



# education|evolving

## The need to strengthen the policy framework for new schools

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by Ted Kolderie, Co-founder, Education|Evolving**

Scaling up the creation of new schools will require an equally substantial effort to scale up, heavy up, the policy framework in which the schools are to be created.

Suppose the country were deciding to increase dramatically the rate of new housing production. Clearly it would not be enough just to find more contractors and to train more workmen and to produce more building-materials and to increase the supply of mortgage-financing. It would be necessary also to have a place to put the new houses. It would be essential to acquire the land, to ensure there are building and environmental policies that make this possible, to secure planning and zoning permission, and finally to arrange for the responsible agencies to provide the supporting infrastructure of roads, utilities and schools.

We have exactly this challenge now in moving to create more new schools. There will have to be a place to put them. This is more than the important question of school facilities, buildings, which Bryan described. It is the need to have a large enough and strong enough policy framework. And we will need organizations that will make this a priority. We will need more education entrepreneurs. We will also need more policy entrepreneurs.

Let's distinguish five elements of this challenge.

First: We have to enlarge the place in people's heads for this idea of new schools. This is the question Joe Graba addressed yesterday, about the theory of action for improving public education. If people simply assume the districts will get us the schools we need by changing the schools we have, then the idea of new schools will be peripheral. But if people are realistic about the risk of betting all the chips on the districts transforming existing

schools then 'new schools' becomes co-equal in importance and central as a strategy. So it is imperative to develop a clear and compelling public-interest rationale for a much-expanded program of new-school-creation.

Second: There must also, clearly, be a place for new schools in the law. The statutes must permit - and encourage - the creation of more new schools. More than this: The laws must be live laws, producing schools. The law itself will need to improve and change over time.

Third: We need a better, safer, place in the executive branch of state government for the new schools program. The state departments of education are not famously flexible or hospitable to innovative arrangements. And there will be controversy: Resistance is always proportional to the scale of the change being attempted. It will help greatly to create a safe harbor for the new-schools program. This is beginning to appear. The U.S. Department of Education has an office of innovation and in Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty created, by executive order, a division of choice and innovation. Perhaps in time the states will evolve separate agencies, one to deal with the district sector and the other to deal with the open sector of public education.

Fourth: Within the policy infrastructure there must be willing and competent sponsors for the new schools. In unbundling public education the states could simply have rounded up the best educators and best managers, created new agencies or public corporations and told them to go create good schools. (Interestingly, the states could still do this.) Instead the states went to chartering, which is a contract arrangement. It is open for teachers and others to propose schools *who can get the approval* (and oversight)

*of some sponsor/authorizer.* So we will need to keep scaling up the supply of sponsors, and heavying up their capacity to make good decisions and to provide good oversight. The Saint Paul Foundation I think never has made a grant to start a school. Its giving is strategic; exclusively to strengthen sponsoring.

Fifth: Research and evaluation. We will need to know more about what is happening and about what is working well. Early-on the Pew Trusts made a useful grant to Louann Bierlein and others basically to inventory the emerging charter sector. Now we need to know more about what students and teachers are doing, about what is new and what is quality, in the new schools appearing. More, in other words, of the kind of thing we heard yesterday from SRI about the small high schools the Gates Foundation has been supporting. On the website of Education/Evolving you can now find a “model RFP” for evaluating both chartering and the schools chartered. These two things do need to be thought-about separately: The strategy can be working even though some of the schools fail. The model RFP has gone to commissioners of education. It could be used by also by a foundation.

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The success of new schools to date is due very largely to American philanthropy. The laws were a great credit to the determination and political skill of legislators and governors. But they are enabling laws, and it is hard to believe they would have been used successfully had it not been for the help the organizers received from foundations large and small, local and national. No one expected, either, the commitment and energy of those setting up the schools. But by itself this would never have been enough.

The federal government was enormously important – partly for the early political support from President Clinton and partly as a foundation. The \$6-million-a-year program of start-up assistance put into law at the initiative of Senator Durenberger has now grown to something over \$200 million a year.

We can talk in the breakouts about the foundations’ possible roles in heavying-up this policy infrastructure. There are many opportunities. You can work locally or work nationally. You can do design work: Public education is stuck in old arrangements and old concepts – as, about leadership. There is an enormous need for new ideas – as, about ways teachers can work as professionals with the administrators working for them.

Foundations can be advocates. You can help develop that new theory of action; you can keep your community in touch with developments elsewhere just with a few plane tickets and hotel-nights. You can help defend the new-

schools program when its opponents try to cripple it in the courts. You can lobby.

You can do these things directly or through existing organizations or through new organizations you help create. About 1995 the Challenge Foundation made a modest grant that started the Charter Friends National Network through which Jon Schroeder organized and financed so much organizational development and consulting advice for states all around the country. This has now evolved into the new Charter Schools Leadership Council which met the other day in Washington.

Foundations will be, need to be, as important in scaling-up the policy framework for the new-schools sector as they are in the scaling-up of the new schools themselves.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR...

Ted Kolderie is a senior associate with the Center for Policy Studies and co-founder of Education|Evolving, the Center’s joint venture with Hamline University. Ted has worked on system questions and with legislative policy in different areas of public life: urban and metropolitan affairs and public finance through the 1960s and 1970s; K-12 public education almost continuously since 1983. He is recognized nationally for his work on education policy and innovation.

Ted was instrumental in helping design and pass the nation’s first charter law in Minnesota in 1991, and has since worked on the design of charter legislation in nearly twenty states. He has written about the charter idea and its progress in a variety of publications, and is currently working on a book about chartered schools as a state strategy for the reform of public education.

A graduate of Carleton College and of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public Affairs at Princeton University, Ted was previously executive director of the Citizens League in the Twin Cities area, a reporter and editorial writer for the Minneapolis Star and Tribune, and a senior fellow at the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota.



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