

## THE SPLIT SCREEN STRATEGY: PART 1 OF 2

# Our 'theory of action' needs to combine innovation and improvement

After 30 years of trying, this country remains disappointed with its public education system. This is not for lack of trying, or for lack of political will. We have a policy problem. We still have not found a 'theory of action' able to make K-12 education a successful system.

For years money seemed the answer. Disappointed with that, we moved to accountability: standards, measurement and consequences. That has not gotten us there. Now we are doubling down, still seeing the problem as one of performance rather than as one of system and school design.

We need a strategy that addresses system and school design. "Each major change in the availability of information," John Lienhard writes in *How Invention Begins*, "required the methods of education to be reinvented": first the book, in the 15<sup>th</sup> century the printing press, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the fast presses. Now the Web again brings another "major change in the availability of information" – requiring education to be reinvented again.

'Reinventing' means more than trying to get better performance from traditional school. It means redesigning school. But how to do that? We cannot (as some superintendents and commissioners privately suggest) "blow up the system and start over". The education policy tends to deal in absolutes: either/or; right-way/wrong-way. But grand comprehensive schemes cannot be implemented. Changes are incremental; marginal.

To produce the new "methods of education" we will have to find a new theory of action. What follows offers that new theory of action. It is the simple idea of transforming public education into a *self-improving* system; adding real innovation to continuous improvement so that education will change the way successful systems change.

## Why the current theory of action is inadequate

Two ideas about strategy came into the national discussion at the end of the 1980s. 'Standards-based systemic reform' aimed to improve the schools we have. Chartering proposed to create different public schools new. Neither has quite worked out as planned.

Standards has turned into an astonishing micromanagement of the schools. Chartering has lost its initial focus on innovation. The consensus strategy has become a curious amalgam of these two aberrations.

### Systemic reform reinforced conventional school

With systemic reform the original idea was to introduce a general framework of standards and assessments, expecting that everything else would then align with these. But economic, political and professional interests did not respond well, and systemic reform began to change.

Some resisted introducing standards for learning without “opportunity-to-learn” standards first equalizing financing. Some feared national standards. Schools of teacher education, profiting from the high turnover of teachers, were reluctant to alter their training programs. Boards of education, insistent that "We're the ones who run the schools", did not want to give their schools and teachers flexibility in the application of the standards. And the states, granted by No Child Left Behind the authority to develop the standards and assessments, began to game the system to show a false proficiency.

Fundamentally, though, standards-based reform was not about reforming school. Rather, it accepted the givens of conventional school. This was defended as politically realistic, and of course it was: If the effort to introduce accountability had also proposed to overturn the givens of system and school, states and districts and educators would not have listened.

But buying into the givens seriously limited what could be done. It meant accepting place and time – of day, week and year; the old agricultural calendar. Since most everyone believes a school “must have a strong principal,” the boss/worker model was a given. It continued to group students by age, whatever the differences among them. It accepted the

limited definition of achievement as scoring well on tests of English and math. The technology remained teacher-instruction, in classrooms. Teaching continued mainly as whole-class group-work. Education continued to be thought of as something adults deliver to children, as if 'to learn' were a transitive verb.

Committed to conventional school, the strategy was essentially to push boards, superintendents, principals, teachers and students – the people – to do better within these givens. Innovation – different ways of teaching and learning – was not central to the effort.

### **Chartering turned away from innovation; back to conventional school**

The analysis that produced the state chartering legislation in the 1990s still seems correct. K-12 was an inert system, it said, because the incentives were in backward. With public education arranged as a checkerboard of territorial exclusive franchises the state was assuring the districts most everything important to their economic success, whether or not they changed and improved and whether or not the students learned.

For a nation serious about better learning that was absurd. It had to be changed, and it was. Legislators and governors saw that if the districts were not giving them what they wanted, it was fully within their power to find somebody else who would, and to do that within the principles of public education. Over the next six years about 35 states enacted some reasonable form of chartering.

The chartered sector had the potential to become a research-and-development sector for K-12 public education. It was open for those creating schools to decide the approach to learning: Pedagogically a chartered school is not a kind of school. The schools were free-standing; autonomous. It was a contract model; accountability was built in.

And innovation did appear: more than is generally recognized and quite enough to make clear the potential. But too many organizers preferred to use chartering simply to create conventional schools outside the district framework. And after 2003 the new leadership of the movement decided success for the sector turned on creating schools that generated high test scores and closing those that did not. This took chartering further away from innovation. (The full story is best left for a separate paper.)

By 2003 a 'consensus reform' had developed that combined higher standards and testing for students with accountability for teachers, and with new schools and parent choice – all focused on doing traditional school better in the district and the chartered sectors. Conservatives have been joined in this orthodoxy by many in the business community, by several large foundations and now by Democrats for Education Reform, Students for Education Reform, StudentsFirst, 50CAN, and the various groups promoting the Common Core.

Doubts are now growing, however, about the Improvement-Only agenda. This is clear in **The Futures of School Reform**, the product of a multi-year rethinking organized by the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Earlier, Chester Finn had noted the consensus strategy was not having significant effect. New questions are arising. Developments in digital electronics require us to ask: What's teaching? Changes in the economy raise the question: What's achievement? The success of the partnership schools forces the question: What's leadership?

Clearly strategy needs to get beyond flogging conventional school to improve. The policy question is how to do that. The answer is not so hard.

## **A successful strategy will open to innovation**

Successful systems have two (or more) different models running simultaneously; the old and the new side by side – like a split screen on your television screen.

In the transportation system . . . energy system . . . communications system . . . food system . . . computer system . . . we see the existing organizations improving through what Clayton Christensen calls “sustaining” or “efficiency” innovation. At the same time, new organizations are introducing new and different product models and business models through what he now calls “empowering” innovations.

So on the split screen we still see gasoline-powered cars, but now also hybrid/electric cars . . . still land-line phones but more cell phones . . . still bricks-and-mortar stores but now also online retailers . . . still books in print but now also e-readers . . . still coal-fired power plants but now also wind turbines, solar panels, and other forms of alternative energy.

Often the innovations are primitive when they first appear. Even so, early adopters pick them up quickly. Innovation is choice-based. Nobody is compelled to adopt the new-and-different. Those who prefer the traditional model may stay with the traditional: They simply may not suppress the innovative for those who do want that.

Successful systems are transformed as new organizations with new models gradually replace the existing. Some innovations fail. But those with a basically sound idea usually improve, sometimes rapidly. As they do, more people switch. In time the curves cross. At some point a transition might be completed. The last typewriter factory has closed. Analog television has been closed out, replaced by digital.

*Adding innovation to the effort at improvement can make public education a successful system – a self-improving system. With this split screen strategy, the country would be improving the existing traditional schools, while at the same time creating new schools taking new approaches to learning, trying new forms of organization. Some would fail; others would succeed and improve. Over time the innovation sector would grow; education would be reinvented. Call it “innovation-based systemic reform.”*

## **The potential for innovation is huge**

With K-12 education opened to innovation, new schools – both chartered and district – in a new innovation sector would target on everything conventional school takes as given. That means moving learning outside the school building and outside school hours; challenging the age-grading and batch-processing that have done so much to perpetuate the gaps in achievement in traditional school; expanding the use of peer-teaching, and maximizing the potential of digital electronics. *Most importantly, innovation would focus on motivating the workers on the job of learning – individualizing student work and offering teachers truly professional roles.*

The central importance of motivation was laid out perfectly by the late Jack Frymier, out of his long experience in schools and with curriculum and instruction, in a discussion with Education | Evolving in 1999.

*Students learn when they're motivated to learn. If they want to learn, they will. If they don't, you probably can't make 'em. Any successful effort to improve learning will therefore be fundamentally about improving students' motivation.*

*Motivation is an individual matter. Young people differ – in personality, in background and experience, in sociability, in creativity, in intelligence, in their interests and aptitudes. No effort at motivation will succeed unless it works with these differences.*

*School is not very well-tuned to the differences in students. Teachers might know students less well today than in the past. Schools are pressed now to be interested mainly in what kids know and can do; less in who they are. Students move around; are moved around. Schools are larger: High school teachers especially have far too many students to know any of them well. Schools are age-graded: Students are with a teacher for a year; next year, have another.*

*Curriculum materials are not often adapted to individuals. Teaching methods are not often varied according to the needs and interests of the individual student. Some teachers do this, but many don't. Teachers work mostly with students in groups; most are obsessed with "classroom management." Most teachers talk too much.*

*Adapting materials and methods to individual student needs is a teachable skill. It just isn't very often taught where teachers are trained. Teachers aren't given much opportunity to modify instruction in this way. Teachers are not encouraged to modify the order in which things are taught, or how much time is spent on what. Students are not free to pursue a topic that interests them; the schedule calls for the course to move on.*

*There are no rewards and few opportunities for teachers trying to modify teaching in this way, so that learning becomes interesting to the student and becomes the responsibility of the student.*

*Because school takes this form, most academic subjects are not of interest to most students.*

This clarifies that the problem is not just outside school. The problems in society are real and make a difference: poverty, the economy, changes in the family, the youth culture. But traditional school is failing to do what it

could to help students learn. Whatever the standards and whatever the learning program, the key in America's diverse classrooms will remain the teacher's ability to adapt to the individual student.

A lot of adults will not want to do this. Many do not relate well to the idea of beginning with what interests young people. They have thought of objectives as adults' objectives and have defined success as the student satisfying the teacher. Many would be uncomfortable with the concept of success as the teacher satisfying the students.

Sometimes -- Minneapolis and Saint Paul are currently an example -- the district leadership thinks the answer is to tighten-down on teachers; scripting their work, telling them what to be doing almost every minute of the school day; insisting on having the same thing in a given grade-level across all schools, as if no differences existed among the students.

## **Innovation will require us to think differently**

It cannot be said too often: The Split Screen strategy lets the Improvement effort continue. Those committed to traditional school can remain with that, focused on improving performance. But in the innovation sector a new and different way of thinking will operate. That new mind-set will:

- **Broaden and personalize achievement.** The concept of achievement will itself be open to innovation. In the current policy thinking achievement is one-dimensional – cognitive knowledge and skills in a few subject areas. Students and parents want – employers and society want and need – multi-dimensional achievement. James Heckman, the Nobel laureate at the University of Chicago, has been writing about the importance of the non-cognitive skills. social skills, critical thinking, creative thinking, communication and collaboration skills.
- **Broaden also, therefore, the concept of assessment.** Assessment, too, has been one-dimensional; an *essay* that considers whether certain cognitive knowledge is present, rather than an *analysis* that looks to identify all the skills and knowledge present. Assessment-as-analysis would ease the imputation that the current and conventional measures discriminate against the non-traditional student. (If standards today

called for the ability to speak two or more languages, which young people would be “high-performing”?)

- **Enlarge the autonomy of schools and professionalize teaching.** Only the schools, only their teachers, know the students as individuals. So, relying on teachers’ judgments about capacity and performance, the innovation sector must be school-based. Today’s accountability model is working in the opposite direction, reducing teachers’ discretion. Like most reasonable people teachers resist being held accountable for decisions made by others. But give them authority over what matters for student success and they will accept responsibility for student success.
- **Distinguish between invention and replication.** Some changes introduce something never done *anywhere* before. Some introduce something simply not done *here* before. When used for both the term innovation loses its meaning. Replication is fine: There are not many true inventions. But do distinguish between the two.
- **See innovation as people trying things.** Those in authority tend to ask, “What is your innovation?” Some states’ so-called innovation laws require those proposing change to get prior approval, and to provide evidence their changes will work. This is not innovation. Innovation means leaving schools and teachers free to adapt their program to what they find their students need.
- **Accept risk.** Some things will fail – which is why innovation must be choice-based. The risk-averse, who recoil in horror at the thought of trying things that are ‘unproven’, need to be reminded of the risk, the failure, inherent in traditional school today.
- **Give up the sense of ‘the right way to do things’.** Accepted wisdoms keep us from seeing the potential in the new and different. The history of innovation is filled with examples. A dozen or more big companies turned down Chester Carlson’s new technology for copying before it was picked up by a small company in Rochester NY later known as Xerox. Astonishingly from today’s perspective, AT&T in 1964 said ‘No’ when DARPA (the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency) offered it the Internet.



- **Ease up on the reverence for evidence and data.** Researchers examine what has been tried. Their findings can help schools decide whether to replicate something earlier tried elsewhere. But research cannot know what has not been tried. It is also a problem that, as John Witte noted at the American Educational Research Association conference in 2004, education research wants to generalize: looks for aggregates; for 'most' and 'on the whole' and 'overall' and 'on balance'. It is less interested in single cases of the new and different.

That is unhelpful. It encourages policymakers to dismiss real innovations as too small to make a difference. We need to do what works. And innovation works. After the Wright brothers' flights at Kitty Hawk, the evidence from research would still have shown that most heavier-than-air craft could not fly. What difference did that 'most' make after Wilbur and Orville got it right?

The need for a new mind-set takes us to the central question: How does so different a strategy become the theory of action for education policy?

## **It will require activating state lawmaking**

This should not be difficult -- for policymakers, at least. The key is simply to step back; *to think about change not as 'something you do'* but -- to take the experience of a wise executive in Minnesota -- as "something that happens if you do the fundamentals right".

That has not been the conventional approach, of course,. Those in legislative bodies think about enacting a law or starting some new program. But the key to success with K-12 education probably does lie in "getting the fundamentals right"; in thinking about *causing* improvement rather than about *doing* improvement.

It means creating incentives – reasons and opportunities – for the schools and districts to make changes on their own initiative, in their own interest, and from their own resources. In short: opening the system to innovation. Not ending the current effort to improve conventional school. Not 'blowing up the system and starting over'. Just letting people try things.

The new split screen arrangement for K-12 education will have to be created in state law. An individual state might do this. Better, though, to be pushing all the states toward this new theory of action. *National policy must be redirected toward encouraging and assisting the states to redesign their K-12 systems to add innovation to the current effort at Improvement-Only.*

### **National policy is currently misconceived**

The problem appears first in the tendency to talk -- as PISA, for example, does -- about 'America's schools'. That is not quite right. PISA does not report on 'Europe's schools'. Europe does not have schools. PISA reports on Italy's schools, France's schools, Finland's schools. But neither does America have schools. Texas has schools, Massachusetts has schools, Florida has schools. The counterpart of the European state is the American state. (This will become clearer now that Massachusetts and other states are buying their way into PISA.)

In our federal system the national government is not responsible for education. Congress is not the nation's board of education; the secretary of education is not the nation's school superintendent. Public education exists in state law. The responsibility of legislatures and governors is to create a system in which teachers and students can work productively.

National policy should focus on helping state policy to do that. But the growing nationalization of our policy debate tends to make a problem existing everywhere in the country 'a national problem'. The media build the sense that a national problem must have a national solution. And 'a national solution' is assumed to mean the national government 'doing something'. In this case, fix the schools. So Washington decided its job is to get traditional schools to perform better; has fallen in with the consensus strategy for reform.

Unable to act directly on systems that exist in state law, Congress and the executive branch long ago began attaching requirements to their aids and grants to states and districts. The theory has been that states will never reject the money, so will accept restrictions and mandates attached to it.

There are major concerns about this conception of the national role.

- **A national policy that depends on bribing and coercing the states and localities might fail** -- as it did when Washington moved in the

1960s to take control of urban policy. To date most states and most associations of states and state officials have been remarkably passive about the drift toward the nationalization of education. For how long?

- **Washington politics is not oriented to innovation.** The political system has difficulty with the concept of multiple pathways. Elected officials want to appear certain; dislike being disagreed-with. A strategy of trying things suggests un-certainty; creates controversy. If we know the right way how can we let others go another way? This is most dangerous when centralized at the national level. National policy has a hard time treating different states differently. So what emerges are uniform national prescriptions that states cannot waive; adding to the states' own micromanagement of the schools. There is talk about innovation, but the desire to have schools 'do what works' means what emerges is largely replication.
- **In truth, 'fixing the schools' is not a priority for the national government.** There are far too many other problems that only the national government can solve: the fiscal deficit, energy, the Middle East, China, homeland security. Better learning is important. *But national policy needs to delegate that job.*

This is not a constitutional appeal for 'states' rights'. It is a practical conclusion that the nation's goals cannot be reached with a strategy limited to making traditional schools perform better.

### **National policy should move the states to the 'split screen'**

There is a critical role for the federal government to play: *It is to activate the power of state lawmaking . . . not to implement Washington mandates but to get the states to introduce the split screen arrangement and so to turn K-12 into a self-improving institution.*

Recent years have seen some steps in that direction. In 1994, in the legislation that began the program of aid for chartered-school startups, Congress and the administration let the states define which entities could authorize and which could develop a school. This was important in moving the chartered sector toward becoming a dynamic sector. (The traditional approach would have been to impose definitions on the states.) And in 2011, with Secretary Duncan's waivers, Washington is delegating the definition of accountability to the states.

There are yet-untried ways to build on this. The 'bully pulpit' role can be effective, as President Clinton demonstrated with his support for chartering during the 1990s. Nothing limits a President to laying proposals only before Congress; nothing prohibits a President from addressing the legislature of a state – or, say, the annual forum of the Education Commission of the States, an organization founded on the concept of national education policy as the states acting collectively.

## **The consensus reform is an unacceptable risk**

As a new approach the split screen will seem a risk. So it will be essential for its advocates to see and to accept accountability for the risk they run with the strategy of improving-conventional-school and with politics as the process of system change.

That risk has both practical and ethical dimensions.

### **Accountability might drive out quality teachers**

Those pushing 'teacher quality' say their effort to evaluate teachers and to link pay to student scores will produce better teachers and better teaching. Perhaps. But perhaps not. Perhaps reducing teachers' professional autonomy will drive out the quality teachers that everyone says we want to attract.

Orthodox reform is pulling authority up in the system while pushing accountability down. That is likely to make teaching a less attractive job and a less attractive career. Teachers can leave: In fact, half the new teachers do within five years. Innovation would move in the opposite direction, making teaching a better job and career by letting teachers control what matters for students and school success.

### **We cannot accept the risk of not improving learning**

Expectations are high that Improvement-Only will succeed by making standards and assessments more substantive. That seems a good idea. But will the Common Core by itself improve achievement? Over and over its proponents say it will "ensure" better learning. Literally, *ensure*? And while accepting the givens of conventional school, such as age-grading?

In truth, who really knows? Is it safe to proceed without trying different approaches to learning that would maximize motivation for students and without the broadened professional roles that would maximize motivation for teachers?

### **New approaches to learning might bypass school**

If the Improvement-Only approach blocks innovation out of K-12 it is possible the new-and-different might appear anyway; outside school.

We tend to think of the school system as the education system. But in fact school is part of a larger system of education and learning. And the potential is growing for learning to go around the institution of school.

For that only three things are needed: (a) ways for people to learn, (b) someone to validate what they learn, and (c) a willingness to accept those validations on the part of whatever institutions the learners want to enter next. All three are now appearing. "Badge Learning", the MacArthur Foundation calls it.

Nothing about this would respect the principles of public education: A bypass could reduce public education to the status of public transit. The fact that this would destroy equity would not necessarily stop its happening. To prevent that, K-12 education needs to open widely, especially to new technologies.

### **Success lies in doing the Common Core + innovation**

Today's strategy of Improvement-Only is a one-bet strategy, putting all the chips on the effort to raise performance in conventional school. Any one-bet strategy is a risk. It is not a necessary risk, since we could at the same time be opening a parallel effort at innovation. *And since it is not a necessary risk to be taking it is not an acceptable risk to be taking – with the nation's future and with other people's children.*

This country could be getting lots more than it is from both its students and its teachers. Google for "high school student competitions"; look at what young people can do when turned loose to learn. Think about that 15-year-old high over the balance beam at the London Olympics: Why would we believe young people cannot soar equally in their learning?

A reformulated theory of action would include an innovation sector that focuses rigorously on maximizing the motivation of students and teachers. They are together the workers on the job of learning. It is madness to be running a strategy not designed to maximize the motivation of students and teachers.

Forces are building for a turn in direction. As people think more clearly about what employers actually want the concept of achievement broadens. The relentless pressure for test scores that has dominated education policy is moving teachers and unions to seek professional roles for teachers. Most important, the dramatic change in “the availability of information” shows how many different ways to learn are now possible.

The split screen strategy is the way to organize this transition – allowing the new and different to appear while the traditional continues. It is not possible to vote-in a radically different approach. Politics inevitably sets aside as 'unrealistic' ideas that do not at the moment command majority support. *Innovation is the only practical route to a different future.*

Through a Race to the Top writ large Washington could now encourage the states to arrange K-12 education the way successful systems are arranged, with Improvement-Only and innovation running together.

Some will say "This is not the tradition; these are not the principles, this is not the process of public education". That is true but not the point. We have spent decades trying to improve within the givens of traditional school and through the traditional process of change. It is time to be practical. It is time to do what works.

National policy now must push the states to add a sector of public education that is fully open to new and different forms of school and approaches to learning.