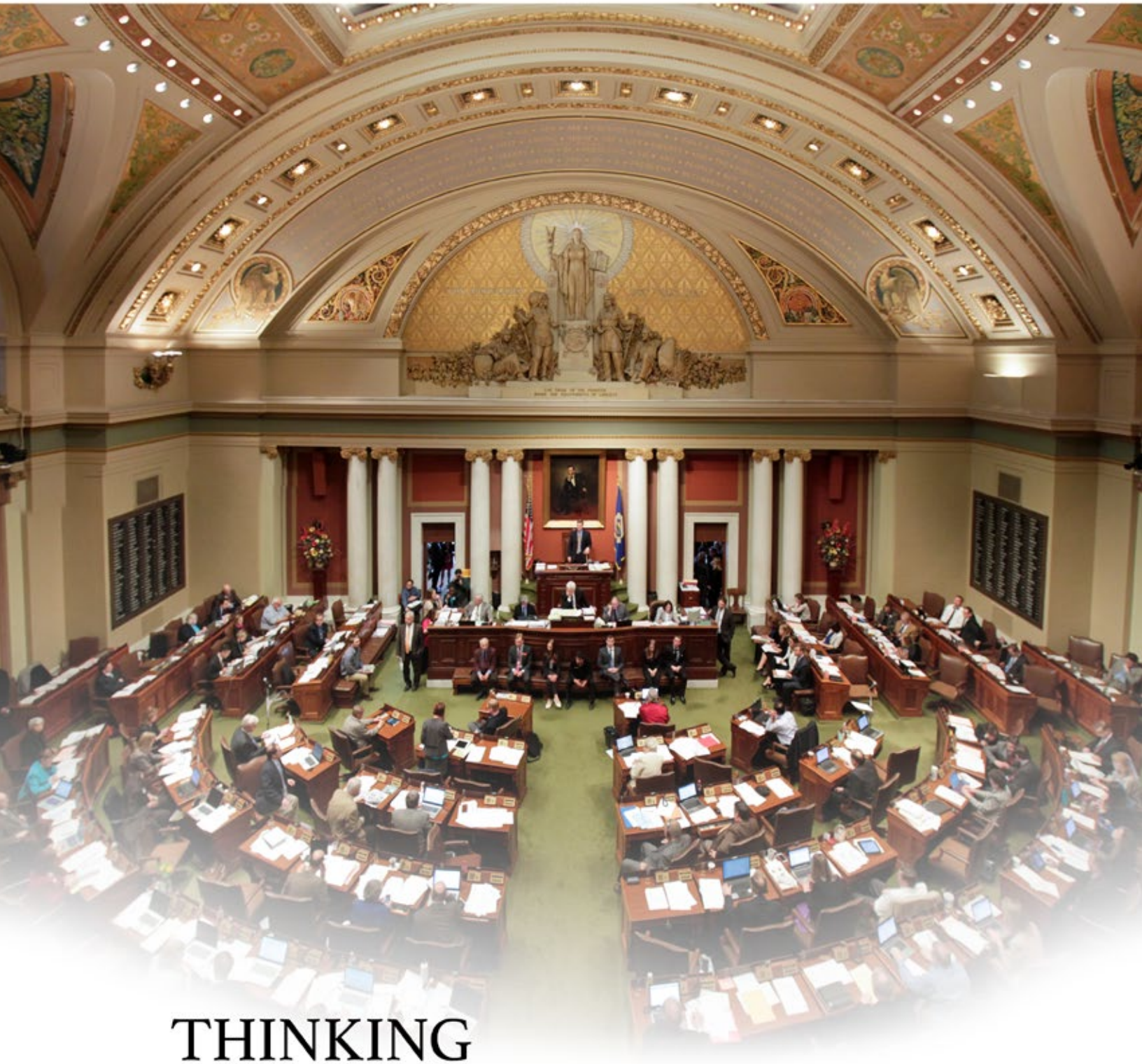
MINNESOTA IS CREATING A SELF-IMPROVING SYSTEM



THINKING OUT THE HOW. . . PUBLIC EDUCATION

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CENTER FOR POLICY DESIGN

This paper makes a surprising assertion . . . that Minnesota's redesign of public education is close to creating a set of options for students broad enough that each truly can get the education s/he wants and needs.

This is good news. But a critical step remains. That is to help districts make their schools more attractive, and more successful in the open, diverse system of public education the Legislature has created.

Good friends will encourage districts to make that difficult adjustment. If you know others who see the problem, use this link to send this paper to them: **http://bit.ly/MinnesotaSystemRedesign**

It is the traditional form of organization that constrains districts' capacity to adapt. A second paper shows how the Legislature can help them with their transition. See: **http://bit.ly/FourOptionalPlans**

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1. Minnesota has just about finished getting its public-education system right . . . with options enabling every child to get a good education.

In a succession of legislative sessions between the mid-1980s and mid-'90s, in notably bipartisan actions, Minnesota's Legislature dramatically changed the arrangement for public education. It moved away from what was essentially a public-utility model. Today elementary-secondary education is offered by a variety of public and publicly-authorized entities among which families may choose.

While others elsewhere struggle with their conflicting visions of 'the right' approach to learning and 'the best' form of school, Minnesota is completing a state system of public education with the capacity to find its way to those answers itself, *making ours a self-improving system*.

There is a wisdom that change and improvement is not something you *do*, but something that *happens* if you do the fundamentals right. Our Legislature is close to having the fundamentals right.

The state is doing what the state is supposed to do and what it is able to do. The state's job is not to run the schools. Its job is to provide an effective structure of incentives for those who do. Children learn in schools. **Whether students receive an 'adequate' education turns on what happens in the schools.** *For the state the test of 'adequacy' is whether it has created a system with schools able to get students to learn well.*

In Minnesota the Legislature's work is well along toward producing a system of such schools. Consider:

In both its district and non-district sectors there are now schools that tailor schooling to the differences among students. New forms of school organization have been appearing. A way has been found to improve significantly the work-life and career of teachers—who use their professional autonomy to make school more engaging for students. Engagement matters, for achievement. Increasingly adapted to the individual student, and with a financing arrangement broadening access, the options strategy has produced a significant gain in social equity and a real hope of realizing districts' mission statements about every student learning well.

This is not to say that the schools or the teaching and learning are yet what they need to be. Or that all schools and teachers succeed. Or that bureaucratic impulses

cannot still be found in the state agency overseeing public education. Clearly the gaps in achievement have not been closed. Minnesota should be getting far more than it is from its schools, teachers and students. And it could: By adding one more element to the system the Legislature can bring that goal within reach.

Minnesota's move to a self-improving system stands in contrast to the effort to 'do improvement' elsewhere.

Conventional education policy thinks in terms of those outside the schools finding 'the best' curriculum, teaching, technology and testing and then—accepting the existing organization of district and school—expecting district officials to implement what is proposed.

Minnesota is going a different direction. But the system redesign here was not 'intentional': You cannot find a master plan, or identify a particular legislative session enacting the change. So not surprisingly Minnesota's move beyond the public-utility model is not well understood.

This paper tries to describe the un-conventional system that has emerged here. Not everyone will agree with its interpretation—as still not everyone approves or accepts the system change itself: Support remains for the top-down strategy that Joe Graba, a former chair of the House K-12 Finance Committee, calls "excellence through regulation".

So think of this small paper as a sketch, with much left for proper research to describe further. Hopefully it will make clear the essentials of the open public system, how it operates and what it has produced.

An effort to describe and explain what has emerged here might be useful in a larger sense: Nationally, today, there seems no agreed-on strategy, no accepted theory of action. The country's policy discussion is on dead-center . . . waiting for something new to appear.

2. 'Getting the fundamentals right' has meant providing a broad range of options and choices.

To understand what has appeared in Minnesota we need to look at the range of offerings and options that now make up the quite large and diverse state system of public education—with some of the options of course containing multiple options themselves. Bob Wedl, a former commissioner, believes Minnesota has more ways for a young person to get a secondary education than any other place in the world.

- **Resident districts** naturally remain a choice. This is where most students are. They offer a range of options: a variety of courses; special education; accelerated programs like International Baccalaureate, Advanced Placement and college in the schools. In John Davis' years as superintendent, Minneapolis for a time would not assign students among its six different programs: Parents chose those they wanted.

- **Alternative schools** designed to offer non-traditional education in a non-traditional setting for those not doing well in regular school appeared in the 1960s as nonprofits contracted-with by the Minneapolis district. In 1987 the High School Graduation Incentives option, urged by Governor Rudy Perpich, made that arrangement possible for districts generally. In the same session the **Area Learning Centers** legislation let approved districts set up and directly run year-round alternative schools enrolling students from nearby districts. In 1988 the Legislature pulled these all together as SAAP, the State Approved Alternative Programs.

  These options are quite widely used, for vocational-technical careers as well as for academic studies. Today about 17 per cent of Minnesota students, about 162,000, are in alternative education full or part time. To qualify for some such programs, however, a student still must be 'at risk' or have in some way failed in 'regular school'. There are reports of students deliberately failing in order to qualify for the different school experience they need.

- In 1985, 11th- and 12th-graders were made eligible to finish high school in college under the **Post-Secondary Enrollment Option,** the first such plan enacted by any state. It offers the opportunity to compress eight years of education into six; providing two years of college free to the student *using money*

already in the system. It was enacted at the initiative of Rep. Connie Levi, then Republican House majority leader. Tom Nelson, DFL chair in the Senate, was co-author. Also in 1985 a statewide non-tuition arts high school open to juniors and seniors was created; the Lola and Rudy Perpich School for the Arts.

PSEO in 2017 enrolled over 7,000 public school students. Two-thirds of them are women. Enrollment grew 25 per cent per year from 2011 to 2017; grew 87 per cent among students of color. In 2018 its current and former students formed People for PSEO, which in 2019 might get the Legislature to improve the program, especially ensuring districts inform students about the option.

- Students have an option to take **online courses** offered in their home district or under PSEO—or from a school elsewhere in the country. Credits earned in an out-of-state program can be transferred to Minnesota, but for this the state will not pay; the student is required to pay privately.

- A student without a conventional high school diploma may get a **GED**, an alternative diploma issued by the state, by passing a test of language, social studies, science and math that establishes s/he has the 'general educational development' equivalent of a high school education. The sponsoring national organization makes the test available at age 16; Minnesota requires a waiver to get a GED before a young person would normally have graduated from high school.

- The **inter-district enrollment option** makes it possible for students to attend in a district in which they do not live, and sets procedures for their admission. Proposed by Governor Perpich in 1985, 'open enrollment' became effective with legislation in 1988. Earlier, there had been provisions of law under which some families, especially in rural Minnesota, could send their children to districts in which they did not live: In the early 1980s, when an assistant commissioner, Dan Loritz counted 16 such.

  The option is fairly heavily used. In Minneapolis open enrollment is the choice of about 6,500 resident students; of about 4,000 living in Saint Paul.

- Among Minnesota's options **chartering** plays a particularly significant role. By opening the way for new schools—and by leaving it for their organizers to design the kind of schools they will be—the Legislature created an 'R&D sector' for public education. The idea is to stimulate, not to replace, districts.

  Chartering came into law in 1991, Minnesota first in the nation to have such a program. It was authored by two suburban Democrats: Senator Ember Reichgott and Rep. Becky Kelso, earlier a school board member in Shakopee. The schools are 'authorized' and overseen either by a local district or by a surrogate of the state approved by the commissioner: an intermediate district, post-secondary institution, nonprofit social-service organization or—since 2009—a newly-created nonprofit whose 'single purpose' is to authorize and to oversee the schools chartered.

  Chartered schools, in the city and outside, currently attract about 13,000 students living in Minneapolis; almost 12,000 living in Saint Paul.

  It is important to understand Minnesota's program in relation to the schism that has appeared in chartering nationally.

  In our state chartering largely retains the original concept of schools that are not-for-profit, are mainly free-standing single-unit operations, with a strong role for teachers and a concept of student achievement that includes but is broader than scores-on-tests. Much the same philosophy now appears in the Coalition of Public Independent Charter Schools.

  Another concept appeared after about 2004 in the new national leadership organization. It has seemed interested mainly in doing conventional school better; demonstrating that 'charter schools' can do two things the district sector presumably cannot: creating schools in which city children achieve at a high level (achievement conventionally defined) and closing schools in which they do not. It has favored the growth of 'charter management organizations' (CMOs) to scale-up the sector rapidly.

  Minnesota has proved uncongenial territory for the CMOs, its law making it difficult-to-impossible for them to control the board of the school and not

offering attractive opportunities for revenue through ownership of school property.

The 'R&D' character of Minnesota's charter sector is described in a small book available from the Center for Policy Design. It gives attention to the innovations that have appeared. MACS, the Minnesota Association of Charter Schools, encourages and now annually recognizes innovations.

- Another now-developing option—perhaps not thought-of as such—is **personalized learning**. The 'individual education plan' came into special education about 40 years ago. Today some teacher-run schools have *all* their students on individual plans. Personalized and project-based learning usually go together: the student picking a topic of interest and exploring its historical, scientific, literary and/or cultural dimensions. **Individualization** is a form of choice that operates within the school, eliminating the need to specialize schools and to provide transportation. In Minnesota the Bush Foundation has retained 2Revolutions, a design lab, to develop its School Design for Individualized Learning initiative.

  Minnesota has been a leader in researching a personalized approach to the teaching of reading. Originally called Response to Intervention, it has teachers conducting formative assessment to be certain every student is meeting academic and behavior objectives, and—if not—quickly to revise the instruction.

- The options concept appears also in Minnesota's **Pre-K programs of child care and early education**. In the 1980s Hennepin County, with about a quarter of the state's population, switched its program of child day care for low-income parents from contracts with centers to support for parents, enabling them to choose between center care and family care. The idea was picked up around 2004 by the early-education program Ready 4 K, which raised private financing and added a quality-assurance rating, Parent Aware. Encouraged by a federal grant, state financing had risen to $70 million a year by 2018; a $40 million increase is proposed in the Republican Senate bill for 2019.

- Two other Minnesota initiatives could be developed further. One is the **innovation zone** idea. The Legislature has been testing that idea gingerly—unfortunately, with the districts using its limited authority finding the state department of education unsupportive of the 'different' they propose. The other is **cooperative learning**. Roger and David Johnson at the University of Minnesota's school of education developed this **peer teaching approach** years ago. Pasi Sahlberg, the leading explainer of Finnish education to the rest of the world, says their work was important in shaping that country's schools. A meta-analysis by Stanford's school of education found students helping other students the most effective of four instructional interventions—cost not considered.

The simple central idea is that if every child is to learn, every child needs to be motivated. School cannot do everything. But school must do its best to maximize motivation. That is the point of designing districts to enable schools to personalize learning.

3. The new 'open' system is—as hoped and intended—producing improvement and innovation.

Minnesota's system of alternatives and options, and its implications for students and learning, has been researched only lightly. What we can do now, while hoping for better research soon, is to point to some of the differences appearing and to suggest what seem to be their effects.

- **Schools acquire an important degree of autonomy, enlarging their capacity to adapt, when organized as a single-unit operation or operating under an agreement.** Most schools in the charter sector, probably also in the 'alternative' sector, are independent entities. Some authorizers today oversee a dozen or more schools. But authorizers do not, in the manner of a district, 'run the schools'. There is a chain of agreements between the state, the authorizer, the schools and sometimes, as noted below, the teachers. Legislation offering districts the opportunity for 'school-based management' goes back to the mid-'80s. All these let a school be largely responsible for its own operations, overseen as to performance. The ability to make decisions at the school is important. Teaching can be tailored to the students enrolled; problems can

be solved on-site. It is common to hear people in these schools say: "If we find a problem we can have fixed by tomorrow, ourselves."

- **Having multiple entities offering different kinds of school enlarges the opportunity to give every student what s/he needs.** Young people do differ, in their aptitudes, interests and motivation. Parents differ in what they want for their children. There is no 'one best way' for all. Having a variety of options means a charter authorizer—or a district that wishes—can serve both those who want (or who do better in) traditional schooling and those who prefer the non-traditional. The availability of options reduces the conflict common in one-size-fits-all. The executive of the Colorado school boards association, then Randy Quinn, came to this realization soon after chartering was enacted there in 1993, writing his members that the law—which the association had opposed—might be "a blessing in disguise" for school boards.

- **Some schools use their flexibility to arrange learning so it is more engaging for students.** They often personalize learning, which can mean moving to project-based work. Such schools frequently look and feel different. This can result from changes in student roles or in the school culture; for example, when students set the rules for dress and behavior or when students and teachers are on a first-name basis with each other. Relationships matter. Commonly the alternative and chartered schools are smaller. State standards apply, but these schools frequently add other objectives for their students, believing that the concept of performance, of success –- in education as in most areas of life—is multi-dimensional, with judgments about quality made on-balance.

- **Introducing options has improved equity.** Though the reality was seldom acknowledged, public education was always a choice system. Those with money, able to buy a house anywhere, could choose the district they felt best. Those without money could not. Open enrollment made the choice of district more available to families without private resources: In Minnesota's programs public financing moves with the students. Those favoring choice, as the surveys by Gallup for The Kappan began to show in the 1980s, are predominantly people who have less education and lower income, tend to be residents of the central cities and in communities of color. Politically most

are part of the Democratic constituency. Personalizing learning supports the 'every child' focus. And open enrollment has helped make districts more racially diverse.

We really don't get a clear picture of districts' success. It is the high-achieving students who appear on the programs; increasingly impressive in all their diversity. Along with the appealing projects and programs they create the impression of a successful organization. It is not common to see those less successful, un-challenged and bored, explaining how school has not worked well for them.

Those who quit school early do enlarge their risk of failure in life. Adults exhort them to finish, then get a job. Realistically, though, school does have to be good enough, relevant enough, motivating enough to make them want to stay. A district administrator responsible for adjudicated youth says that when they finish their term "I try to get them into charter schools". A program like Green Visions in Rochester NY gets good results putting those over 18 to work growing and supplying (cut) flowers to a local grocery chain; taking responsibility for the whole business. What if they had that opportunity while in high school?

In thinking about the 'how' of change it is worth noting the emergence in Minnesota of an *organizational* innovation in which the school is set up as a professional partnership of teachers. That arrangement appeared in Minnesota's charter sector in 1993 when a workers cooperative of teachers contracted with the nonprofit New Country School to take full responsibility for school operations.

- **Giving teachers meaningful control of 'professional issues' enlarges the prospect for changes in schooling.** Where teachers have real autonomy they reshape schools to maximize student motivation, knowing that motivation matters. Richard Ingersoll at the University of Pennsylvania finds that with respect both to the culture of schools and to their success with learning, schools work better where teacher roles are larger.

- **Providing the opportunity for teachers to be in charge maximizes the prospects for public education to retain top people in the profession.** Public education needs and wants outstanding teachers. Ingersoll says the challenge is clear: Education recruits good people; its problem is retention. In the traditional boss-worker arrangement half the new entrants leave within

five years. The way to retain top people, he says, is to turn teaching into a fully professional job and career.

- **Teacher unions are intrigued.** Generated in Minnesota's charter sector, the idea of the school as (generically) a professional partnership had by about 2001 come to the attention of the Teacher Union Reform Network through the involvement of Minnesotans in its work. In Minnesota—and probably nowhere else in America—leaders of a teacher union local have formed and operate an authorizer, aiming to charter schools that offer teachers these professional roles.

- **Enlarging teachers' professional roles can help solve the challenge about accountability.** Given greater autonomy teachers can adapt their instruction to the aptitudes and achievement levels of the students they have, and know. Teachers able in this way to control what matters for student success are willing to accept accountability for student success. An earlier paper from the Center for Policy Design explained how the professional partnership idea carries the potential to bridge the differences between the teacher unions and those in conventional 'school reform'. Simply put: Each can get what it wants by giving the other what *it* wants. See **http://bit.ly/SelfImprovingSystem**.

- **Teacher-professionalism is now moving into the district sector.** Minnesotans in 2014 launched a national initiative to build awareness of, interest in, support for and use of the 'teacher-powered' model of school. Its national meetings (three, to date) draw teachers from about half the states, and increasingly from schools in the district sector. (See **www.teacherpowered.org**) Currently in Minnesota Farmington is a district adopting this approach. Its superintendent, Jay Haugen—in 2019, the 'superintendent of the year'—says: "We want teachers accountable for results. We don't tell them what to do: Our role is to give them agency and support." He says: "A lot of superintendents would like to do this." So might thoughtful leaders in the teacher unions.

Such a self-improving system, its options generating innovation within a framework of public standards and public financing, might be better at responding to changing societal needs than is traditional education policy, designed and imposed from outside.

4. Though different, the 'options strategy' is realistic and practical as a process for change in a way conventional strategy is not.

The history of education *is* of the system being designed largely by others, outside.

Initially it was leaders in the academic world; famously, in 1892, presidents of ten major universities. Academic policy centers are still prominent in the what-to-do discussion. So now are researchers and policy groups, often foundation-supported. And as policymaking has centralized, 'outside' has come also to mean direction from the states and from the national government.

It is not unfair to describe the conventional approach as essentially 'central planning'.

- It is an effort to find 'the right' form of schooling; teaching and learning. (Not for no reason did David Tyack title his history of American education The One Best System.) Understandably—commendably—it wants to see all schools better. A torrent of advice and directive pours out: articles, speeches, advertising, seminars, consulting; grants for new programs with requirements attached, aimed at districts and their leadership. Their response is reported daily by the education media.

- That desire to improve everywhere, now, has led education policy to think in terms of what, in a talk at the Humphrey Institute in 1983, Professor Charles Lindblom called 'mechanisms of central authority'.

- The effort to find 'the right way', using 'mechanisms of central authority' to install "what works", implies a process of comprehensive transformation; 'systemic', with curriculum, pedagogy, teaching, training and assessment aligned. For some this is explicit: "You have to have a completely worked-out plan", a leading academic said. Others urge we copy schools in 'high-performing' systems elsewhere; offer 'blueprints'.

- The implications for uniformity, for sameness, are obvious. Once it's known what works best, can we let schools do anything else?

- And of course central planning also assumes a political consensus broad enough to make possible the system change proposed.

It is fair to say the top-down process for change has not been a conspicuous success.

- The consensus needed for comprehensive action does not develop. Different ideas and proposals struggle to win acceptance, one research finding disputed by another. People disagree.

- Even were agreement to be achieved, no 'master plan' could be implemented. The legislative process, state and national, does not do 'comprehensive transformation'. So nothing major moves. What can be agreed-on changes things only marginally.

- The failure of the effort at comprehensive change imposed from outside leaves us with a frustrating situation: with everyone deploring the problems and reaffirming the goals, with urgent pleas about what "We must" accomplish, but with little clear explanation as to how all this is to be done.

The reason for the failure of central planning seems obvious. **There is no central-planner, and no central authority able to implement a plan were one agreed-on.** There are multiple organizations and individuals all proposing plans, which they look to districts to adopt and implement.

It surely is good to have an open forum of ideas . . . generating those diverse conclusions about what students should know and be able to do, about the right kind school, about the proper definition of achievement and about the practices best able to improve learning.

But **suppose we think of the schools as the implementers**, selecting the ideas they find most appropriate for the students they see every day. Conceivably schools and teachers know best what's 'best'.

Changes in our economy and society are pressing on public education: Out there are different students and new technologies for learning, the higher aspirations of teachers, a changing economy requiring different skills, a society with different

expectations . . . and a software industry with the capacity to disrupt public education and its traditional ways should public education fail to adapt.

That changes the concept of 'the best system'.

Being 'best' no longer means having the state-of-the-art facilities, the most modern curriculum, the cutting-edge technology and all the 'best practices'. The best districts are now those with superior capacity to adapt to the demands of a changing environment. Adapting means finding a way to encourage those in the schools to try the new-and-different.

So, then:

- **Avoid central planning.** A strategy imposing a 'one right way' is a risk. It is, as a former chair of the California state board once put it, "a one-bet strategy'. A one-bet strategy is not a necessary risk to be taking, when other strategies are available. And if it is not a necessary risk to be taking then it is not an acceptable risk to be taking, with the country's future and with other people's children.

- **Establish that the role for those in charge is to "create a climate of encouragement for innovation" at the working level.** It was the willingness of leaders at the top to seek and accept initiative from those below, Professor Paul Kennedy wrote in Engineers of Victory, that made it possible to solve the major strategic problems critical for Allied success in World War II. Political leadership set the strategies—for example, to supply Britain across the Atlantic and to bomb Germany night and day—but it was those close to the action who figured out how to beat the submarines and how to provide air cover for the bombers.

- **So do value initiative from 'inside'.** The idea of crediting the wisdom, experience and motivation of those closest to the action makes basic sense. Starting-inside is the strategic idea most conspicuously not yet attempted. It should be tried and can be tried. As the things-tried are replicated, the system is gradually transformed.

- **Understand, accept, that major system change** is **innovation gradually spreading.** Committed to its search for a strategy that will make all schools

good schools, conventional education policy has difficulty accepting that major system change works gradually. Yet all around us we can see 'mutual adjustment' operating, as we watch the transportation, communications, energy, financial, medical, entertainment and other large systems changing. At the start only a minority is willing to try the 'radically different'. As the innovations prove out, others follow. For a time it is a 'split screen'; the new-and-different running alongside efforts to make the traditional better. In time the system is transformed. Read Diffusion of Innovations, Everett Rogers' life work.

Gradualism is clearly the superior strategy: *The more voluntary the change, the more radical it can be.* With trials kept small, failures will be small. The risks involved are accepted, not imposed, and hopefully will be set against the failure of the familiar that is tolerated far too often.

What Lindblom called 'mutual adjustment' is "messy and untidy, and therefore unappealing to many persons. As a consequence, the most logical and intelligent people tend to underrate its potential." The influence of those "trained to think comprehensively", he said, remains "one of the major intellectual problems in the organization of human action".

- **Recognize that traditional structures can be changed.** In education as in other fields 'realists' say that to make change it is necessary politically to accept the existing organizational givens. That was the theory underlying the effort at standards and accountability: We have the system we have; we don't need to turn it inside out and upside down; we just need it to perform better.

  Probably it *would* be unrealistic to attempt a grand political action revising the organizational arrangement for public education. But perhaps what cannot be done comprehensively can be carried out gradually and voluntarily. Arguing the need for restructuring while heading the American Association of School Administrators, Paul Houston drew a distinction between "keeping the faith" and "preserving the church". Public education is a set of principles and convictions, he said. "If we keep the faith it is OK to change the church: The church is not the faith."

That takes us back to Minnesota's redesign of its public education, and the next steps required. If a commitment to historic structure is impeding innovation and keeping it from spreading, the Legislature can change that structure. Changing existing law is what legislators do.

5. How best to encourage change in the district sector is now the principal challenge remaining for the Legislature.

In 1998 three leading superintendents—Don Helmstetter, president of the superintendents' association, Tom Nelson, earlier a state senator and after that commissioner of education, and Jim Walker, a former superintendent of the year—tried to get the Legislature's attention.

They saw the implications of the new system emerging. In a plan they hoped would get to the Legislature they accepted the emerging open system. Their appeal to legislators was simple: Having made this radical change, you should in fairness give districts the ability to respond.

Nothing happened. Because individual superintendents do not normally approach the Legislature on questions of general policy, the three took their plan to the associations of school boards and superintendents. Getting no positive response from the associations, the three superintendents went back to their own district work.

Now, after 20 years in the 'options' environment, districts feel the need to adapt; to make fundamental change. "We understand we have to persuade families to enroll their children", says Steve Marchese of the Saint Paul board.

The question is how.

One popular notion has been to replicate good schools. There are good schools, and as these are found and their characteristics identified the impulse is—as Professor John Goodlad wrote in Educational Renewal in 1994—to say: "Bottle it!"

No, Goodlad advised: Instead, *replicate the conditions that caused those schools to become good schools*. Usually those 'conditions', he found in his study of schools, involved giving the schools and their teachers a larger say in what is taught and how.

Districts are responding to some of the incentives created by the options the state has introduced.

- Anxious not to lose (or eager to regain) enrollment and the revenue that comes with it, Minnesota districts have responded to the post-secondary option by providing college work in their high schools; putting high school teachers onto the college faculty or bringing college faculty into the school.

- At times, too, a board unenthusiastic about 'charter schools' but learning that one is likely to appear in its district, has decided that it would prefer to authorize the school itself.

But making a general delegation of meaningful authority to its schools remains difficult for the district. The tendency everywhere in policymaking is to define problems in terms of the symptoms visible. It always is hard, politically, to move to causes.

Experienced consultants say that when dealing with organizations in trouble it is common to find the leadership unable to understand or unwilling to acknowledge the underlying problem. "*The most important and most difficult challenge in consulting", says one, "is to overcome the resistance to rigorous diagnosis".*

The education policy discussion does not emphasize 'rigorous diagnosis'. Those inside point to problems outside: the Legislature does not give us enough money; the national government is too controlling; the union contract too restrictive; the youth culture too distracting; parents not sufficiently responsible. Friends outside want to be supportive. Few even among the critics go to causes; locate the problem in district organization.

Yet what is causing the difficulties might indeed lie in the statutory plan of school district organization, written into law at a time when change was not an imperative. Much has since changed: Charles Taylor Kerchner explains in Learning from L.A. how the original role and authority of the school district as historically organized has been destroyed by political pressure from above and by parent and community pressure from below. Studying the Saint Paul schools for his PhD thesis, Jim Walker found the board changing its *procedure*, moving its decision-making into committees. But not changing its *organization*.

Over the years the Legislature has changed much in the organization of Minnesota's governmental. It reorganized the executive branch, creating new departments of Administration and Finance. It created a new structure of local government and finance to handle the metropolitan reality of the Twin Cities area. Municipal courts were replaced by a new county court of municipal jurisdiction; then the county courts were taken into a 10-district state system. The Legislature even changed itself; asking and getting approval for a constitutional amendment moving its meeting-schedule from the first 120 days of the biennium to a unique 'flexible session' that lets it meet in the first five months of each year, for a total of 120 'legislative' days'.

When it came to general local government the Legislature took a different route. It did not enact a change. Instead it created a way for municipalities and counties to adopt a different form of organization if they wished. (That legislation is described in Section 6 below.)

Nothing comparable has been done to help the local school district enlarge its capacity to respond.

Legislative action now, making it easier for districts to adapt constructively to the new environment of options and choices, would be good for those in district leadership, good for teachers and students, good for parents and the public—and good for state leadership itself.

Our state is at the moment a reasonably calm place in the national education-policy scene; relatively free of the conflict raging in other states about teachers, unions, financing and 'privatization'. The change that is needed can probably be made in our state now.

Two things seem essential:

- **The Legislature will need to be sure the district sector continues to be challenged.** As late as 1988 the president of the American Federation of Teachers, Albert Shanker, speaking at the Itasca Seminar, could describe the district as "an organization able to take its customers for granted". Given such assurance of its economic success, an organization has no incentive to change. Today the state needs the district to be a changing organization. So the state needs to maintain its system of options and choices to stimulate a constructive response in its district sector.

- Without the challenge presented by alternative programs, by the post-secondary option, by open enrollment and by chartering, districts could not summon the will internally to make the hard decisions that change requires. Many both in state and in district leadership likely understand that a vital and innovating non-district sector is essential for the success of the district sector itself.

- **The Legislature at the same time needs to make certain that districts have the capacity to respond to the challenge.** The key step remaining for the Legislature is to get school boards and their citizens—and the leadership of the state associations—to think seriously about a form of organization better designed to create that needed 'climate of encouragement for innovation at the working level'.

6. The 'optional forms' approach used for cities would be a sensible and feasible way now to help school districts move to a form of organization better designed to let them adapt.

At the end of World War II the League of Minnesota Municipalities saw the need to modernize front-line general local government for the rush of development that was coming. In 1949 it got the Legislature to enact an 'optional forms' statute—MS 412.541—offering three optional plans and providing a way for voters to choose which if any to adopt.

Respecting local control, this ingenious statute was successful in moving municipalities beyond the statutory plan of 'village government' with its elected staff. That has given our state the competent city-manager and city-administrator organizations now operating in the Twin Cities suburbs and in cities around the state.

The obvious possibility now is for the Legislature to provide that same 'optional plans' approach for school districts.

A separate paper from the Center for Policy Design offers specifics for four optional plans of district organization. All would in different ways enlarge the dis-

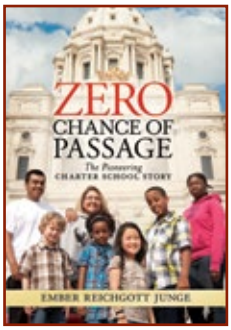
tricts' capacity to make their schools more appealing to their resident students now enrolling elsewhere. The paper contains a rough draft of a bill for such an optional-forms statute. It is available on the Center's website or by going to http://bit.ly/FourOptionalPlans.

Legislation of this sort, enlarging the capacity of district public education to adapt, would complete Minnesota's transformation of its public education into a self-improving system.

A lot rides on the state's decision: A reversion to the pre-1985 public-utility model would be a disaster for state policy leadership and for public education.

The current state administration . . . the governor having been a civics teacher, the lieutenant governor a school board member and the commissioner a board-certified teacher and a union-local president . . . has, perhaps uniquely, the incentive and the credibility to take this pro-district, pro-teacher and pro-student policy initiative.

BOOKS ABOUT INNOVATION AND TEACHERS



Ember Reichgott Junge on the origins of chartering

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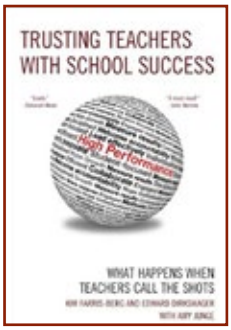

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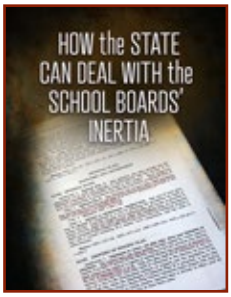

How the State Can Deal with the School Board's Inertia

PDF linked at:
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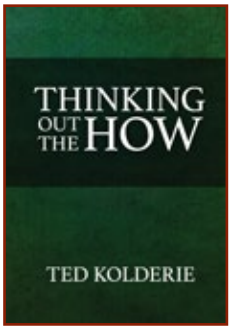

A round-up of the education strategy, 20o17

Available on Amazon:
https://www.amazon.com/Thinking-Out-How-Ted-Kolderie/dp/1592986501/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1516052847&sr=8-1&keywords=thinking+out+the+how

The split-screen strategy; 2014

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The theory of diffusion

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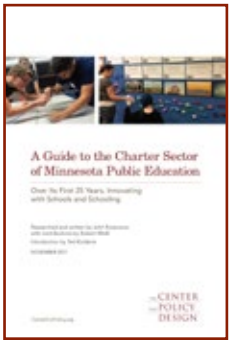

A Guide to the Charter Sector of Minnesota Public Education

https://www.educationevolving.org/content/guide-to-charter-sector-of-minnesota-public-education