Innovation as the Practical Strategy for Change

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Nina Rees, president of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools had invited me to discuss "The Role of Innovation in the Charter Movement" with the heads of state charter associations and resource centers; the State Leaders Council convened by the Alliance. What follows are my remarks; edited to include some of the points made in the hour-long discussion that followed.

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I'll cover six things. First, the need for -- and the definition of -- innovation. Second, the problem in getting innovation. Third, the danger in not getting innovation. Fourth, innovation as the strategy for system-change. Fifth, policy for the states and federal governments. And finally, the challenge and opportunity innovation presents for chartering.

1. The need for innovation

In **How Invention Begins** John Lienhard writes that every advance in the availability of information required education to be reinvented. First the book; then the invention of printing; then in the 19th century the fast presses. Now, clearly, digital electronics represent the greatest "advance in the availability of information" ever seen. With the digital electronics education now is bound to be reinvented again.

In the process learning can greatly improve. We know it needs to improve. But at the moment we do not see clearly how the re-invention will happen within the institution of public education.

Today's dominant strategy . . . theory of action . . . has accepted the givens of traditional school; bets the nation can reach its goals by adding accountability: standards, measurement and consequences. Chartering started out to create an R&D sector, but then turned to a similar effort to do traditional school better.

2. Our difficulty in getting innovation

So we're caught in a one-bet strategy; gambling everything on improvements to conventional school.

Let me pause to define 'innovation'. Like most concepts as they become popular it has lost any clear meaning. Today it seems to mean any change; of whatever sort and however small. We might talk in terms of 'invention' -- something new *anywhere* -- and 'replication' -- something just new *here*. But those of us in Education Evolving prefer Clayton Christensen's distinction between sustaining innovation -- that improves an existing model -- and disruptive innovation -- that departs from the givens of the existing model.

Several things work to suppress innovation of the latter sort. Political pressures certainly do: The status quo is always defensive. So does the eternal resistance to change in general. But we make things worse ourselves by the way we think.

Conventional thinking insists on a one-dimensional concept of achievement, for example. Currently policy confines innovation to a search for ways to do that conventional achievement better. To get a sense for this read Paul Tough's new book, **How Children Succeed**. It puts into perspective what he calls "the cognitive hypothesis"; the notion that 'achievement' means only academic knowledge and skills (in English and math). The effect is to block-off efforts to open any new and broader dimensions of achievement.

The innovation that looks toward improving cognitive knowledge is useful. The video [www.educationevolving.org/pai] that Taishya sent you, showing the teacher in a district near Saint Paul personalizing his third-grade classroom, is an example; doing better with language and math.

Out there in the chartered sector some schools have opened broader dimensions of achievement. But overall the chartered sector did not develop as the R&D sector for public education. It's worth reminding ourselves how and why it didn't.

The laws left it open for those organizing a school to start whatever sort of school they wished. A chartered school was not pedagogically a kind of school. The

legislatures were looking for innovation. And many different kinds of schools did appear.

As the sector grew most people stopped thinking about chartering as a strategy, forgot that "charter" was a verb. They began to think of the new sector only as the schools.

This invited the kind of thing we saw last Saturday in that New York Times editorial: No interest in asking what kind of schools chartering is producing; an interest only in whether the schools chartered do or do not 'perform better' than district schools. "Perform" of course meaning how the students score on the tests of English and math -- and taking student scores as the measure of school quality. That is statistically invalid, though everybody does it.

Researchers began to compare chartered schools and district schools, almost never looking to see what the schools are as schools; at what they have their students reading, seeing, hearing and doing. That seems quite strange -- to relate learning to what a school is (legally) rather than to what it does (pedagogically). But there it is; hardly a credit to academic education research.

Regularly the studies concluded, "the evidence is mixed" -- as of course it would be. So, looking for a way to show chartered schools do 'perform better', charter advocates about 2003 moved to a strategy of promoting the kind of school that generates high scores and of closing schools that do not. This marked the end of real innovation. Why start schools that might *not* produce high scores?

A second thing suppressing innovation is the notion that 'reform' has to be a comprehensive transformation politically engineered.

I had not fully appreciated until some conversations at Harvard in November how completely the education-policy discussion is about The One Best System; has what someone recently called a "silver-bullet culture" about Right and Wrong; about absolutes. Every idea is tested by asking whether it would be accepted everywhere; would work everywhere. It is not a culture of innovation and experiment or -- despite Bob Schwartz' urgings -- of multiple pathways.

Our education-policy discussion is not a high-quality policy discussion. Too many questions that ought to be asked are not being asked. Why is schooling standardized when students differ? Why is school age-graded? As learning personalizes does 'teaching' change? Do the non-cognitive skills really not

matter? If the standard called for a reasonable facility with two or more languages which students would be 'high-performing'? If districts script teachers' work can education be a profession? Who will be accountable if fixing-traditional-school does not work?

Given the focus on fixing-traditional-school it is hardly surprising that current strategy is producing only incremental change. This frustrates people: I've heard commissioners in private moments say we should "blow up this system up and start over". But that can't happen. Occasionally someone comes up with some comprehensive master plan -- as Marc Tucker did late in '06. But those don't get enacted either. The radically different -- the kind of changes that departs from the traditional givens -- won't be voted-in. There has to be some different theory of action.

The difficulty with innovation is made worse by the reverence for 'research'. Clearly, while research can evaluate what has been tried, research cannot know what has not been tried. So insisting that all change be "evidence-based" -- while it helps with improvement -- blocks off the innovation that introduces the truly different.

3. The danger in failing to innovate

It's a risk for this country to go without real innovation -- as thoughtful people seem increasingly to be recognizing. In his introduction to the book coming out of that Harvard project (**The Futures of School Reform**), for example, Jal Mehta reports the group's conclusion:

> "The current debate is just not commensurate to the scale of the challenge we face. Almost all the ideas currently on the mainstream table leave the basic structure of American schooling fundamentally unchanged . . . Given the scope of the problem these incremental reforms will not bring about the better schools we want. *If we keep doing what we're doing, we're never going to get there*."

It seems important to get beyond traditional school. Almost certainly this country could be getting far more than it is, from both its students and its teachers. Does anyone defend the proposition that traditional school is well designed to maximize the motivation of either? [Motivation matters.]

It also has ethical dimensions. Those managing the consensus strategy assure us the next stage of effort will succeed. But statements of that sort, common in the

education-policy world, are in the business world 'forward-looking statements' that oblige corporations to identify the risks that the effort might *not* succeed. Those in education policy carry no such obligation.

A one-bet strategy is a risk. It is not a necessary risk to be taking, since we could at the same time be running multiple strategies. And since it is not a necessary risk to be taking it is not an acceptable risk to be taking, with the nation's future and with other people's children.

This is a dimension of 'accountability' missing in our policy discussion; one our group believes it appropriate to press.

4. A new theory of action: Innovation-based systemic reform

The strategy for re-inventing seems clear. (Some things, a friend used to say, are "too obvious".) *The simple, central, idea is to arrange for K-12 to change the way successful systems change*.

Our country has successful systems. These are open to innovation. New product models and new business models can appear; some trying to do things not done today. Early-adopters pick up the new, however primitive. Those who prefer the traditional may stay with the traditional, but may not suppress the innovative for those who do want that. Over time, as the new models improve, more people switch. At some point the curves cross; a transition is completed. Analog television was phased out a year ago; replaced by digital. The last typewriter factory closed.

We all see this process of gradual-replacement operating; two different models running side by side. Most of us still drive a gasoline-powered car but there are now hybrids and all-electrics. Most of our light bulbs are still incandescent but we see more and more fluorescents and LEDs. Most homes still get their electricity from a central station burning coal or natural gas but solar power is growing. There are still land-line phones but more and more cellphones.

Public policy sets the incentives -- the reasons and opportunities -- for change. Those operating the system do the actual redesign. The traditional models continue to improve even as the new models develop. The transition is gradual, relatively peaceful, in large part non-political.

Education|Evolving has been describing this as the 'split screen' strategy. Think about two pictures running side by side, on your TV set. The 'split screen' now needs to become the strategy for education.

5. So: What do the states and the national government do?

It is time to drop the debate about The One Best System. It will be a challenge for those in the traditional discussion to get comfortable with the idea of different models running simultaneously. But opening to innovation is the only practical way to get education reinvented. And it is time at last to be practical.

There is a lead role here for the states, and a supporting role for the national government.

It is time now for the states to create an innovation sector that will ask schools to design and test alternatives to the givens of traditional school. Boards in the district sector and authorizers in the chartered sector would be encouraged to let some schools -- new or existing -- depart from the traditional in six areas:

- **Age-grading**. This 19th-century 'reform' came in largely for the convenience of adults, administrators, as schools grew larger. It produced classrooms in which the students often range in their levels of attainment from the 10th percentile and below to the 90th percentile and above. The teacher must then decide to focus his/her efforts at the low end, or the high end, or at the middle. The district might say: "Differentiate your instruction!". But how is the teacher to do that? We need schools testing alternatives to age-grading.

- **Whole-class instruction**. The dominant paradigm has been and remains 'teaching': It is still common to hear people talk about 'classrooms', and about schools "delivering education", as if 'to learn' were a transitive verb. Whole-class instruction is of course most problematic in the age-graded classroom (see above). Schools should be free to test alternatives to whole-class instruction -- the personalization that digital electronics can now provide.

- **The role of teachers**. The teacher's role in learning has been as instructor; the teacher's role organizationally has been as an employee. Conventional school is arranged on the boss/worker model. We need some schools free to have teachers functioning more as coaches. And we should encourage teachers to move if they wish to the model common in most white-collar professions, in

which they as partners carry the responsibility for the program of learning -- or for the whole schools -- and have the administrators working for them.

- **The definition of achievement**. 'Achievement' has come to be thought of as academic knowledge and skills. Surely children should know how to read (English) and do math. But that narrow definition disregards and disrespects -- especially for students not middle-class -- the other abilities that young people often possess, that are real and are important. 'Achievement' is an *assay*, looking only for, giving credit only for, academic 'performance'. It should be an *analysis* that tests the full range of knowledge and skills. For students and for schools achievement should be multi-dimensional, with judgments made 'on balance'. As it is in most areas of life. (Think about places you know, things you know, people you know.) Judgments are made 'on balance', and are based as much on satisfaction as on statistics.

- **Instruction, as the way students learn**. The traditional notion is that students learn in school; in the classroom; from teachers. This is reflected in the notion of 'seat time' as a measure of learning. It would help enormously for some schools to be free to test other approaches to learning and other sites for learning. That is: to have some students learning at work; or learning from projects in which the various academic 'subjects' are integrated; studied together. There should be schools free, as well, to test new varieties of cooperative learning; same-age and cross-age peer teaching.

- **The 'boundaries' of school**; the starting and finishing years. Attendance is compulsory in most states between ages 7 and 16; the practice is to start kindergarten at age 5 and to graduate at age 18. Because the early years are so important it would make sense for states to look for new ways to have schools testing continuous literacy programs Age3 to Grade3. And to adjust the boundary between secondary and post-secondary; to ensure students are college ready -- and to move those college-ready at 16 into college sooner.

National education policy has been fundamentally misconceived. People talk about 'how American's schools perform'. But of course our national government does not have schools -- as 'Europe' does not have schools. Finland has schools, Britain has schools, Germany has schools. Massachusetts has schools, Minnesota has schools, California has schools. The job of our national government is to see that the states carry out their constitutional responsibilities for public education; to support the state-based programs of innovation.

Our national government has other policy areas that *are* its direct responsibility, to which it now much give priority: foreign policy, homeland security, national defense, the health-care system, the economy. Washington needs to delegate 'education'. [The recent paper by Rick Hess and his associate makes good sense, about this.]

6. What role does the charter sector play?

Chartering has a comparative advantage in innovation, given its ability to start schools new. So innovation would be aided, the 'split screen' strategy easier to introduce, were chartering to be trying, testing, new and different models of school and approaches to learning. Hopefully it will: It would be quite strange for chartering not to capitalize on its being strongest where the district sector is weakest.

Today chartering has drafted away from innovation. The sector has bought into the one-dimensional notion of achievement; into the one-bet strategy for getting the country the better learning it needs. This might work. But it might not. There is a question here it would be well for the leadership of the sector to re-think.

A good way to begin would be to do that inventory -- which Nina and Todd and Joe Graba and I discussed at our meeting at O'Hare last October -- looking to see what innovative models have in fact appeared in the states through chartering. The list I ran out in Section 5 might be a way to organize such a survey.

Education|Evolving, for its part, intends to do all it can to argue the case I've tried to lay out here for a strategy of 'innovation-based systemic reform'.

We appreciate that this requires some basic change in thinking, a new paradigm. That is never easy. But moving away from the old argument about re-forming everything . . . showing legislators the way other systems change . . . might prove persuasive. Teachers are increasingly demanding a professional role. And the digital industry, we hope, will find its future in school-based innovation -- resisting the lure of centralization.

As more people worry that we are not now on a successful course the support is likely to grow. Innovation is, simply, necessary. Things that are necessary tend to happen.

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