) to believe they could control urban growth and shape the metropolis. They couldn't. And the world might not stand still while the policy debate goes on about education. It's possible that new models of learning will simply appear; traditional school 'disintermediated' as learners of all ages connect directly to the universe of knowledge available through digital technologies. The bypass requires only three elements: (1) new ways for people to learn, outside school; (2) entities able and willing to assess and validate this learning, and (3) the acceptance of these 'validations' by the organizations into which people want to move. The key is the middle step. Some 'accrediting' organizations are already beginning to think about certifying individuals as well as schools. Nothing about this will respect the principles of public education. But that will not necessarily stop The Bypass happening.

Of the three, contemporary opinion greatly favors (**A**) . . . this opinion strongly reinforced by an unprecedented push from the national government, backed -- or led -- by major private foundations. It seems to incorporate the standard strategy (a) to

declare a problem, (b) to assert a goal and (c) to present only one way to solve the problem and to meet the goal.

The country needs a searching debate about this fundamental question of strategy; bearing in mind Warren Buffett's caution that much of what is described as 'investment' is often in reality speculation.

Here're the Questions To Debate

There are always questions to ask about any proposal; always more options than people tell you there are. These seem obvious:

- Why bet all the chips on a single strategy that might not succeed, when it is possible to be trying other strategies at the same time? 'Improvement' might work with the 60 per cent of students who have always done well in traditional school. But why resist trying something different for those who never have done well in traditional school?
- Is or is it not important to motivate students and teachers? If traditional school cannot be said to maximize motivation, then *don't* we need to be redesigning school and learning?
- Is it viable to separate accountability from authority? Can the two be combined anywhere in the system *except* at the school?
- Will the centralizing and standardizing practices of 'continuous improvement' welcome the new learning possible with digital electronics; with their ability to personalize learning?
- Is the K-12 institution, economically sustainable in its current form without a major effort to capture the potential of new technology? Can incremental improvements conceivably solve this problem of un-sustainability?

The Answer Is Likely To Be: A 'Split-screen' Strategy

Good policy emerges from good discussion.

A realistic look at the way systems change will conclude that the need is to create a sector of K-12 truly open to real innovation -- especially for the students for whom 'school' has never worked well -- alongside the conventional efforts to improve traditional school. This is the 'split screen'.

The question next is: How to implement that strategy. There are several possibilities.

- One or more states might say: K-12 is our system. It's in state law; we're its architects. We'll decide what we think will work for us. If we want real innovation as well as 'continuous improvement', we are free to do that.
- Congress, as it debates the reauthorization of ESEA, could in its wisdom "hedge the bet" and leave an opening for -- and financially support -- real innovation.
- If necessary the issue re: nationalizing education and strategy should go into the political campaigns of 2012. Whether to nationalize the system, and policymaking, is a question the major institutions of K-12 might want to debate. (Where in the world *are* the associations of the states, the school-boards associations and the superintendents' associations, anyway, as the pressure to nationalize proceeds?)
- Certainly the teacher unions need to come into this debate. They have a major stake; they hold the key to the implementation of the strategy laid out here. After years of talking about professionalism, and now seeing themselves backed into a corner from which there is no way out, surely it is time to make a major move.
- One hopes, too, that a discussion of the risks and of the strategies will occur in the thoughtful media; print and electronic . . . that these will not let themselves become simply a cheering-section for today's conventional wisdom.

In Closing . . .

You asked what policy should do in a VUCA world: volatile, uncertain, chaotic and ambiguous

I hope my answer is clear. <u>When no one can be sure what one course of action will succeed, the sensible strategy is to try a variety of different things</u>.