

Creating New Steps: Innovating from the Edge to the Middle

Schools and school districts change and innovate all the time. They just don't do so radically enough. Mr. Washor and Mr. Mojkowski propose the steps that need to be taken to move beyond the boundaries of current practice.

**BY ELLIOT WASHOR AND
CHARLES MOJKOWSKI**

IN THE movie *Strictly Ballroom*, dance innovators Scott and Fran demonstrate profound talent and courage by taking their unconventional dance steps out onto the competitive ballroom floor. Their risk is rewarded when they gain the approval of a public audience, thereby forcing reluctant judges to vote them the winners of the Pan Pacific Grand Prix Championship. Their victory is achieved much to the dismay of Barry Fife, president of the Australian Dance Federation, and his cronies. Fife had repeatedly insisted that there would be “no new steps” in the competition. But Scott

ELLIOT WASHOR is co-founder of the Big Picture Company and of the Met School in Providence, Rhode Island. He is currently coordinating an effort to help districts throughout the country adapt the Big Picture School design. CHARLES MOJKOWSKI is a senior associate at Big Picture who is assisting Washor with the project. Their work is supported by a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. They also wish to thank Sam Seidel for helping them formulate several of the ideas presented here. ©2006, Charles Mojkowski.

and Fran made their case publicly, and ballroom dancing was never the same.

Educators have their own innovative steps, but these innovations seldom make a real difference in the learning opportunities and environments that students experience. And those innovations that truly make a difference are seldom sustained or passed on to other ed-

changes, but most such changes are really small and amount to trivial improvements on a failing system. Even the most substantial and significant innovations are seldom sustained or expanded, becoming, in effect, perpetual pilot programs — good practices that never get replicated or adapted elsewhere. Most of the reasons for this situation are quite familiar to educational re-

The prevailing mental model for schools and schooling seems to be almost hard-wired into our entire society. It is difficult for educators and noneducators alike to imagine, much less support, schools and schooling that operate very far outside of the usual practice.

ucators. Instead, most are strangled by a bureaucracy with limited vision, an aversion to risk-taking, inadequate leadership, and limited organizational capacity. It is not surprising, therefore, that many schoolpeople are skeptical about the possibility of significant and sustained change, particularly in large districts.

We are currently engaged in helping school districts across the country create new high schools that push the envelope regarding what a small high school should look like and what it might accomplish for all of its students. We work for the Big Picture Company, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to catalyze vital changes in American education by generating and sustaining innovative, small, and highly personalized schools that work in tandem with the real world of their communities.¹ For the past five years, much of this work has been supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

The Big Picture School design represents a real challenge to the existing system of high schools in most districts, and working to disseminate it has given us ample opportunity to observe how districts are attempting to push back the boundaries — conceptual, programmatic, and organizational — of what is taken for granted about high schools. In this article we describe what we have learned from helping many large districts try new approaches even in this era of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), when visions are constrained and bureaucratic requirements are increased.

WHY SO LITTLE FUNDAMENTAL INNOVATION?

Schools do a lot of innovating and create a lot of

searchers and seasoned practitioners alike, but we'll offer summaries of several.

Myopia. Districts and schools have a limited vision of the possibilities available. The innovations they are willing to contemplate are significantly limited in scope and focus more on exploiting and fine-tuning the existing system than on exploring substantially different ways of achieving highly valued student learning. The prevailing mental model for schools and schooling seems to be almost hard-wired into our entire society. It is difficult for educators and noneducators alike to imagine, much less support, schools and schooling that operate very far outside of the usual practice.

Risk aversion. Educators have a strong culture of risk aversion, which is motivated partly by a genuine concern for kids and partly by a fear of accountability. Will these radical innovations, they ask, not yet founded on empirical research and widespread practice, be harmful to students? Will these innovations cause a temporary dip in performance measures that the accountability system will not accommodate? Will these innovations challenge the comfortable status quo?

Antibodies. Despite the fact that schools have highly permeable membranes — open as they are to external forces and influences — they are nonetheless highly resistant to adopting radically different innovations from external sources. Richard Elmore points out that schools don't resist all change; indeed, they are changing things all the time.² What they do resist are the fundamental changes that make a significant difference in traditional core practices of teaching and learning.

Control. The district bureaucracy's impulse to control is well tuned, evolving as it did over the past 75

years of district and school consolidation. The central office, pressured to produce results, leaves little room for school-based entrepreneurial behavior. Indeed, the district often specifies not only the outcomes that must be achieved but also *how* they must be achieved. Such constraints limit the entrepreneurial behavior and variation that are the lifeblood of learning.

Limited resources. Districts have few resources with which to innovate. Much of the budget is allocated to maintaining or fine-tuning the existing system. New schools are often provided with little or no start-up funding and allotted the same per-pupil dollars given to already established schools. External funding sources for real innovation are similarly limited.

BOLD STEPS, NEW MOVES

The barriers to innovation are unlikely to diminish anytime soon. Thus we cannot afford to simply wait. Here are some of the ways we have begun to push for new “dance steps” on several fronts and in several states and districts.

Program designs. In developing the first Big Picture School — The Met in Providence, Rhode Island — the leaders of Big Picture were charged by the state with developing an alternative program design that could take the place of the traditional one used by all of the state’s high schools. At monthly meetings of the State Board of Regents, Big Picture staff members reviewed each alternative to the traditional high school design and ultimately persuaded the state board to allow all high schools to use alternative designs.

Curricular and instructional designs. Big Picture and other alternative schools in California are petitioning the University of California system to consider accepting a new template for course descriptions that is designed to allow students to meet the university’s curriculum requirements over several years of nonsequential instruction. The course descriptions pilot will allow students to master content and skills in a variety of contexts, including through internships, projects, lectures, workshops, and seminars; by working with credentialed teachers and qualified mentors in a variety of laboratory and field settings; and through independent study. A proposed matrix course description design, developed by the staff of Big Picture, will track the academic program and performance of each individual student and create transcripts that reflect high-level course completion and mastery/competence. Based on our experience in California, we have begun simi-

lar work in Indianapolis and in Camden, New Jersey.

Portfolio of high school designs. Big Picture is helping the Camden City Schools in New Jersey to develop a portfolio of small high schools of choice, which will offer a range of school designs to students and their families and will nest these small schools in neighborhoods. The portfolio will include “edgy” school designs like Big Picture’s, as well as more traditional ones, but all address valued student learning standards. Several other districts with which Big Picture is working (Chicago; San Diego; Mapleton, Colorado) are establishing systems of choice across many different models of schooling.

Accountability. Our Big Picture schools in Detroit, headed by Doug Ross, were chafing under the requirement that they use the Michigan Educational Assessment Program to calculate Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for NCLB, while they also had to pay attention to the ACT college admission test as part of students’ college application process. Ross led a coalition of charter and alternative schools to successfully petition the Michigan legislature to designate the ACT as the state test for determining high school AYP, thereby lessening the testing burden on students.

School leadership. The Big Picture design requires equally edgy school leaders. With support from the Wallace Foundation, Big Picture created a suitable principal preparation and support program. Supplement-

ing the Interstate School Leaders Licensing Consortium standards with increased attention to such competencies as fostering family and community engagement and navigating the difficult shoals of state and district regulations, the Principals Residency Network (PRN) featured learning in real schools with a mentor; individual, project-based learning; and diverse performance assessments. The edgy PRN has influenced nearly every principal preparation program in Rhode Island.

are needed in almost every aspect of their business. That so many of their students are bored, alienated, and performing poorly is pushing districts to look beyond their normal school improvement activities. They are beginning to recognize that getting better — even a lot better — at prevailing practices will not be enough. They desperately need to do things differently — even very differently.

How might they do that? Districts need to funda-

Prescribing the same outcomes for all students shows a crude sense of customized learning. Sameness does not yield equity. Having multiple definitions of student success is essential to achieving innovative and equitable schools.

These examples illustrate the range of work that we do in order to innovate at the edge of the system and thereby change the middle. In each case we are trying to help the bureaucracy understand how to embrace innovations that challenge basic assumptions about nearly every aspect of schools and schooling. We are engaging in what Michael Fullan and others have called “mutual adaptation,” deliberately encouraging variation in the Big Picture design so we can better address the core principles and understandings that support the design. We are learning what variations of our design contribute to student success, and we are adjusting the design and its implementation on the fly in order to realize immediate benefits to students.

Big Picture is legitimizing the creation of fundamental alternatives in teaching and learning. That the Big Picture Company, advocating a design that substantially pushes the envelope of what a high school should look like, has been invited to work in so many districts testifies to the potential for true entrepreneurial behavior. In each district, however, our success is determined by our ability to shift the conversation from compliance with detailed requirements to addressing valued student performance outcomes and, simultaneously, broadening the definition of success to include more than just performance on standardized tests. Working within the particulars of each state and district, we push for an expanded vision of ends and increased flexibility on means.

Our work is successful to the degree that we can empower district leaders. They realize that big changes

mentally rethink how they organize to innovate. They need to look at the student learning outcomes they address and consider the kind of culture they establish to support innovation. And they need to examine the innovations themselves. Here are four steps that districts can take to help them begin to do things differently.

1. *Create an innovating organization.* Districts must reshape their organizational structures and systems to spark the process of innovating and to sustain innovations. Five major actions are critical to making this happen.

- Adapt school designs that embody “edgy” innovations, operating at or beyond the boundaries of current practice. This is edge-to-middle change.

- Devolve onto individual schools the creation of innovative programs and practices that substantially affect student learning and influence policy.

- Make the innovations transparent to all, particularly the community.

- Create systemic innovations that integrate schooling, health, housing, and neighborhood revitalization.

- Redesign system budget processes to accommodate the ways that small schools achieve economies of scale.

2. *Focus on results, but not the same results for every child.* Perhaps the most powerful stimulant to innovation would be to establish a shared definition of student success that focuses on very high levels of numeracy and literacy while encompassing a much broader set of learning goals — goals valued by students, their

parents, and the community. Even more fundamental: allow schools to produce different results for different students. Prescribing the same outcomes for all students shows a crude sense of customized learning. Sameness does not yield equity.³ Having multiple definitions of student success and multiple measures to assess student learning is essential to achieving innovative and equitable schools.

3. *Establish a culture for innovating.* Such a culture requires a tolerance, if not a passion, for continually examining alternatives to existing practice and questioning what might be considered adequate or even good. Districts should pay particular attention to cultivating such dispositions and skills in principals. Districts need to reward creativity and entrepreneurial behavior in achieving significant and highly valued student learning outcomes.

4. *Create true alternatives to prevailing practice.* Recall the Napster phenomenon. Seventeen-year-old Shawn Fanning created a system for sharing music that forced the music distribution industry to rethink its business model. Although the music moguls shut Napster down, they could not shut down the business model it created. And the music distribution business will never be the same.

These four bold steps are highly interdependent and require a coherent set of dispositions and actions. For example, establishing a culture of creativity and innovation requires an organizational capacity to bring creative ideas into being and to implement them well. But creating even disruptive innovations around the same standardized learning for all kids will *not* serve each child well. Districts will struggle with innovating if they cannot address these recommendations as a unified whole.

Dee Hock has observed that the fundamental problem with most organizations is that they are governed by mediocre ideas.⁴ Too many district innovations are mediocre and merely sustaining rather than disruptive. Why do we need an educational equivalent of Napster? Because there are limits to how much improvement can be wrung from the existing system, particularly for our young people who are served so poorly by it. Optimizing the prevailing system will not be enough.

To effect fundamental change, district reform must support Napster-like innovations at the edge — and then move them to the middle. We are reminded of the statement attributed to Wolfgang Pauli, the Nobel laureate physicist, upon hearing of a theory by a col-

league. Said Pauli, “It’s crazy, but not crazy enough.” Innovations at the edge need to be “crazy enough” to make a real difference at the middle.

Districts must create a balanced portfolio of “edgy” alternatives to complement those innovations at the middle that do improve and deepen existing practice. Such a portfolio can generate more of what Malcolm Gladwell calls “tipping points,” innovations that create a momentum for substantial, significant, and sustainable change.⁵

If, as Michael Schrage has argued, innovation is about managing people’s expectations, what expectations will we choose?⁶ If we have the ingenuity and courage to take an innovative idea far enough to the edge, we may be able to encourage changes to the system that would otherwise take decades of debate in the policy realm. To do this will require that we push against the boundaries we take for granted about innovations and innovating. It will require as well that national, state, district, and school leaders devote more time and energy to understanding the principles behind their policies, programs, and practices. It will require that leaders embrace thinking and acting at the edge, even as they make good use of scientifically based research. That is what Scott, Fran, and Shawn chose to do. Districts must find and support their Scotts, Frans, and Shawns. Indeed, if they dare, districts must deliberately create alternatives to themselves.

Few districts have been able to get both the design and the execution of “edgy” innovations just right. Make no mistake, however, education will have its Napsters. There will be innovations that allow the public to have choice and make the education system — from state bureaucracies and local school districts to colleges and book publishing companies — change the way it operates, educating more students who have traditionally been marginalized. Look for those new steps!


1. Elliot Levine, *One Kid at a Time: Big Lessons from a Small School* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002); and Dennis Littky, with Samantha Grabelle, *The Big Picture: Education Is Everyone’s Business* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2004).

2. Richard Elmore, *School Reform from the Inside Out: Policy, Practice, and Performance* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Education Press, 2004).

3. Nel Noddings, “Rethinking the Benefits of the College-Bound Curriculum,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, December 1996, pp. 285-89.

4. Dee Hock, *Birth of the Chaordic Age* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1999).

5. Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point* (New York: Little, Brown, 2000).

6. Michael Schrage, “Great Expectations,” *Technology Review*, October 2004, p. 21. 

File Name and Bibliographic Information

k0606was.pdf

**Elliot Washor and Charles Mojkowski, Creating New Steps:
Innovating from the Edge to the Middle, Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 87,
No. 10, June 2006, pp. 735-739.**

Copyright Notice

The authors hold copyright to this article, which may be reproduced or otherwise used only in accordance with U.S. law governing fair use. MULTIPLE copies, in print and electronic formats, may not be made or distributed without express permission from the authors. All rights reserved. Distributed by Phi Delta Kappa International with permission.

Note that photographs, artwork, advertising, and other elements to which Phi Delta Kappa does not hold copyright may have been removed from these pages.