

Educational “Innovation” v. Educational Innovation

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Education has historically been plagued by a surfeit of innovation. In their influential volume *Tinkering Towards Utopia*, Stanford University professors David Tyack and Larry Cuban documented the longstanding persistence of oversold educational innovation, almost none of which has yielded significant reform. Rather than a solution to what ails public schooling, educational innovation has often been a symptom of incoherent systems and perverse incentives. Unable to affect or to demonstrate significant improvements in performance, and allured by trying something new and exciting rather than wading into resistant organizations, leaders have adopted a continuous stream of silver bullets.

In recent years, a new generation of education reformers has argued that if innovation is to ever make much of a difference, it will require new opportunities for innovators to operate and for their endeavors to achieve scale. What is notable about the Ash Institute education finalists this year is that they inhabit the tenuous space between meaningful innovation and the prevailing tinkering that Tyack and Cuban previously identified. Promising initiatives like the Big Picture Company’s efforts to promote more personalized high schools, High Tech High’s effort in San Diego to develop a model that integrates technology throughout a rigorous high school curriculum, the SEED Academy’s attempt to create a full-service grade 7-12 boarding school in the middle of Washington DC, or the EdVision’s Teacher Partnership Schools design calling for teacher-owners to collaboratively manage schools, could prove to be either important catalysts for reform or something far less significant. In truth, the outcome probably depends as much on how we reshape the educational world in which these innovators operate as on anything they do or don’t do.

Most “innovations”—ranging from efforts to promote block scheduling to new mentoring programs and from “themed” high schools to new instructional approaches—have been anything but innovative. Rather, they have been new wrinkles on a variety of practices, often dressed up with new names and new justifications. They have often taken the shape of school district A embracing an “innovative” approach already in use in district B, even as district C is unfurling as its “innovative” new approach the very program that district A is abandoning. This constant searching, swapping, and recycling has been termed “policy churn.”

Educational innovation need not be ineffective or lead to “policy churn.” In sectors ranging from telecommunications to motor vehicle registration to banking, innovation has been an engine of productivity and social betterment. In fact, a history of innovation in the private and public sector is in many ways the history of American progress. Innovations have allowed organizations to do more with fewer people, to more effectively serve customers, and to pioneer new and improved models of production and service. They can do so in schooling, as well, but only if we understand what meaningful innovation looks like and how we can promote it.

The leading edge of innovation is often interesting, likable, and pleasant. It’s easy to hail innovations so long as they are small and peripheral. Matters change when innovators become threatening or when their innovations expand and begin to threaten jobs, accepted arrangements, or assumptions about how work should be done. Moves to replace police with traffic lights, automate library collections and filing, or franchise restaurants all met with resistance due to cultural norms, fearful workers, threatened firms, or public officials hesitant about disruption.

Every meaningful innovation inevitably encounters this kind of resistance. In the public sector, where public officials are more attuned to passionate constituencies than to the diffuse, long-term benefits that innovations often provide, resistance to the “threat” posed by innovations

can be intense. This is particularly true in schooling, where sensitivity to inequities and the vulnerability of the student population is acute. The result is that we have reams of highly regarded educational innovations—including specialty schools that span the nation—that have not made much of a systemic difference. Programs like Ash Institute nominees High Tech High, the Big Picture Company, the SEED Academy, or Teacher Partnership schools are tolerated and even accepted—so long as they remain small, isolated, “one-offs” that know their place and take care not to explicitly criticize the larger system. When such programs begin to rapidly expand, publicly indict the performance of their peer institutions, seek to change public policy governing pay or school governance, or advertise an intention of becoming large-scale providers, the reception grows chillier. The programs that have been recognized by the Ash Institute this year hold much promise—but whether they prove to be precursors to fundamental change or bangles that decorate a stumbling sector is not yet clear. In seeking to expand the reach and impact of these acclaimed programs, reformers must recognize the role played by public officials in shaping education reform and the pressures that these officials must confront.

Educational employees face extensive procedural requirements adopted to ensure that educators are conforming to the wishes of lawmakers. Given substantial penalties for violating statutes or offending elected lawmakers, and the lack of rewards for effective performance, public servants have incentives to hew to legal and procedure requirements—even if they deem such measures to be inefficient or flawed. Employees who respect rules and procedures tend to prosper, while entrepreneurial individuals who violate norms or offend powerful constituencies have difficulty gaining authority. It is not that bureaucracies are devoid of entrepreneurial personalities, but that these individuals are discouraged and find their professional progress impeded. Altering this reality requires deliberate steps to change policy and culture.

First, identifying and nurturing meaningful educational innovation is not merely a process of panning for gold. It requires reforming the sector to make it more welcoming to innovators, more inclined to embrace productivity-enhancing innovations, less risk-averse, and more comfortable with diverse forms of provision. For example, licensure requirements for teachers and administrators that deter many potential educators from entering the field have long limited the influx of ideas, especially by selectively screening out those who have not been acculturated in the schools or have experience in other sectors. Nontraditional recruitment efforts like Teach For America, the New Teachers Project, and New Leaders for New Schools are working to address this constraint. The influx of individuals is no magical tonic, and will inevitably yield some poor decisions and failures, but it is imperative if educational innovation is to amount to more than cycling through variations on the same tired menu of pedagogical, curricular, and instructional cures.

Charter schooling and small school reforms have also made it easier for talented, frustrated teachers and principals to put new programs into practice. We have repeatedly seen—in places like Milwaukee, San Diego, Houston, District 2 in New York City, and elsewhere—that when school districts give educators leeway to launch new programs, those previously regarded as “malcontents” and marginalized by the bureaucracy have responded by launching highly effective programs.

Second, real innovation is always a disruptive force. Highly successful innovations threaten comfortable routines, jobs, and new demands. For that reason, established private sector firms are often slow to embrace new technologies or ways of doing business—and often hold the line until newer, smaller, more nimble competitors leave them with a choice between action and extinction. In the public sector, and especially in publicly-funded school districts, that kind of

imminent threat is rarely present. As a result, it is easy for district and school officials to offer all kinds of reasons why leaner staffing models, outsourcing, new IT-enabled work arrangements, tighter timelines, or heightened expectations are problematic, unrealistic, or of dubious value. Unless pressures to embrace productivity-enhancing innovations outweigh comfortable inertia, education will continue to favor “innovations” that tinker with the easily manipulated—adding a school council here or a new reading program there—while leaving longstanding arrangements untouched.

Overcoming natural resistance requires incentives that make change less painful than failure to change. This requires rewards for performance and sanctions for ineffectiveness that are predictable, sensible, and large enough to change behavior, culture, and expectations. It is not enough to offer crude collective incentives or sanctions—such measures mean that those individuals who shoulder the burden of change will still only reap a tiny fraction of the benefits and that those who drag their feet will suffer only a fraction of the consequences. It requires that the performance of faculty, school leaders, and district officials—whether measured in student achievement, faculty workload, enrollment, cost efficiency, client satisfaction, discrete job function, or some combination of these—be recognized and rewarded appropriately. Part of the emphasis on performance requires an attention to results that has long been lacking in K-12 schooling. That, of course, is no longer the case. In the era of No Child Left Behind and pervasive accountability, schools are making unprecedented progress in measuring performance. (If anything, the new danger is that the measures may be too crudely drawn and too casually used.)

Third, building upon that potential, however, requires that voters, policymakers, and educational administrators become more thoughtful in calculating the risks and benefits of

various reforms. In any public sector activity, it is easy to latch onto the costs of program failure, which have immediate and obvious victims, and slight the benefits of innovation that may be diffuse and far-reaching. The disruptions caused by a school closure, a poorly executed management model, or the failure of a for-profit tutoring firm are apparent, while the benefits of effective new approaches may take years to yield fruit. Given that we have long known individuals to be generally risk-averse, worrying more about losses than about potential gains, it's not surprising that there is discomfort with fundamentally rethinking the way we operate the nation's public schools. The result is a preference for cuddly, risk-free innovations, like new curricula or site-based management, in which failures are generally invisible—largely because the impact of the “innovation” itself is so minimal. This helps explain how schools can embrace so many innovations that matter so little.

So long as we lacked useful information on performance, this risk-aversion could be justified as a reasonable way to ensure that educational providers were held to some standard of performance. Today, though, the preference for employing “proven” approaches impedes the ability of entrepreneurial individuals to strike out on new paths in a culture of accountability. Rafts of detailed statutes, contracts, court rulings, and required procedures—governing school construction, school staffing, special education, permissible work hours, textbook acquisition, budgeting, bilingual education, and any number of questions—restrict what may be attempted and hamper would-be innovators. The frustrations involved in launching and managing the SEED Academy or replicating the High Tech High model show how the collective effect of these various policies can stifle promising new ideas even after they have demonstrated the ability to effectively serve students. This is one reason why most expansion of results-driven new providers like the KIPP Academies is happening in the charter school sector—outside

traditional school districts. Changing the status quo will require the public and public officials to recognize that there are other, better ways to ensure that children are well-served; an increased degree of uncertainty is the price of meaningful innovation.

To date, educational innovation has had a limited reach and a modest impact, due at least as much to the educational world innovators inhabit as to the intrinsic merit of the proposals. If we are to harness the power of promising programs like the SEED Academies, Big Picture Company, or Teacher Partnership schools, we need to reform schooling so that it no longer merely tolerates entrepreneurs, but fosters their efforts, rewards their successes, and encourages their growth.

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