

# Innovation-based Systemic Reform



*How to Get Beyond Traditional School*

### ***About this E|E paper***

The argument here for a strategy of “innovation-based systemic reform” grows out of a five-year-long process of thinking and discussion in meetings in Minnesota and around the country. Education|Evolving owes much to those who took part in these discussions and to the organizations that hosted them for us: Wingspread, the Hewlett Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, the Stanford University School of Education, the Progressive Policy Institute and Hamline University

The discussions began after the dynamics of chartering opened K-12: The question was whether the new schools being created would indeed form an ‘R&D sector’ of public education. The meetings and discussions began to focus on innovative forms of school-organization, on innovative approaches to learning (including the greater use of digital electronics) and on innovative, broader, concepts of ‘achievement’. This paper pulls together the results of that thinking, about the need to move beyond traditional school. Its principal author is E|E Co-founder Ted Kolderie, who in 1990 wrote a similar paper arguing the need for innovation to move beyond the institutional arrangements in K-12 public education. His 2004 book about education policy -- *Creating the Capacity for Change: How and Why Governors and Legislatures are Opening a New-Schools Sector in Public Education* -- is published by Education Week Press.

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# A 'Split Screen' Approach Is the Only Practical Strategy

In the current discussion about improving education the consensus is to build on traditional school. The initiative proceeds on the assumption that learning can be significantly better without school being significantly different.

This is very strange. What other system competing in the global economy today would start by proposing to carry forward unquestioned the operating models and the practices of the past?

In its vastly expanded role the national government is pushing hard for better teachers, better teaching, higher -- now, national -- standards and tougher accountability. It is mainly about changing the content and practices of formal learning. Presumably this will translate directly into performance. People talk as if once it is agreed what students *should* know and be able to do, this *is* what students *will* know and be able to do.

A prominent national magazine calls this "school reform". In fact it is not about re-forming school. The initiative *assumes* school in its traditional form: courses and classes, teachers 'delivering education'. The illustrations that accompany the policy discussion commonly display traditional school: a classroom; students at desks or tables and, facing them, an adult in front of a blackboard. In the mainline discussion technology barely appears. A Microsoft "We See" ad for software shows a classroom, a blackboard -- and no computer.

Why? Perhaps everyone instinctively assumes traditional school in the same way strategy 20 years ago assumed the public-utility arrangement of districts. Surely it is not because traditional school is working well: In traditional school perhaps 40 per cent of the students never learned well. Nor is traditional school the only option: There are other ways to organize learning. It seems national policy simply expects that, done better, traditional school can and will get all students to learn.

Basically this approach asks the country to commit to a limited agenda of academic achievement aimed at improving performance as conventionally defined, using

the existing organizational model, through a centrally-directed and hugely complex effort to manage the actions of thousands of organizations and millions of teachers and students. It does seem daunting; like commanding an army of cats to perform close-order drill.

Seen in perspective and set against what is under way in other systems, there is a kind of blindness about this assumption that new goals can be reached without old methods being changed. Henry Ford in 1900 challenged the notion that what transportation needed was 'better horses'. Bill Gates in the mid-'70s challenged the notion that what computing needed was 'better mainframes'. In the mainline discussion about the future of education it is assumed that the future of learning is better classrooms.

And all the chips are bet on this one strategy. Its advocates believe it will work. But they cannot be certain. What if even the most earnest efforts to improve traditional school did not close the learning gap?

This commitment to a one-bet strategy puts the nation seriously at risk. It is not a necessary risk, since we could at the same time be trying other approaches. Since it is not a necessary risk to be taking it is not an appropriate risk to be taking, with the country's future and with other people's children. What if innovation is in fact required, to close the learning gap? Who could effectively be held accountable should the one-bet strategy fail?

This paper proposes a different approach. It argues that meeting national goals requires a 'split screen' approach, incorporating both innovation and improvement. Not everyone welcomes this discussion. But sound decisions usually do require challenging assumptions and proposing alternatives.

## **Other Systems Are Innovating, Dramatically**

When we step back to get perspective on system-change it becomes clear that K-12 is not the only 'utility'-like system that has come into crisis and that has needed to be reconstructed on a new model.

In the 1960s the old postal system crashed; most visibly with its breakdown in Chicago. It was taken out of government; made an independent corporation. Major efforts were begun to modernize mail-handling. But already the 'delivery system' had been opened to new technologies and new entrants. Fax appeared, enabling the phone system -- already the dominant carrier of personal messages -- to send print. United Parcel Service evolved from its early role as the consolidated delivery service for city department stores to become a national carrier. Then came the same-day courier services, allowed past the law against private carriage of the mail on grounds the USPS should not prohibit a service it was not itself prepared to provide. That argument opened the way for overnight inter-city delivery by air, and Federal Express emerged.

By 1970 the nation's telephone system was in serious trouble: service deteriorating, the utility unable to keep up with the capital investment demanded by the expanding economy. Again, new technology and new entrants appeared: The FCC allowed MCI with its microwave towers to compete for long-distance service. The phone company found itself being driven gradually out of the price-averaging business, and in 1982 AT&T agreed to a breakup; left the local phone market.

By the 1980s the education system was displaying similar symptoms; signaled in the **Nation At Risk** report in 1983. It was having difficulty adapting to the changes in the cities and to the rising expectations of an increasingly knowledge-based economy. By the late '80s the states were beginning to break up the old public-utility arrangement; withdrawing the exclusive first with inter-district enrollment, then in the 1990s with their chartering laws.

But look at the contrast over the succeeding 25 years! Contrast what followed the divestiture in communications and what followed in K-12.

- Communications developed enormously, with new products and business models we see around us, every day. None of that was visible in 1986, when Steve Coll published his account of the breakup of AT&T. There seemed only turmoil and disruption. Quickly, however, technology produced the satellite and fiber optics and the cellphone, which rapidly evolved into the now-internet-connected computer you carry in your pocket today.

- What has been the comparable innovation in school; in learning?

What accounts for that difference? Almost certainly that education policy has been, as Andy Rotherham wrote recently about *No Child Left Behind*, “anchored in past approaches”. The central tendency of the consensus about “improving performance” is still to strengthen the traditional givens, not to change them. It resembles what Warren Buffett describes as the common approach to investment: “Driving by looking in the rear-view mirror”.

Think about the systems -- like the ‘learning system’ -- that essentially store, retrieve, transmit, distribute, analyze and manipulate information; think about communications and computing, about the changes sweeping through the media; through book publishing, newspapers and magazines and the production and distribution of music.

In these other systems the discussion about doing-better does not assume existing arrangements. People see new possibilities, sense the existing model is not sustainable. So the expectation is that the future will not or must not be like the past; that change will replace rather than re-form the existing. Radical change is now visible in energy, transportation, finance, agriculture, climate and the environment; is still pushing on the postal service.

Many inside those systems do not welcome the changes under way and in prospect. But those involved accept the reality of what is happening; have a sense that critical problems of system performance make all this necessary. As they talk about how to adapt they try to preserve the best of the old as the new emerges. The dynamics are intense; the discussion alive.

Listening even casually to these other discussions you sense quickly how innovation dominates the discussion; how rapidly the services, products and business models are changing and how central are developments in technology. Once opened these systems become self-improving; change becomes the norm.

It is quite otherwise with the discussion about the future of education. A strong orthodoxy has developed with little challenge around the conviction that we can fix existing schools, and that the only obstacles are recalcitrant states and districts

and the teacher unions. There is talk about innovation, but innovation has for years been heavily constrained by the notion that new models must look like, feel like and perform like the traditional -- and especially by the notion that success and achievement will be judged against the definition of quality used in the past.

The risk now is that the coming rewrite of the national education law will continue “anchored in past approaches”, closed to major innovation, and so will create a standardized model rather than a self-improving system capable of generating new models of school and new approaches to learning.

This is serious: What if traditional school, even with tougher standards, cannot induce from students or teachers the effort required to raise learning to the levels the country now requires?

## **Traditional School Suppresses Innovation**

Can we afford to take that risk? Why *not* let K-12 change as other systems change; why *not* explore radically different approaches to learning? We could, and should. That will, however, require going beyond traditional school since its key elements work powerfully to suppress innovation. Success with innovation will require removing what now blocks the ‘different’.

To see the blockage, look at the three elements of traditional school: (a) its form of organization, (b) its approach to learning and (c) its concept of achievement. Singly and together these operate to constrain the efforts at economic sustainability, better student performance and social equity.

**Why only the boss/worker model?** -- Organizationally traditional school is a unit of the district, a large public bureau. The school is not the teachers’ school. It is assumed the school will be run by a ‘strong principal’, hired by the district, for whom the teachers work. The management model does not motivate teachers well. Teaching has not been truly professional. Turnover is high.

The traditional model is probably unsustainable economically. Superintendents, principals and teachers see their program steadily eroding; privately are candid about this. People hope that budget problems can be solved on the revenue side.

But today state revenues are stressed as almost never before. Why else would districts be moving now to a four-day week?

**Is ‘instruction’ the only route to learning?** -- School is a building to which students come at a fixed time of day, week and year. Here they are grouped by age. At the secondary level knowledge is divided into academic subjects for students to study; their work organized into courses and classes; the teacher ‘instructing’ students almost as if ‘to learn’ were a transitive verb. This traditional model does not motivate students well. Two years ago in *The Other Half of the Strategy* we described its effects this way:

*With its model of courses and classes school is a kind of batch-processing; a bus rolling down the highway with 30+ students on board, moving too fast for some and too slowly for others. An adult points out interesting and important things along the way. But there is no opportunity for a student to get off to explore what s/he finds intriguing. The schedule calls for the bus, the course, to move on. 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 sees 150 students a day there is little chance for teachers and students to know each other well.*

Students have some but not much voice in what they study or how they work. Adults decide what students should know and be able to do: Some influential people believe it would be quite wrong to begin with what interests students. The course-and-class model also discourages those interested in bringing digital technology to the improvement of schooling. Some argue that technology offers little to teachers -- which might be true when you assume traditional school. But might technology truly matter if student work were individualized, if the paradigm were *learning*, and especially if achievement were more broadly conceived?

**What’s ‘achievement’?** -- The traditional concept of performance focuses on math and English-language arts. Assessment does not search aggressively for knowledge or abilities beyond the academic that might be learned outside formal school. It focuses on what can be quantified. And -- because the low levels of learning now press educators so hard to “close the learning gap” -- it emphasizes



‘proficiency’. It seems less interested in individual performance: The term “*all students*” appears a lot; the standards are “common” standards.

A few questions suggest how the narrowness of the traditional definition constrains innovation. Is ‘achievement’ really only the skills of reading and writing, the knowledge of math and science? Is ‘proficient’ really all the public wants and all the country and its economy require? Is proficient all that is possible? In the important effort to “close the learning gap” what has happened to excellence? How many students in fact do achieve above the standards? How far above? What causes students to make the effort that excellence requires? Do all students need to master all subjects -- or may they specialize?

The traditional definition of achievement seriously skews the education-policy discussion. Other important dimensions of achievement, whose existence is strongly suggested by the popularity of the chartered and other ‘alternative’ schools, are not picked up. School performance and student performance are assessed only in terms of academic knowledge and skills: No other measure of accomplishment is possible since no other achievement is recorded. The impression spreads, as a result, that only a conventional school can be a quality school. So the pressure is enormous to create conventional schools.

The power of the traditional raises some equity concerns. The middle-class notion of what it is important to know and be able to do disadvantages and in some ways disrespects non-traditional students. Many young people in our cities today, for example, have a reasonable facility with two languages. Is that credited as achievement? To what extent might ‘the achievement gap’ be a function of the traditional definition of achievement?

## **To Succeed We Will Have To Innovate with School**

The concern is that the effort to improve the traditional model with higher standards, better instruction, fuller use of data and tougher accountability -- while not wrong -- is inadequate. Are we absolutely sure it will elicit the burst of achievement needed for American education to be world-class?

The difficulty in securing high performance from the traditional model suggests it would be prudent to test new and different forms of organization, approaches to learning and definitions of achievement. But again: This implies a split screen; an innovative sector running alongside the traditional sector -- based on these four clear understandings:

### **1. Innovation is a search**

The key question, of course, is: How? Bring up the idea of ‘innovating’ and people will ask: “What is your innovation?” They think of all the books, articles, speeches and seminars promoting this or that way to improve curriculum, technology, pedagogy; whatever. They want to have The Answer; now.

So ‘innovation’ is a difficult discussion. Almost any change gets represented as ‘innovation’. (The old telephone utility thought of the color phone and the ‘curly cord’ as innovation.) Also, people often say ‘innovation’ when they mean ‘replication’; when they want you to introduce into your schools something earlier done *elsewhere*. True innovation is a search for *some new ‘different’*.

The discussion is further complicated by the pressure today for change to be ‘research-based’. That reinforces the effort at replication; discourages trying things not ‘proven’. Replication is useful, and research on traditional school can help improve traditional school. Yet surely innovation is essential. And surely ‘*research-based innovation*’ is a contradiction in terms.

Introducing innovation means freeing educators and others to search for what works for the students they have enrolled. Students differ, so ‘what works’ might well differ; school to school and even student to student. Innovation needs to be open to practitioners in schools trying things.

### **2. ‘New schools’ are the platform for innovation**

It is always easiest to innovate when starting new. It is hard enough to make traditional school markedly better: It is harder still to make it significantly different. We are all conscious today how limited is the ability of leadership to change existing organizations in more than marginal ways.

In a series of institutional innovations over the past 20 years the states have created opportunities for people to start new schools that may be different. The principal platform for this is chartering -- though programs are now appearing for the district sector: Boston with its Pilot Schools, Massachusetts now with its Innovation Schools; Minnesota in 2009 with its 'site-governed' schools. Chartering, as Allan Odden of the University of Wisconsin points out, is this country's principal experiment with school-based decision-making.

Chartering is not -- directly -- about student learning. Chartering is about innovation; about developing new models of school in which students might learn better. Students learn nothing from a charter, as they learn nothing from a district. Students learn from what they read, see, hear and do. *So the evaluation of students' learning has to be linked to the type of school they attend;* to what the school has them reading, seeing, hearing and doing. KIPP schools are a case in point: an innovative form of school, developed and now being expanded on the platform that chartering provides. It succeeds because of what it has its students reading, seeing, hearing and doing. KIPP is a kind of school. 'Charter' is not.

Unfortunately the political warfare over education policy obscures the critical role of chartering as the platform for innovation. People love to talk as if the status of the school is responsible for student learning: Studies fly back and forth purporting to show that "chartered schools outperform district schools" or that, "No, district schools outperform chartered schools". Few researchers, fewer in the media, trouble to ask what the schools are as schools. Few worry that attributing learning to jurisdictions is intellectually indefensible -- or, for that matter, bother with statisticians' warnings that it is scientifically invalid to treat measures of student mean proficiency as measures of school performance.

Somehow the effort to introduce a strategy of innovation will have to rise above this confusion; will have to build an understanding that students learn from what their school has them reading, seeing, hearing and doing. And will have to see that the role of chartering is to generate schools that change what students read, see, hear and do.

### **3. It is autonomy that lets new schools be innovative**

Autonomy lets the school *be* the unit of improvement. Success with learning requires knowing the students, and only the people in the school know the students. This is why so many experts have so long said the school is logically the unit of improvement.

Being autonomous means being able to control money, time and the approach to learning; also being able to decide who comes in to teach, so that the school can hold a faculty committed to its approach to learning. With autonomy a school can also control its size. ‘Small’ is important, but by itself is not enough. Professor William Ouchi is adamant about this: Small size must be combined with the school’s ability to make decisions.

Autonomy is not easily achieved, given the history of schools as units of the district, controlled by its central office. School autonomy challenges board, superintendent and union.

### **4. The innovative will not seem better, at the start**

Innovation will require patience and understanding. The truly different usually does not seem impressive in its early years -- which, again, is why it is so important to measure the new by its own rather than by conventional standards. The sound-quality of the first transistor radio was terrible. It had a different quality: It was portable.

The new models will gradually improve. But it will take time. Look at the early models in any field from today’s perspective: the Wright Brothers’ airplane, the automobile (“horseless carriage”), the early ENIAC computer, the early cellphone (like a brick). They succeeded because they offered new and different ways of traveling, calculating, communicating. And rapidly they improved.

In education the tendency has unfortunately been to expect the new-and-different to be perfect from the start. This is unrealistic. “Very few people get everything right on the first try”, as the late Albert Shanker put it.

## How Might Innovative Schools Be Different?

Let's go back to the three areas of 'school' in which innovation is needed -- not by way of offering particular models but simply to suggest what new models might emerge from a process of innovation. We can reasonably expect:

### **O Different approaches to learning**

In the innovative sector teachers and others will develop alternatives to the course-and-class, batch-processing, model; will challenge the traditional age-grading that confronts the teacher with the mixed-ability classroom. It will likely test the old given that work at the secondary level must be organized in courses and taught in classes, learning based on 'seat time'. By individualizing student work the new schools will vary the pace of learning: Those who need more time will get more time; those who can go faster will go faster. Today there are innovators eager to bring into school the modern digital electronics that can make this possible. Schools free to innovate would take up technology.

The digital electronics do not necessarily break away from course-work: It is clearly possible to take courses online or on disk and still to vary the pace and level of learning. But the internet and the Web now make it possible also to *break away* from courses so students can do project-based learning. It is obvious how these innovations might help motivate students. And how they might also improve the economic performance of the school.

Changes of this sort, making students increasingly responsible for their learning -- perhaps combined with programs that merge work and learning -- might start to break down the institution of 'adolescence'. It passeth all understanding why the discussion about improving the achievement of young people proceeds with no question raised about this century-old institution. The reformers who after 1900 took children out of the factories and out of adult prisons -- out of the responsibilities of adult life -- surely meant well. But the effect, psychologists tell us, has been to trap teens in a "separate society" peopled only with their peers; denied both the responsibilities and the rights of adult life. It is bizarre to be leaving teens infantilized in the youth culture, yet expecting them to be serious about learning.

High school was expanded after 1910 partly to absorb those young people: It has been a major element of the institution of adolescence. School must now be a part of the effort to change it. Today, when the country needs all the energy and talent it can get from its new generation, 'adolescence' is a serious constraint. To get young people to perform like adults we will need to treat more of them more like adults. Young people deserve to be listened-to; need to be given responsibility; ought not to be shut out of discussions about school and education policy as they are today. We cannot anyway *give* young people an education: What we can give them is responsibility and opportunity. They will give us back achievement -- rather than, as at present, the negative behavior that is so often exactly what adult society deserves.

### **O Different in the definition of 'achievement'**

Schools innovating will look beyond academics for outcomes that matter. Comprehension matters. Creativity matters. The ability to solve problems matters. Initiative matters. The ability to work well with people matters. Simply the ability to work at-speed matters. Character matters. The broader definition of achievement will accept Whitehead's definition of education as "the acquisition of the art of the utilisation of knowledge"; aligning with the Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Skills in believing that critical thinking, creativity, teamwork and problem-solving do go together with the knowledge of content.

The broader thinking about 'achievement', about what young people know and can do, is likely to be interested in performance above proficient, and in learning outside formal school. For a sense of what young people accomplish, outside conventional school, Google sometime for "student competitions". You might be amazed.

Excellence is often associated with work in a single field; so innovation will probably accept specialization as necessary for high achievement. A number of innovative schools, especially those in the chartered sector that have moved to project-based learning, have found they can stress these other dimensions of achievement so long as their students do 'well enough' on traditional assessments. Some innovative schools, for example, aiming for students to graduate college-ready, stress students being responsible for their learning, sometimes requiring

them to take college courses during their high school years. This different concept of 'college-ready' should be legitimized.

A different concept of achievement will mean a different concept of assessment. Those advocating non-traditional achievement can reasonably be asked to demonstrate and document what is being accomplished. But this need not rest on numbers alone. Surely the non-quantitative measures of 'satisfaction' that most of us use to judge quality in most fields can be adapted to learning.

### **O A different organization of school and role for teachers**

Innovation will explore models other than the boss/worker school. One idea will be to change the roles people play, so the responsibility and authority for school and student success is vested *in the teacher group*. It will give teachers professional roles, recognizing and respecting the research (like that of Richard Ingersoll at the University of Pennsylvania) that shows schools work better where teachers' roles are larger.

On this front, too, the new-schools sector has produced significant innovation. The idea of organizing the professional work of school in the partnership form typical of most professional occupations appeared in Minnesota more than a decade ago. It has since spread to other cities; most notably Milwaukee where it took root successfully in the big-city, union, environment.

The delegation of meaningful authority to the school, the placing of real authority with a formally-organized group of professional teachers, can drive the other needed changes -- in the approach to learning and in the redefinition of 'learning'. It is fascinating, and important, that this is a model to which top teacher-union leadership is now giving serious attention.

It is possible -- would be eminently logical, if stunningly unexpected -- for the teacher unions to introduce this concept of school designed to motivate teachers as well as students. They have the influence to do it. It is in their interest to do it.

The conviction that 'better teachers and better teaching' is the magic wand for improvement is playing out as a strengthening of management's role -- in

assigning teachers, in assessing performance, in setting teacher compensation and in holding teachers accountable. Developments like these challenge, threaten, a number of things the unions have won for their members over the years.

Their impulse will be to resist. But resistance would make the conflict worse, and would strengthen the sense -- widespread already -- that union resistance to accountability is the principal obstacle to the progress the country so badly needs to make. For teachers and their unions the appealing opportunity is to re-frame the debate; to leverage the 'accountability' pressure in a way that will help them win professional status for their members. They should say: *Teachers will take responsibility for student and school success . . . if teachers can control what matters for student and school success.*

The teachers' inability professionally to control what matters for learning is at the root of the system's difficulty. And the way things are drifting they will be even less able to shape what is taught or how it is taught. No more than other sensible people do teachers propose to be held accountable for what they cannot control. And the pressure about scores, together with the growing tendency to tell teachers how to teach, will -- if nothing intervenes -- turn teaching into a job that teachers will increasingly hate. So conflict looms. Prospects would change, in very important ways, if the school and its teachers were given real control over the practices in the school. Authority and responsibility go together. If they are not combined at the school, for heaven's sake, at what level *can* they be effectively combined?

It is in the unions' interest to suggest the country cut this new deal with its teachers. They have long said they seek professional status as well as economic security for their members; yet have never been able to win them that professional role through negotiation or through legislation. Increasingly their younger members want this larger role: want better work and a better career. We know that where teachers do control their work their (and their students') attitudes and behaviors change dramatically. By seeking this professional role for teachers the unions can make the push for 'accountability' work for them.

This would be in the public interest as well. Rising conflict in the traditional labor/management model would not help improve achievement. Nor can the country



realistically expect highly qualified people to move into teaching if teaching does not become a really good job and a really good career -- professionally as well as economically.

A startling proportion of the nation's teachers would apparently like a professional role: Public Agenda's survey in 2005 found two-thirds of the under-five-year teachers and half of the over-20-year teachers would be somewhat or very interested in working in a school run and managed by teachers; a school organized, in effect, on the partnership model. There are teacher-union leaders now saying they see opportunities in the new-schools strategy; even in chartering.

The core idea is to enlarge in some way the teachers' role in decisions about how the school runs and how learning is handled. Lots of variations are possible. One might have the teachers forming the kind of partnership we see in other professional occupations; fully in charge and with the administrators working for them. Equally it could mean simply larger roles for teachers in schools that continue to be administrator-led. What form it takes, or how the arrangement evolves over time in a particular school, can be left to the people in the school; decided on the basis of what they prefer and believe will best ensure school and student success.

### **'Innovation' Is a Strategy for Systemic Reform**

The old concept of system-change has been to change all the existing schools. Progress has been slow, however. The theory of comprehensively re-making existing schools has not proved a conspicuous success. In frustration some occasionally say, "Blow up the system and start over". But the success-rate for that approach is low, as well. Some more practical strategy is called-for.

The strategy has been to rely on accountability -- on standards, measurement and consequences -- to drive change and improvement. The new effort at national ("common") standards is an effort to strengthen that first element of the accountability model; the interest in 'turn-around' is an effort to strengthen 'consequences'. The major organizations of state officials have bought in -- the National Governors Association, the Chief State School Officers. Individual states, attracted by the available federal money, are shaping their applications

carefully to comply. This strategy is broadly supported, though it accomplished none of the goals set at the 1989 national summit and though few today express confidence the effort embedded in *No Child Left Behind* will result in all children being ‘proficient’ by 2014.

The cry for ‘accountability’ was spectacularly successful politically; trumping the strategy of ‘money’ in the election of 2000 to permit the Republican party to take control of education policy with the law enacting the President’s campaign slogan. Schools began to focus on raising scores. But fearing consequences if their schools did not ‘make Adequate Yearly Progress’, states began lowering standards and defining proficiency down in an effort to appear better-performing. Understandably, today’s national leadership, reacting against that ‘race to the bottom’, wants “a race to the top”. Hence today’s push for national standards and the other ‘reform requirements’.

It is not clear, however, that accountability can be effective educationally as the strategy moves to the new common standards. Accountability is almost certainly overrated as a driver for performance. High stakes can be enforced where standards (or cut-scores) are low. And where consequences are low, standards can be high. But will it work to combine high stakes *and* high standards? The political realities that have made it hard for the states to impose consequences for low performance are not eliminated by moving the enforcement of accountability to the national level.

The idea of opening K-12 to the creation of new schools -- public, but not necessarily district-owned -- added a new mechanism for system-change. But its potential was blocked by the traditional concepts of organization, learning and achievement. By opening now to non-traditional models and approaches in the new-schools sector the country would get itself a more effective theory of action; one keyed on ‘replacement’ rather than on ‘turnaround’.

### **O Build on the new-schools programs in the states**

The first step is to get innovation moving in the new-schools sector now appearing in many significant states. This goes beyond telling people in one place to replicate

someone else's reported success. It means letting the people in the schools try things they believe will work for their students.

- Other states should also provide these platforms for new-school creation. President Obama has been pushing all states to have working, successful, chartering laws. Beyond this, the states should also enable the district sector itself to create new site-governed schools -- as Minnesota did in 2009.
- The states should set up new entities to assist and encourage the new innovative sector, focusing the state department of education, with its orientation to bureaucratic regulation, on improving the traditional schools.
- National education policy -- in revising the Elementary and Secondary Education Act -- should let a state allow its innovative sector to set its own definition especially about 'achievement'; different from what is provided for traditional schools. There is precedent for this. In its urban legislation in 1965 the Congress, while providing a default arrangement for the new metropolitan planning councils, agreed to accept other arrangements enacted in state law. Similarly, in its education legislation in 1994 Congress left it to the states to define what entities might organize and operate the chartered schools the national government was agreeing to aid and assist.
- Those who are committed to and who have an interest in innovation -- those involved with digital electronics, the entrepreneurs, the foundations that support them (like MacArthur, with its interest in computer gaming) -- need to get organized behind the new strategy for systemic change.

### **O Let the innovative sector grow gradually, as people choose**

On the new-school platforms different schools will appear. The early-adopters -- some parents, some students, some teachers -- will move quickly to the new models. Most at first will not. Those who wish to stay with the traditional will be free to do so. And many will. The understanding must be, however, that these may not suppress the new-and-different for those who do want that.

Initially the non-traditional sector will be small. Probably it will grow. Over time it might replace the existing -- as computers replaced typewriters, as tractors

replaced horses, as digital television has now replaced analog. Or it might not: Perhaps the two models would run indefinitely side by side.

This gradual 'systemic change' means that whatever transformation occurs will be of a dramatically different order: less ideological, less political. Nobody will *have* to do anything. The system will change as people decide in their own good time to move from the old to the new. Toleration replaces conflict. The transition will be driven significantly by the users in the system -- the teachers and the students -- in contrast to the traditional process dominated by non-users outside the schools. And change will move faster: The voluntary approach will accept more radical innovation than could ever be imposed successfully through the political process.

Innovation-based systemic reform will turn K-12 into a *self-improving* system. Before, anything more than 'sustaining' improvements had to be driven into the schools from the outside. Realistically there can never be the energy, the time, the resources or the political priority endlessly to be 'doing improvement' from the outside. Far better to structure institutions so their organizations have incentives -- reasons + opportunities -- to do improvement themselves: on their own initiative, in their own interest and from their own resources. Improvement will happen if the fundamentals have been set right. The job for policymakers is to set the fundamentals right.

## **We Cannot Afford the Risk of Failing to Innovate**

Let's return to the perspective we set earlier; to the lessons from the Postal Service and the telephone and other utilities; arguably also from the airline system and from public transit before that. Unable to adapt to changes in their markets, unable to meet rising national expectations, these systems needed to be -- and were -- radically changed by the introduction of new technologies and new business models.

Perhaps education is different; perhaps improvements to the traditional model will enable K-12 to cope with the new kinds of students and the new attitudes of the younger teachers; will enable it to meet the rising national expectations for

skills and knowledge. Certainly strong and dedicated efforts are now being made to get traditional school to perform better.

But that is a risk. No one knows for sure that the job can be done by ‘fixing’ existing schools. So it is unwise to limit the effort to the improvement of traditional school. It will be prudent at the same time to use innovation as a driver for better schools and for system-change; to emphasize motivation as the key to teacher and student performance.

So different a theory of action will challenge the traditional strategy for securing change. Happily, there is precedent for policymaking to move beyond the strategy first adopted, to find a new ‘how’. The civil rights movement, for example, initially targeted segregation in the schools. Its court challenge won the *Brown* decision. But after 1954 the effort to implement the Supreme Court ruling encountered ‘massive noncompliance’ in the South. So in 1964 the strategy shifted, to securing voting rights. With the breakthrough there, civil rights -- and desegregation -- began to move.

Going back many years, responsible voices have been calling for other, non-traditional and in some cases non-incremental, solutions. Arthur Wise warned years ago about “legislated learning”; the bureaucratization of the classroom. John Goodlad began cautioning in the 1970s about the accountability model. Ted Sizer questioned traditional ‘accountability’ in the 1980s, arguing that the aim of school is, instead, “to teach young people to use their minds well” -- and was marginalized. Lauren Resnick in her presidential address to the American Education Research Association in 1987 pointed out how different are the conceptions of learning in school and in work. Albert Shanker in 1987 urged an end “to self-contained classrooms, to the classroom as we know it” -- before he turned to advocating for standards.

None of this has so far seriously dented the dominant consensus. The idea of pushing traditional school to do-better appeals to influential people who themselves did well in school and who tend therefore to feel that school is fine; that if performance is low perhaps students and teachers are not trying hard enough, or parents are failing in their responsibilities. But, again: The question is whether it is safe to rely on this “one-bet” strategy.

Almost certainly this country could be getting far more, from both its students and its teachers, than it is today. Quite certainly, it *needs* to. Over the past 20 years policy has opened the K-12 system to the creation of new public schools. This provided an opportunity to search for new models that would better motivate both students and teachers. So far we have not used that opportunity well.

Policy must next open these new schools to innovation, with a ‘split-screen’ strategy that works to improve traditional school but that has as its centerpiece a major new effort at innovation-based systemic reform.



### ***About Education|Evolving***

Education|Evolving has been described as “working to convince those who make and influence policy that America’s success depends on creating radically different and better ways for young people to learn and for teachers to work”.

We are nonpartisan, non-commercial, non-academic and non-governmental; a group of individuals with backgrounds in education, public-policy and politics. Most are in Minnesota; some are elsewhere; some are full-time, some part-time. Organizationally, E|E is a joint venture of the non-profit Center for Policy Studies and Hamline University, both based in Saint Paul, MN. E|E was founded by Ted Kolderie, senior associate at the Center for Policy Studies, and Joe Graba, formerly dean of the graduate school of education and now a trustee of Hamline University. Its managing partner is Curtis Johnson, most recently co-author with Clayton Christensen of *Disrupting Class*. Several E|E ‘partners’ were closely involved with the development of chartering, in Minnesota and around the nation. Most recently E|E has been closely involved with innovation in the new schools, and with teacher-union leadership around the development of site-governed schools and the potential to organize these as partnerships of professionals. It has a particular interest also in enlarging the ‘student voice’ in questions about K-12 education. Education|Evolving’s activities are updated on its web sites: [www.educationevolving.org](http://www.educationevolving.org) and [www.educationinnovating.org](http://www.educationinnovating.org). For questions, contact [info@educationevolving.org](mailto:info@educationevolving.org).