THE SPLIT-SCREEN STRATEGY: PART 2 OF 2

If chartering won’t, what will serve as the new innovation sector?

In the first paper we said the current national strategy for K-12 public education puts this nation seriously at risk by betting everything on doing-better within the givens of traditional school.

We suggested that dramatically different forms of school and approaches to learning are needed and are now possible . . . and that the only practical way to create truly different forms and approaches to learning is to arrange for K-12 to change the way successful systems change. That means opening K-12 seriously to innovation; to a redesign combining Innovation with Improvement.

We recognize this requires us to explain two things. First: How and why chartering did not develop as, and realistically is not likely to serve as, the R&D sector that is needed. Second: What specific actions can be taken to introduce an innovation-based process for this redesign of public education.

Chartering today is about traditional school

The new chartered sector of public education that began to appear after 1991 might have developed as an R&D sector. That was a key part of the original intent.

The initial intent was to give K-12 an R&D sector

Most of the ingredients of innovation were present in the legislation, as the language of the early statutes makes clear.

• Many (though not all) of the laws made it possible for an entity other than the local district board of education to start and run a public school in the community. The alternate authorizer is important. As the inventor of the
unmanned aerial vehicle has nicely said: "Incumbents have a problem creating anything that competes with what they’re already doing”.

• The schools chartered were to be autonomous, able to make their own decisions. And there was to be a larger role for teachers.

• The laws left it open as to the kind of school to be created and as to the outcomes to be sought. Pedagogically a chartered school is not a kind of school.

• In contrast to the public-bureau model in the district sector, the chartered sector was set up on the contract model. Accountability was a key concept. The idea was for the school to have a limited term, renewable on a showing of good performance. The initial Minnesota legislation called them "outcome-based" schools.

This early intent comes through clearly in *Zero Chance of Passage*, the story of the beginnings of chartering written and published by (then-state-Senator) Ember Reichgott Junge, the legislative author in Minnesota.

As is usual with innovations, it took some time for this institutional innovation to work well. But the laws and their administration did quickly improve. Some truly innovative schools did appear.

By the end of the 1999, 35 states, and Congress acting as legislature for the District of Columbia, had enacted chartering in some form. This unexpectedly rapid development of the chartered sector might have produced what came next.

**Chartering is 'diverted'**

For the first 10 years chartering was state-based, its leadership loosely organized. As schools were created, state-level organizations appeared. After late 1996 these were loosely linked through the Charter Friends National Network, created in Minnesota with early help from the Challenge Foundation. CFNN was not an organization. It was a project, connecting state-based organizations.

By late 2000 interest had appeared in having a formal national organization to support and advance chartering. What initially appeared – in March of 2003 -- was the National Charter School Alliance, a membership organization of state charter-support organizations, with a blend of state-based and national
advocates elected to its governing board by its state-based membership. Howard Fuller became its chair. Dean Millot, earlier with RAND, became its executive.

But in the summer of 2003 several foundations actively involved in financing new schools expressed a desire for "a leadership organization" rather than a membership organization. This crystallized at a 'donors strategy session' July 17 at Charlottesville VA, just prior to a meeting of charter actives called by the Progressive Policy Institute. The sentiment developed further at a second meeting in early August in Philadelphia. The sense was, as one consultant put it, that for chartering to grow to its potential the "little people" would need to give way to the "heavy hitters".

Considering the distinction fundamental, the foundations collectively decided not to provide financing for the initial design, and the initial organization was dissolved. The staff were let go. Fuller appointed a smaller group of board members to come up with a new design acceptable to the funders. That took another year. In October 2004 the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools appeared as the new, Washington-based national leadership organization. Nelson Smith was brought in to be its executive. Concurrently a number of existing organizations in the sector -- as in California and Washington DC -- were de-funded. 'Strategic planning' grants became available to organizations willing to fall in with the philosophy of the new initiative. In March of 2008 most of the early state-based members were removed from the Alliance board.

(At about the same time commercial interests were taking over the organization that Senn Brown and Chris Yelich in Wisconsin had founded to develop the idea of contracting in K-12 education, turning it into what became the Education Industry Association. Initially the for-profits had thought in terms of contracts with districts. But it did not work well to connect a commercial directly with a district. Some for-profits contracted with (nonprofit) chartered schools to manage their operations. The Edison Project quickly gave up its initial idea of selling private school to families and came into chartered sector.

With the leadership organization established the next big challenge was to establish a strategy for the reconceived chartered sector. This emerged from a task force created by the Alliance's executive, Nelson Smith. Its January 2005 report was then presented to a meeting of the charter family at Mackinac Island in August 2005.
The prime question about what the charter laws were producing should have asked about the kind of schools appearing. Unfortunately, that was not the question asked. People began to think of 'charter' as the schools and began to ask what kind of learning the schools were producing. That was a nonsense question, since a 'charter school' was pedagogically not a kind of school: The schools created varied widely. Nevertheless research (some of it 'advocacy research') plunged ahead; asking especially whether students were learning more in 'charter schools' or in district schools. Routinely the studies came back saying, "The evidence is mixed" -- as of course it would be.

Anxious to show that charter schools were better, were 'quality schools' -- that is, produce high scores -- the strategy quickly turned to an effort to create the kind of school that does produce better scores and to close the schools that do not. Disregarding the cautions of statisticians, the leadership of chartering talked in terms of 'high-performing schools' (where students score well on English and math) and of 'failing schools'. There is now an effort to get state legislatures to use achievement on the state assessments of English and math as the sole basis for approving a new charter and for renewing an existing charter. And an effort to favor Charter Management Organizations; networks of such 'quality schools'. There is pressure on the U.S. Department of Education to favor these CMO networks in its grants to states for the start-up of new schools.

"Growth Through Quality" became the mantra. On the 20th anniversary of the first chartered school opening, the Alliance met in Minnesota. It released "Fulfilling the Compact", reaffirming the basic strategy from the Mackinac meeting about 'quality charters'. A panel discussion was explicit about this as a strategy to protect the sector politically. The head of the California association said: "We have a chance to convert the country to the charter system. The only way we could blow it is to fail on quality".

Later in 2012 the Progressive Policy Institute issued "Improving Charter School Accountability", adding its voice to the push to close 'failing schools'. More and more the effort seems to be moving through the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA), an organization with broadly the same backers as the Alliance but with an agenda focused on state rules that influence which schools open and which schools close. In late November 2012 NACSA announced the "One Million Lives" campaign, aiming over the next five years to close 1,000 'low-performing' schools and to open 3,000 'quality' schools serving 1,000,000 students.
NACSA wants states to make renewal contingent on high scores (not just progress toward higher scores). It wants a single statewide authorizing body, of the sort enacted earlier in Arizona and most recently in Washington state and in Georgia. There is strong disapproval of the ‘politics’ that makes it difficult to close low-scoring schools. Authorizers that do not close low-scoring schools should themselves be terminated. There is little sympathy for parents protesting that a school has been good for their daughter and that its closure will mean her returning to a district school admittedly worse. Sorry about that, they are told. My job is to close failing charter schools.

Steadily a particular concept of ‘education reform’ has now taken shape. It combines the idea of ‘quality’ new schools in the chartered sector with a push in the district sector to get tough with teachers and their unions; all in the context of the new national academic standards being developed as the ‘Common Core’.

Early in 2012, after Nelson Smith’s resignation and during the tenure of an interim executive, the Alliance conducted a further round of strategic planning. It recommended phasing-down further the role of, and support for, the state policies and support organizations.

In the summer of 2012 Nina Rees came in as the Alliance’s new executive. Whether this change in leadership means a change in direction is not yet clear. A major change in the thinking of its backers, it seems safe to say, would be required for the Alliance to return to an emphasis on innovation.

**Interest drifts away from innovation**

Innovation would make no basic sense for the philosophy that has taken over chartering. New and different models of school might produce ‘quality’ schools -- or might not. Uncertain results would complicate the simple message -- that ‘charter schools’ are good schools because they ‘outperform’ other schools. Innovation means trying things. Some would fail. Why take the risk?

There is no significant risk in the limited innovation aimed at doing-better at the conventional academic objectives. Or in replication: the pseudo-innovation that involves doing ‘here’ something done and proven earlier elsewhere.

The innovation that is incompatible with the adopted strategy is the kind that lets people look not only for new ways to reach the current objective but also for ways to achieve objectives not reached or even sought before. Adapting a known
model to a new use can be a kind of innovation. Engineers had been working for years to improve the steam engine as a device for pumping water out of coal mines. Then someone thought to use it to power a boat and to pull a train.

Today the question is whether innovation might open new and better ways for young people to excel. Put another way, might open new dimensions of 'quality' appropriate for the rapid change in our economy and society

What isn't at issue -- and what is
At this point objections arise and controversy develops. So we need to affirm up front that:

• The goal includes achievement in the traditional academic areas. No one does not want children to know how to read and compute. The idea is not to drop that. It is to go beyond that.

• There do need to be standards, measurement and consequences. The question is not whether there should be accountability. Accountability is essential. The question is: "accountability for what?"

At issue is whether the goals for student learning should or should not value the dimensions of achievement that go beyond the narrow range of academic knowledge and skills defined and assessed today. Put another way: whether the one-dimensional concept of 'performance' and 'failure' advanced to serve the interests of the charter sector will or will not serve the public interest.

A one-dimensional notion of quality is passing strange. It is not easy to think of areas of life in which 'quality' is not multi-dimensional and in which our judgment of success and failure is not made 'on balance'. Think about your city, your neighborhood, your college experience, your job, your employees, your house, your automobile -- for that matter, the people you know, admire, love. Quality usually is multi-dimensional, and most judgments are balanced judgments.

So it is not obvious that in judging student and school success it is wise to disregard achievement in other academic fields . . . to dismiss character as unimportant in the development of young people . . . to downplay the skills of critical and creative thinking . . . not to care whether students are honest and conscientious . . . to disrespect the interpersonal and contextual skills that inner-
city youth often possess to a high degree, or the 'social skills' that James Heckman of the University of Chicago recently told Kentucky are so important to success in life. Or to ignore the facility some young people display in multiple languages. Or to say that being safe for children does not help define a school as successful.

In the climate of opinion created by NCLB it has been possible to get many people -- and a media obsessed with numbers -- to avoid thinking beyond scores on tests. But from any objective perspective the one-dimensional concept of success and failure cannot be all that parents want, all that employers want, all this country wants and needs. The broader dimensions of success are real. They can be defined and measured. They motivate academic achievement.

The narrowness and rigidity, the almost Puritan orthodoxy that has come to characterize the standard-enlightened 'reform' agenda, has worked to suppress innovation. It is hostile to the 'different'. Some of the most innovative (early) schools in the chartered sector doubt they could get their model approved today.

**Raising, and expanding, achievement**

Again: This country could almost certainly be getting far more than it is from its students and from its teachers. Expanding achievement seems a good idea.

That will require trying alternatives to the givens of traditional school and traditional learning. The operable word is 'try'. We cannot impose different concepts of school or of achievement or of teaching and learning. We cannot "blow up the system and start over". The only practical strategy for change is to let people move to these new approaches if they wish; see if these work; let them grow if they do. Innovation is the way successful systems change; progress.

This innovation will involve recognizing achievement above and beyond what's now defined and assessed, personalizing learning and raising the standards for individual students as a way to raise performance from proficient to excellent. More than anything, it will require improving motivation; giving teachers professional authority to adapt the program to the students as individuals and giving students responsibilities in the world of work.

Many of these things have been tried in the chartered sector. Unfortunately no one has surveyed the sector to inventory the innovation that does exist. (It has been proposed the Alliance now do this.) Many innovative schools still operate.
But they are put at risk today by the narrowed concept of achievement now being asserted.

**Running two models at the same time: the 'split screen'**

The idea of innovation -- of letting people try things -- is not a proposal to halt the current strategy and to move entirely to something different. The 'split screen' strategy proposes to create a modest sector of K-12 open to innovation while the conventional effort proceeds incrementally to improve traditional school.

Whole-class instruction in age-graded schools could continue. So could high schools with 500, 750, 1,000 students per grade level, of the sort Elinor Burkett describes in *Another Planet*. Where schools are unsuccessful, efforts would continue to 'turn them around' by sending in stronger leadership (rather than by changing the model of school). School and district leadership persuaded of the merits of 'focused' or 'managed' instruction could continue to tell its teachers what to be doing, almost minute by minute.

Traditional school, traditional 'reform', is a legitimate choice for those who want it. But it should not be the only choice. It should not be allowed to suppress the different. The answer is to have both strategies -- Improvement and Innovation -- running simultaneously. This would reduce the real and unacceptable risk presented by the single bet on the one-dimensional concept of achievement and the single bet on the traditional concept of change.

Chartering as first conceived could have been the strategy for system-change. As now revised, however, it cannot be relied-on to produce the broader innovation the 'split screen' strategy requires. In its present mode chartering is now, like the district sector, working to do traditional school better.

Perhaps the current leadership of the charter sector will alter the approach . . . moving to the 'split screen' strategy. If not, education policy, state and national, will have to create some other space in K-12 for the different approaches to learning and achievement now needed and now possible.

**How to design a new sector for innovation**

The simple concept of the country running Improvement and Innovation side by side can be implemented by opening a modest sector of K-12 in which schools and teachers will be free to depart from the givens of conventional school. As the
new models appear and steadily improve, the system is transformed; new models gradually replacing the old. This is, we say again, the way successful systems change.

**What does the legislative author do?**

An enterprising, redesign-oriented, legislator with this goal in mind might give these instructions to the legislative counsel:

- Our object is to grant real autonomy and professional authority to teacher-groups that seek to innovate.

- Make it possible for such groups to form in both sectors of K-12: 'District' and "Chartered'. There will continue to be traditional schools in each sector. We now want to develop non-traditional schools in each.

- The teacher-group can be new or existing. It can be whole school, or department within a (secondary) school. Or a program district-wide (Montessori, say).

- Set it up as a pilot program; initially limited in scope; probably maximum of 100 sites.

- Give the sites real freedom to change. We don’t want one of those 'have to get permission' arrangements. We are going to trust these teachers. They won’t know what they need to do as professionals until they get to know their students. The teacher-group will not be required to declare in advance what it proposes to change, or to 'prove' in advance what results will come from the changes it makes.

- Set it up for the site to get a general commission to be different. This OK to enter the 'innovation zone' will come from the board in a district; from the authorizer in the chartered sector.

- We want to amend existing law with our new bill. Incorporate by reference every statute you can find that grants autonomy to schools, or provides for waivers from law and regulation. Clean out restrictions. Where some federal law or regulation inhibits innovation, direct our chief state school officer to seek a waiver.
• Make it clear the teacher-groups may try alternatives to any of the 'givens' of traditional school. This would include but not be limited to the use of time (length of day, week and year); the traditional seat-time requirement, the practice of age-grading, the use of whole-class instruction, the use of the Carnegie Unit, the definition of 'highly-qualified teacher'. I want them to be free to un-grade the school, to personalize learning, to try competency-based progression (and graduation), to use peer teaching and project-based learning where the teacher is a generalist. The sites should be able to try new and different forms of organization; to organize as a professional partnership if they choose.

• Be sure to set this up so it's clear this freedom to teach includes the opportunity to broaden the learning-objectives. Of course we want a basic proficiency in language and math. But we want the sites to get students achieving beyond 'proficient'; want them to get students achieving far higher than that. And achieving in more different areas.

• Make the teacher-group accountable for meeting the objectives it agrees it will meet. Sites will give the 'Common Core' assessment. But provide for them to be evaluated on balance; taking into consideration their students' progress toward all the objectives set for them. We want to broaden the concept of 'successful school' and of 'failing school'.

• Encourage students to specialize. Excellence usually requires specialization. Standards need to be much higher in an area in which a student specializes. Some students probably will do well in one area and not in another.

• In existing schools, district or chartered, the teachers will keep their existing employment-arrangements. The new innovation-agreement will change only their professional activities. Provide for this authority to be removed should they not do the innovation we want.

• Since this innovation program is not financed with new revenue, give the teacher-group full authority to reallocate the per-pupil revenue it will receive. That flexibility is essential for innovation. The teacher-group will make the decisions about technology; the digital hardware and software. Arrange for it to be able to carry over, keep for use in the program or reallocate among functions what it does not need to spend.
At the state level, find some way to have this new program overseen by an entity -- existing or new -- that understands innovation; is comfortable with what's laid out here. We can't have it suppressed by folks with the regulatory mind-set. We didn't think about this with our chartering law, and that was a mistake.

The 'split screen' departs radically from the traditional notion of change as "something you do" politically, from above; working to find the One Right Way, then making everybody go that way. 'Comprehensive transformation' has not been a successful strategy. It leads to endless argument; produces minor incremental progress. The political process does not vote-in radical change, nor will it be allowed by a bureaucracy devoted to maintaining the system entrusted to it.

The 'split screen' strategy, delegating innovation to practitioners in the field, is the only practical way to get this country beyond conventional school.

**Can education policy get beyond 'the one best way'?**

To say this is practical does not mean that it will be easy. It will not be easy, we can tell from the early reaction.

The 'split screen' idea asks those in education policy to think in fundamentally different ways both about learning and about the process of system change. Each generates resistance, but in some ways the latter is the more difficult.

The education-policy discussion is very much a search for **The One Best System** (as David Tyack titled his history of American education). A suggestion to introduce some new approach to learning somewhere for someone will be treated as a suggestion to introduce that new approach everywhere for everyone. The notion is that once the One Best System is defined and agreed-on, system-change means enacting it politically. It is an entirely a different concept to think in terms of policy installing a mechanism that enables K-12 to evolve, producing different approaches to learning over time.

The current orthodoxy about improvement, the low tolerance for dissent, reflects the high confidence that the strategy of 'improvement-only' will succeed. It is commonly said and broadly accepted, for example, that the Common Core will "ensure" students learn. In the business world that is the kind of 'forward-
looking statement' not countenanced without an offsetting acknowledgement of risk. Where in the education policy discussion do you find language like this (from the annual report of an engineering company in California):

*This report contains forward-looking statements that are not based on historical fact. Words such as 'expects', 'anticipates', 'believes', 'seeks', 'see', 'estimates', 'plans', 'intends' identify forward-looking statements. You should not place undue reliance on any such statements. Although based on management's estimates and expectations, forward-looking statements are inherently uncertain and involve risk and uncertainties that could cause our actual results to differ materially . . .

*We operate in a changing environment that involves numerous known and unknown risks and uncertainties that could materially adversely affect our business, financial condition and results of operations... We encourage you to read carefully the risk factors described in documents we file from time to time with the SEC."

Thirteen pages then detail just the known risks.

It is good to have confidence in what you believe. But that confidence does not entitle you to suppress others' efforts to try a different approach. Being agreed-with does not make you right; those not-agreed-with are not necessarily wrong. Orthodoxy is dangerous. Out of his experience at Intel Andy Grove advised: "When everybody agrees on something it is time to be skeptical".

**We trust good sense will prevail**

There is reason to believe the case for the 'split screen' will be accepted; that it will be possible to add an effort at Innovation to the consensus effort at Improvement.

Partly it is that, on reflection, people are likely to accept its simple essentials. Motivation matters. Conventional school is not now arranged to maximize the motivation either of students or of teachers. The new technology is too powerful to be contained; will sweep around school if school does not open to it. Huge gains are possible from individualizing learning, if the digital electronics are used more by the student for learning and less by the teacher for instruction.

Those in support are not without influence. Students; parents; the digital industry; those in the business community directly involved with personnel. Elected officials at the state level, not being deeply vested in traditional
education reform, are likely to see that the practical route to major change is through the strategy of innovation-based system redesign.

And teachers. Consensus 'school reform' is scripting and directing teachers' practice; standardizing and routinizing what they do; narrowing their discretion, wanting them more tightly evaluated and 'held accountable' by managers. It would be entirely reasonable for teachers and their unions to help create a sector in which, like professionals in similar vocations, teachers are free to adapt their practice to the needs of the individuals they serve. This country has about three million teachers. Freeing them to individualize would be a way to scale up.

**Redesign, in larger perspective**

More is at stake in this than just the success of the K-12 system. Education is not the only system this country will be struggling to change, and to finance.

Most of the discussion about the economics of all these systems is now a discussion about how much to cut and how much to tax. Within the budget cycle the question does come up that way. But longer-term that 'budget' discussion alone would mean endlessly 'less, for more'. No one should want that.

To avoid it the country will need to find ways to make the education system, the medical-hospital system, the transportation system and others work better; steadily improving quality and reducing cost. In this sense the effort to work a basic redesign of K-12 is an example of the 'second agenda' now missing from our country's major fiscal-policy debate.