



Of Innovators and School Improvement

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The charge to America's system of public education has undergone a dramatic shift. Access was the maxim for many years. Expansion into rural America, integration, busing, title nine, and other landmarks paved the road of compulsory schooling. Districts were responsible for making sure all students had a desk, and it was the duty of the parent to make sure their young person showed up. Whether a student learned once in that desk depended on the effort they chose to put forth. Many were left behind.

The assignment has since changed. Schools are now told that no longer is attendance the measure of success, but that all students must now learn. Education can no longer be an opt-in venture. Unfortunately the institution and its schools were built to provide students the opportunity to learn, but not to ensure that they did, in fact, perform. If we now insist our schools do this quite different job we will have to create new models that make that possible. We should provide opportunity for students and educators to unleash their creative capacity by helping to rethink education.

A National Imperative: Higher Achievement Through Innovation

Education is now a prerequisite for the middle class. It is also a national imperative, as global economics shift the means of production to countries with larger, cheaper, and less regulated labor. To maintain and sustain its status as the dominant global power, the United States must evolve and emerge as the leading knowledge economy of the world. The ability to do so is tied directly to the capacity of our public schools to educate not only those who are presently underachieving, but also to improve our "better" schools that are, among global competition, quite average.

Today's outsourcing is a sign of things to come. It is also an opportunity. By relegating production and support services to emerging economies American business is making room for a higher order of professional industry. These new positions, to be filled internally, require of coming generations what are currently unprecedented skill sets.

In talk of school improvement we must keep in mind that no other society in the history of civilization has taken on so large or noble an educational effort as public schooling in 21st century America. Having strived in decades past to establish equal access, we are now committing to educate all students, well, in a large, sprawling, and highly heterogeneous country. It is assumed that this undertaking is to go forth without restrictive forms of tracking that hamper the scalability of student success, mobility, or choice. Our schools need to develop creative and competent young adults that are both analytical and creative.

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills has done some good work laying out what this new set of competencies looks like: the ability to analyze and problem-solve, to adapt, to be creative, to speak more than one language, and to work effectively in teams. Young people need to know how to gather facts when factual material is needed. This implies models of school and processes of schooling that move away from the memorization and repetition of content knowledge, toward methods that more resemble life outside school.

Rethinking the Strategy for School Improvement

The traditional model of school never has educated all children well. A sizeable number of young people, especially those who are non-white, do not graduate. How much those who do make it through actually learn is another concern entirely.

The current strategy for improvement, embodied in national legislation in 2001, sets out a marvelous goal: for all children to learn, with a special commitment to those groups traditionally left behind. Despite the preoccupation of a nation's academics, technicians, and educators—with much time and effort invested—nobody can say with any real certainty that the current strategy of command performance will work. It is by no means clear that young people, who are not now succeeding or learning well, will somehow perform at a higher standard because their districts, schools, and teachers are told that, “they have to.” Believing that schools can teach more and teach better, without altering the system that has proven itself defunct, amounts essentially to hope. Hope is not a strategy.

The limitations of the conventional model are a major constraint. Teachers lack a stake in the direction of schools, and have limited incentive to look beyond their own classroom walls. Principals are held accountable for the results of the building and its educators, despite having limited discretion over staffing, finances and curriculum. It is usually not a good idea to direct people to do what probably cannot be done.

Our strategy at the moment still sees the problem as one of securing better performance from the conventional model. But almost certainly the problem is mainly in the design of school and schooling. If all kids are to learn, different models with different cultures and approaches to learning will be needed.

The open sector allows for this. By “open” we mean those alternative pathways of public education, operating parallel to the conventional systems, which exchange autonomy for accountability. The open sector provides an area for educators to research and develop. It supports innovation free of hindrance by convention or interest groups.

Getting More Out of School Workers

It is common in this age of increased expectations to hear political leaders or academic types call for increased effort on the part of educators. Teachers may not work hard enough, it is said, or they if they are, not with optimal efficiency. If only we demand more, assess progress, and hold them to account, teachers will achieve greater gains in the classrooms.

Minnesota state law carries a quaint old provision that, “The school shall be under the control of the teacher.” But this is not true in any real sense, because the school is not the teachers' school. Teachers work for administrators, in a classic bureau model. Opportunities for professional growth are limited. Arley Gunderman used to say, when president of the National Association of Elementary School Principals, that “Candidly, my job is to motivate

as much as I can and for as long as I can, people who are in essentially dead-end jobs.” Even states regarded as high performing lose half their new entrants in five years.

It is true that we could be getting more out of the workers in our schools. Educators have varying levels of discretionary effort that they may choose to further contribute to the minimal requirements of a contract. Some do so already, many do not. Nearly all could give more. It would be a mistake, however—a common mistake—to assume that discretionary effort can be coaxed out through punitive measures. Or more importantly, that higher performance can be obtained within the present confines of a teacher’s position in the school.

Motivation is a principle, underlying ingredient for teacher and student performance alike. Sustained motivation for both groups has always been elusive, and will continue to be, as long as the process of schooling is structured as it is. The very model of conventional public education at the middle and secondary levels seems to be designed against inspired learning: teachers are placed in front of the class to do the work of “imparting” knowledge while young people sit passively in desks. Yet if achievement matters then effort matters, and if effort matters then motivation matters and should be made central.

Mainstream school today resembles a kind of batch processing. This is what this essay refers to as ‘conventional’ or ‘traditional.’ It can be likened to a bus rolling down the highway with a class of 30+ students on board, moving too fast for some and too slow for others. An adult positioned at the helm, right behind the yellow line, points out and comments on important objects along the way. But there is no opportunity for a student to get off to explore what he finds interesting. The schedule calls for the bus, the course, to move on. Not only does this leave some students behind, but it also bores those who could be moving faster on any given subject.

For many students the size of high school is also a problem. Relationships matter for motivation, and in large schools with multiple courses where a teacher has 150 students there is little chance to develop a culture in which teachers and students know each other well.

Upon recognizing the fundamental importance of motivation, there are at least two ways for a school to get increased productivity out of its workers. The first is to utilize the full skill sets of teachers by improving the scope of their contribution to the school. The second is to identify and enable the other, often unrecognized, group of workers: students.

An Expanding Role For Educators

Innovative forms of school can provide teachers the opportunity to develop innovative approaches to learning. Teachers will be innovators, if given the opportunity and the authority. With a greater sense of responsibility and self-determination for the culture and curriculum of their school, educators will identify and invest discretionary effort.

Public education never really has offered educators professional control of their work. There are teacher teams, professional communities of practice, and other efforts in this direction. But these usually try to expand teacher roles within the boss/worker arrangement of conventional school. A truly professional model would provide an organized group of teachers the opportunity to design and to run the program of learning.

This is the partnership concept we see operating in most white-collar occupations we call professional, including law practices or architectural design firms. It is now slowly appearing in K-12, with teachers formally organized as a professional practice getting the authority to arrange and operate a school. They are doing this in the open sector. Educators

at these (always small) schools act collegially, and share the responsibility for student and school success. When a student or class does well or struggles, it is the responsibility of each educational partner. All are responsible for school culture and direction. This model shows great potential. A recent survey by Public Agenda found that more than two-thirds of educators with less than five years on the job would be interested in such a model.¹

The common assertion that teachers resist accountability and oppose change might be mistaken. That behavior seems to be specific to the management model where administrators run the show and teachers are employees. They may be resisting change out of a learned fear that the new will not be for the better. Or, the current model may be the only one they know to exist. In the professional partnership model, teacher attitudes and behaviors change quite dramatically. When educators are provided the authority to control their own professional partnerships, there is a creative and energetic response. This is the power of motivation, and student attitudes and behaviors are quick to change in response.

Technology and Young People

Teachers are not the only workers in the classroom. Students will play an increasing role in the educating process as new technologies provide both greater access to information, and the capacity to efficiently process it into knowledge.

Nearly all schools now have computers, and classrooms are fully wired. Advanced software is prevalent and student proficiency is approaching universal. The issue today is use. Most has been described as type one, adapting the new technology to present-day school. It helps make current methods of teaching more efficient, much as early cinematography was used to film stage plays. In the case of laptops—very much the vogue for tech-minded schools today—students take notes and teachers keep records.

Next will come Type-II applications, in which school is adapted to the characteristics and the potential of the tech devices.² In this sense technology is used to fundamentally improve how schooling is carried out. It is not an add-on or a supplement, but structural. A good example, already spreading rapidly, is online virtual learning. In contrast to conventional school it offers flexibility of time, place, and curriculum.

No one can now foresee all the ways digital electronics will impact learning and schooling. But we know we are in a revolution when we see the cell phone becoming a portable computer, able to manage media and access the web. Since we know where the trend in technology is heading—toward personalization and interaction—the fact that we do not know exactly *how* the future will look is of less worry than some may think. An option is to use technology to customize learning for students, to move away from the batch-processing that is increasingly obsolete.

Everything we hear suggests that young people would like to pursue what interests them and to learn through the study of real-life applications. The new technology can be organized to permit this either as coursework or as project-based learning, with teachers building on students' interests and aptitudes to move them gradually toward what the standards require them to know.

These type two applications might disconcert traditionally minded people. But the day is gone when the best or the only way to put students in touch with knowledge was to send an adult into their classroom with books under her arm. School should let students explore the enormous resources now available. Young people today are skilled with the technology and

move comfortably in the digital world. We might be surprised how many would move toward math and science if high school let students pursue what interests them individually and with depth.

It is hard to believe digital electronics will not affect education as profoundly as they have other activities that involve the storage and manipulation of information. Newspapers, magazines, books, film, and video are all now accessible and interactive—with young people consume on a weekly, if not daily, basis. Should districts really prohibit the possession and use of digital devices in school? Or should they turn this technology to their advantage? Resistance will probably only ensure that innovators using new technology will create new arrangements for learning outside school, as some chartered and private schools already are.

Cost and performance together determine productivity. Innovation can improve both by moving away from schooling as service-delivery toward a system of supported self-help in which the student is increasingly the worker on the job of learning. Students work for free, as we do not compensate their effort with a salary. More strongly motivated students learn more. In this model teachers' work would upgrade from presenting information to planning, advising and evaluating. As a formula for improvement this might prove attractive to families, to citizens and to policymakers.

Who are the Innovators?

Educators, students and families, policy makers, and the non-education industries of gaming and technology all have roles to play. Executives—superintendents, mayors, and governors—are in especially prime positions to lead. Though for the new models of school and schooling the states will probably need to look mainly to people new to education and those now outside it.

Some of the best innovations do and will come from non-traditional people. Too many who are enthusiastic about the new system-level arrangements still create conventional schools, feeling apparently that these can do better (in conventional terms) simply by being outside the district bureaucracy and the union contract. Many chartered schools, for example, look strikingly similar to the larger schools down the road in both structure and pedagogy. Seeing these difficulties even in the open sector makes it clear how much harder innovation will be within districts. We need to recognize how difficult it is in districts with declining enrollment to start new schools that would—as boards, superintendents and teacher unions see it—“compete against our own schools.”

But that is the point. These districts schools are not working for most students, especially non-white. Significant improvement, logically, can only come through alternatives to what is not getting the job done. In this sense it is impossible to avoid competition. As most every major urban district can attest, competition is already ripe and robust in the form of suburban choice and chartering. Minneapolis Public Schools for one has lost over 12 percent of its market in the past ten years due to competition. Why would these districts want to circle the wagons? They should provide their own competitive response.

Short of creating an open sector, a state could by law push down into the schools real authority to decide on management of programs, staffing, and finances. The more points of decision, the greater the opportunity for innovation and a collective sense of ownership.

Great feats can sometimes only be accomplished in times of great necessity, and a consensus to act can rally opinion around a leader. Unfortunately many administrators and

political leaders struggle to see the need for fundamental changes in how schooling is structured. Districts vie instead for perennial “tweaks” to the status quo, of which none show significant, sustainable results. Meanwhile the open sector—innovative and responsive—continues to evolve, with a growing appeal to educators and families. Public schools would do well to open the gates and take note.

Endnotes:

1. See *Teacher Professional Partnerships: A Different Way to Help Teachers and Teaching*, EducationEvolving. <http://www.educationevolving.org/pdf/TPPs.pdf>.
2. See *Rethinking the Student-Centered Classroom: Personalization and the Type II Application of Technology*, EducationEvolving. <http://www.educationevolving.org/pdf/TypeIIRethinkingTheClassroom.pdf>.

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