

Think the Unthinkable

by Ron Wolk

For more than two decades, the United States has been struggling to improve public education. In April 1983 the federal report *A Nation at Risk* stunned the nation with its dire warning that “a rising tide of mediocrity” was swamping our schools. A spate of articles and editorials on the occasion of its twentieth anniversary last spring concluded that the schools today are not much better than they were then.

Five years after *A Nation at Risk*, in 1988, the first President Bush and the nation’s governors, with much fanfare, set lofty education goals to be met by the year 2000, including the goals that every child would be ready for school and that the U.S. would be first in the world in math and science by the dawn of the new millennium. We didn’t even come close to meeting any of the goals.

Now we have “No Child Left Behind,” the sweeping and intrusive new federal law that more than doubles the amount of standardized testing. It promises, among other things, that a highly qualified teacher will be in every classroom by 2006 and that all children will be proficient in a dozen years. It, too, will inevitably fall well short of its noble objectives.

How could a country with such knowledge, wealth, and power and such stellar accomplishments in every other field of human endeavor try so hard and still be so far behind in education that it ranks among Third World nations?

The Wrong Questions Encourage the Wrong Answers

After pondering that conundrum for many years, I’ve come to believe it is because we are seeking answers to the wrong questions. In the current school-reform movement—and in every previous one—we have asked:

- How do we fix our broken public schools?
- How do we raise student achievement (meaning test scores)?

Not surprisingly, the answers to those questions nearly always focus on the school. We always accept the school as a given, which means we are essentially stuck with all the conventions and sacred cows of the traditional school. It almost guarantees that we will not be able, as they say, to “think outside the box.”

The questions we should be asking are:

- How do we guide our kids through their very challenging formative years so that they emerge as responsible young adults with the skills and attitudes they need to function and thrive in a rapidly changing world?
- What do we want every child to achieve?

The answers to those questions must focus on a lot more than just school. Three short sketches from where I live—Providence, Rhode Island—make the point.

Jesse the Janitor. Sixteen-year-old Jesse lived with his widowed mother and attended Coventry High School in Rhode Island. Bored to death and “fed up” with school, Jesse told the principal he intended to drop out. Although Jesse had been labeled “troubled,” the principal knew Jesse liked to work and considered him to be a bright, mature young man. So he offered Jesse a deal: if Jesse would attend classes in the morning, he could work as a janitor in the afternoons for five dollars an hour.

Jesse accepted, and in the following months the school was never cleaner. Jesse got grass to grow where it hadn’t grown before and even inspired his classmates to cease littering almost completely. Jesse now wants to go on to community college to study computer programming. Says his principal: “This kid is going to be a productive citizen someday, and I would not have been able to say that months ago.”

Following Footsteps. Michelle and Tiffany were sophomores at the Met school in Providence, perhaps the most unconventional high school in the nation. Students at the Met spend a couple of days a week out of school, working with mentors on term projects in the community. Each student has a personalized curriculum worked out in consultation with the parent, teacher (known as “adviser”), and mentor. Michelle and Tiffany decided that for their term project they would join a group of adults and retrace Martin Luther King Jr.’s Alabama Freedom March from Selma to Montgomery.

They read biographies of King, studied contemporary accounts of the march in newspapers and magazines, and plotted their day-by-day itinerary. Then, with their adviser’s help, they arranged to stay with families along the route. The girls traveled for three weeks, interviewing civil rights leaders and participants in the march.

When the girls returned to school, they wrote a detailed account of their adventure. Michelle said she had never understood before all the fuss about voting, but she learned during that trip that people died so she could vote, and she vowed that her vote would never be wasted.

Recorder, Reformer, Revolutionary: An Education Odyssey

I have not come to the conclusions in the accompanying article quickly or easily. In 1980, three years before the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, I started *Education Week*, a newspaper of record for educators and policymakers. Since then, I have spent my waking hours reading, thinking, and writing about education, attending scores of meetings with very smart people struggling to find solutions to the vexing problems of public education, and visiting at least 100 schools all over the country.

At first, I believed that the schools were generally okay and that their problems were largely the result of being asked to do too many things for which they were not designed. By the mid-1980s, I became convinced that the education system was badly broken and desperately needed to be overhauled from top to bottom. Through most of the 1990s, I believed—or, more correctly, hoped—that the system could be fixed, that standards-based reform would lead to better schools and greater student learning. But accountability hijacked the standards movement, and politicians gutted it almost from the outset.

Consequently, I found my faith in the system steadily waning. Schools are the instruments that society constructed to educate our children—not just affluent and docile children, not just in good times. However difficult and different the conditions become as the world changes, schools must somehow accomplish their mission. If they don't, then society must create new instruments and institutions to meet the challenge.

My evolution from recorder to reformer to revolutionary is now complete. I no longer believe that we can convert the schools we have into the schools we need. The conventional school that most Americans attended—at least from grades seven to twelve—is too deeply rooted in the culture to be changed through some rational process, even though it does not work for millions of our kids—perhaps most of them. We have no choice but to create new schools.

—Ron Wolk

Learning Leadership. To be admitted to Classical High School (arguably Providence's best), students must pass an examination. On her first day as a freshman, Maria, nervous and scared, sat in the auditorium as the principal told students to look to their left and right. One of those kids would not be there at graduation, he warned. As the months passed, Maria found school boring and irrelevant. She wondered if she might be one of the absent ones four years later.

Then Maria heard about a community organization called "Youth in Action" and joined. Suddenly she was immersed in meaningful and interesting work—designing an AIDS curriculum, gathering data for a local environmental-justice campaign, working with troubled children, speaking to groups, planning events, raising money. Maria became an officer and a member of the board of Youth in Action.

After graduating from high school and beginning college, Maria returned to Providence to speak at a meeting on educational opportunities for American adolescents. Poised, passionate, and articulate, she talked more about her work in the community than her high school experience. When she finished, she was complimented on her accomplishments and asked how much of her success she attributed to attending Classical and how much to participating in Youth in Action. Without hesitation, she said that the youth group was responsible for 95 percent of her growth.

Jesse was fortunate that his principal was perceptive enough and flexible enough to adapt to his needs and skills. Michelle and Tiffany learned about history and the meaning of citizenship by following their own interests. Maria blossomed through doing real work in the real world.

America Wasn't Listening

For those youngsters and millions like them, the conventional school with its rigid academic curriculum and inflexible procedures is neither the only way nor the best way to become educated—that is, if we accept Webster's definition of educate, which means "to rear, to develop mentally and morally." If our primary goal is to help children become competent and responsible adults, then the conventional school, at least after grade six, may be counterproductive.

That same message was delivered to the nation by a panel of researchers assembled by the White House Science Advisory Committee almost a decade before *A Nation at Risk*. Led by the noted sociologist James S. Coleman, the panel in 1974 published "Youth: Transition to Adulthood." The report began with this profound observation:

As the labor of children has become unnecessary to society, school has been extended for them. With every decade, the length of schooling has increased, until a thoughtful person

must ask whether society can conceive of no other way for youth to come into adulthood.

If schooling were a complete environment, the answer would probably be that no amount of school is too much, and increased schooling for the young is the best way for the young to spend their increased leisure and society its increased wealth.

Coleman and his colleagues concluded, however, that schooling was far from a complete environment, and called for a “serious examination” of the institutional framework in which young people develop into adults. They argued, “The school is not the world, and is not perceived by students as ‘real.’” The panel recommended that high school play a lesser role in the lives of adolescents and that their learning be transferred to a variety of sites in the community where they can develop the skills and attitudes which society expects of responsible young adults.

If that 175-page report had galvanized the nation the way *A Nation at Risk* did, the past twenty-five years of education reform probably would have been much different and, arguably, much more productive.

Two years before Coleman’s report appeared, a colleague of his, the sociologist Christopher Jencks, published his landmark study *Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America*. Jencks found that not only is school not the complete environment, but he discovered no evidence that “school reform can be expected to bring about significant social changes outside of schools.” The research showed that the outcomes of school depend largely on what goes in: i.e., the students. Middle- and upper-class kids tend to perform adequately; poor kids tend to do poorly. The schools that kids from affluent families attend do relatively well; the schools that poor kids attend do poorly.

That remains true today. The quality of a child’s education in the United States depends mainly on where he lives, the color of her skin, and the socioeconomic status of the family.

One Size Fits All

Educators and policymakers often react negatively to specific reform proposals; they assert that there is no “one size fits all” solution to our educational problems. That, however, is exactly what we have in the current system.

Today’s student body is extraordinarily diverse in every way—ethnically, racially, and socioeconomically. Reflecting their varied genetic and cultural influences, children have very different interests and abilities, and they learn in different ways at different speeds. Nevertheless, we funnel them into a monolithic system that doesn’t accommodate their diversity or their individual needs. As a consequence, middle and high schools are generally irrelevant, even alien, institutions for the vast major-

ity of poor kids, especially those who don't speak English as their native language.

Even for most average, working-class youngsters in the towns and suburbs of this country, school after the sixth grade is mainly a rite of passage to be endured until one graduates or drops out. Only highly motivated students—generally from affluent, educated families—thrive in conventional schools, and they are probably not nearly as challenged as they should be.

Parents want the best for their kids. Most want schools to prepare their children for college, but polls show that they also want their kids to be well-rounded, happy, and confident, able to get along with others, and motivated and prepared to work. I believe society should demand even more for its investment. It should expect youngsters to acquire the skills and knowledge they need to become lifelong learners, to develop personal values that will help them negotiate the ethical and moral dilemmas we all face from time to time, and to understand the rights and responsibilities of free individuals in a democratic society.

Despite overwhelming evidence that the public schools are not meeting those expectations—not even the academic mission they were designed for—parents and the larger society continue to bet the future of their children on those same schools. It may not be a risky bet for affluent parents whose offspring, as Jencks noted, are likely to do well and get into college regardless of school. Betting the future of the majority of kids on the current public school system, however, is such a long-shot gamble that it is irresponsible.

The Good Old Days

There was a time when the responsibility for transforming kids into competent young adults was mainly the job of the family, shared by the church and, for six or eight years of children's lives, the public school. The responsibility was more easily fulfilled in the simpler era of the nineteenth century because the distractions were far fewer than they are in this cacophonous age of mass media. Today, neither the family nor the church wields the kind of influence on the young that it once did. That has left the school as the primary institution charged with shaping our young.

The school might have successfully filled the vacuum left by family and church had it changed as dramatically and continually as the rest of the world, but it didn't. The core of the school remains essentially as it was a century ago, even though the students and the world have changed radically. As a consequence, schools are declining in influence and effectiveness at the very time that kids are facing greater and more demanding challenges. Restoring the family and the church to their long-

lost cultural dominance is unlikely. And because the school is in decline, we are leaving much of the social and intellectual development of our children to their peers, the media, and popular culture.

Needed: A New Education Strategy

It is not productive to criticize schools or to blame them for not changing over the decades or for not solving a problem they are not now equipped to solve. The rational course of action is to recognize where we are, what the main task is, and how to accomplish it. Our paramount goal should be to help kids progress successfully into adulthood. To accomplish that, our priorities should include, at least, the following:

- To help youngsters acquire the skills and knowledge they will need to function in a continually changing world. That means nourishing in them the motivation and ability to continue educating themselves.
- To guide them as they develop a system of positive values and ethics that will govern their day-to-day behavior and their relationships with others.
- To assist them in understanding their rights and responsibilities as members of a community and a democratic society.
- To give them the opportunity to explore the world of work and to recognize their obligation to support themselves and their families.

Schools have an important role to play in the development of the young, but it is not their only—or even the dominant—role. If we want children to become responsible adults, we need to forge an alternative or parallel system that offers a range of choices to young people and allows them to make decisions and change directions as they grow into adults.

The elements of such a new system already exist in some schools and communities across the country. Certainly, there are enough models available for states and municipalities to construct a system that addresses the varied needs of young people and offers them choices at critical times in their development. The challenge to policymakers in statehouses and school-district offices is to create some open space in the present system for new educational opportunities.

Here is a glimpse of what that system might look like and how it might come to be.

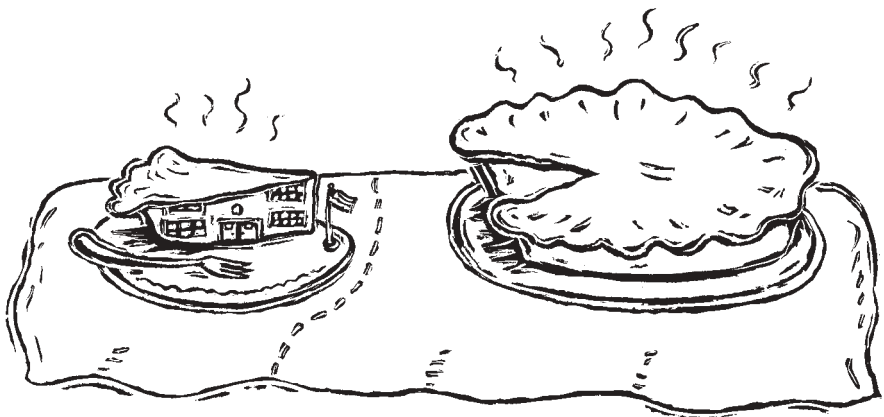
Proposed: A Parallel System to Educate the Young

On the premise that it is easier to make significant change by starting something new than by trying to reform something old, I would

argue that each state should charter a nongeographic district that could include institutions located anywhere in the state. The charter district would be led by a superintendent with a relatively small administrative staff. The superintendent would be appointed by, and accountable to, a board, whose members would in turn be elected by the individual schools in the charter district. The state would exempt the charter district from all regulations governing public schools except those involving safety and civil rights.

The role of the district would be largely to coordinate and support innovation and experimentation in education and youth development. It would offer educational alternatives to the conventional schools. The charter district might be viewed as the research and development arm of the state's educational system. There would be two kinds of learning institutions in the charter district. Children from age five to age thirteen would attend "primary" schools, and children ages thirteen and over would enroll in secondary learning centers.

The primary schools could be new schools established by the state, schools chartered by nonprofit organizations (the way charter schools are today in most states), or existing innovative elementary schools that opt into the new charter district. Like many of the innovative elementary schools, the primary schools in the charter district could be organized around a theme or a particular pedagogy. All primary schools in the charter district would focus significantly on literacy, numeracy, and the arts. Students would be exposed to the disciplines—science, history, literature, biography, geography, and civics—through reading in those disciplines. The emphasis would be on reading and comprehension of concepts and ideas in those disciplines, not on coverage and memorization of enormous amounts of trivia. In addition, the primary school



would nourish children's curiosity and inculcate good habits of mind and behavior.

To be admitted to a secondary learning center or school in the charter district, students would have to demonstrate mastery of reading comprehension and basic mathematics. The secondary learning centers would not be schools as such, but rather community-based organizations created by the state or operated under contract with the state by existing organizations. Their primary functions would be supervising young people and helping them manage their education. Secondary learning centers would be limited to about 200 "students."

In addition to the new secondary learning centers, the charter district could include innovative secondary schools that already exist in virtually every state. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation funds some of the more innovative schools, such as the New Country School in Minnesota, High Tech High in San Diego, the Met in Providence, and Best Practices High School in Chicago. Schools like those would add strength and diversity to the charter district. In addition, they would find the sanctuary and support that they often lack as outliers in the conventional system. (For additional examples of innovative schools, see Timothy J. Dyer, *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution*, DIANE Publishing, November 1999, ISBN 0788183559, and Thomas Toch, *High Schools on a Human Scale: How Small Schools Can Transform American Education*, Beacon Press, April 2003, ISBN 080703245X.)

New Institutions and New Roles for Teachers and Students. In the new secondary learning centers, the roles of teachers and students would change. Students would assume much more responsibility for their own education and would be assigned to an adult adviser: a teacher in most cases. Although advisers would teach, their primary function would be supervising fifteen to twenty students and helping them manage their learning and their time. The adviser and his or her students would remain together during the students' stay at the learning center. In schools practicing that model, students and advisers tend to become "families," forging close and productive relationships.

Personalized Curricula. In consultation with advisers and parents, students would formulate personalized curricula. Each year they would choose from a menu of opportunities. Periodically, as they progressed, they would be able to change directions if they were so inclined. For example, they could participate in apprenticeships and internships with adult mentors in businesses, hospitals, government agencies, and other employers where they could experience the workplace and see the need for punctuality, attention to detail, and teamwork. They could volunteer to perform social and human services or work for worthy causes where they would observe democratic practices and politics in action.

Educational Travel. Youngsters would have opportunities for educational travel in the United States and abroad, both individually and in groups. Programs like Americorps could provide opportunities for high-school-age kids. Programs like Outward Bound could help young people test themselves and develop self-confidence. Previous efforts such as the Civilian Conservation Corps of the New Deal era could provide a useful model for such programs.

Extracurricular Activities. As the role of high schools diminished, extracurricular activities would have to be provided largely through out-of-school clubs, teams, and youth organizations, perhaps coordinated by the secondary learning center. Many graduates attest that their most rewarding experiences in high school were activities such as chorus, band, debate, and athletics. To the extent that those activities met student needs, they would continue to command a significant amount of time and resources. However, because students would be spending much of their time in real-world situations, they might come to rely less on extracurricular activities to develop a sense of self-worth and to learn the values of teamwork, performance, effort, and proficiency.

Just-in-Time Instruction. All the activities the students chose would be constructed to involve learning at several levels, including academic instruction. Students would have available “just-in-time” instruction: e.g., a student interning in a hospital might need to take a course in biology or anatomy; an intern in a bank might require instruction in math or accounting; a student apprenticing in a restaurant might need chemistry instruction. The secondary learning centers could make such instruction available both in person and online.

Technology. A modest investment in research and development and a little imagination could produce software programs to provide “just-in-time” instruction. Simulations, computer games, chat rooms, CDs, Internet courses, and the like enable students to do almost everything that they could in a classroom: dissect a frog on the computer, conduct physics experiments, learn languages, study poetry read aloud by the poets themselves, conduct research, and carry on extensive discussions about issues. The infrastructure is already there: most schools in nearly every state already are wired to the Internet. Indeed, following the lead of the University of Phoenix, many of the nation’s top universities and nearly seventy charter schools now offer online courses and degrees.

In-person Instruction. Technology by itself would not encompass the complete environment that students need to learn and grow. Secondary learning centers would offer live instruction either by contracting with a conventional school, arranging for courses in community or four-year colleges, or arranging for tutoring.

Flexible Scheduling. Whether online or in person, instruction would not necessarily be delivered in semester courses of several classes a week. For example, an adviser and a small group of students might spend every day for two weeks in intense study of the Constitution, an area of mathematics, or the geography of the United States, but the decision to do so would arise from the needs and desires of the students—not from a pre-set curriculum.

The great philosopher and mathematician Alfred North Whitehead described the challenge this way: “The result of teaching small parts of a large number of subjects is the passive reception of disconnected ideas; not illumined with any spark of vitality. Let the main ideas which are introduced into a child’s education be few and important and let them be thrown into every combination possible. The child should make them his own, and should understand their application here and now in the circumstances of his actual life.”

Students at the Met School in Providence constantly demonstrate how effective and committed kids can be when they are working on something that interests them, which they have chosen. For example:

A play of her own: A young woman in her junior year wrote a play for her term project. When she finished it, she decided to produce it. She selected the cast, designed the set, directed the play, rented the hall, printed and distributed announcements, sold the tickets, and played the lead. She symbolizes the independence and conscientiousness of students who engage in self-education, and she is not unusual.

His father’s war: A young man had long been intrigued by the fact that his father had served in Vietnam, but the father always declined to talk about his experience. The boy decided he had to visit Vietnam and he desperately wanted to take his father with him. He studied the history and geography of the country and read widely about the war; then he wrote a proposal that helped him raise enough money to cover travel expenses. He and his father spent several weeks visiting places in Vietnam where his father had been stationed. When they returned, the student wrote a detailed and thoughtful report about the experience and what he had learned about his father and himself.

“This is who I am”: Met students must write a seventy-five-page autobiography to graduate. Many students moan and resist. One student in particular insisted that he couldn’t do it, that it was cruel and unusual punishment. When he walked across the stage to collect his diploma, that student’s adviser noted that the young man had submitted a 100-page autobiography with the comment, “Until I wrote that paper, I didn’t really know who I was.”

In such projects, students learn a great deal and it becomes part of them, not just something to regurgitate on a test and forget. Doing real

work in the real world—whether interning with a chef, a glassblower, or a hospital technician—requires some knowledge in a number of disciplines. Youngsters pursue that knowledge and assimilate it because they need it to do their work. Equally important, the work helps them to mature, gain confidence, and understand the power of learning. And their success in one endeavor tends to fuel their curiosity and lead to broader learning.

Special education students and students for whom English is a second language, who tend to fare poorly in the current system, would probably do better in a system that provides something other than strictly academic options. Immigrants might find it easier to learn English working in community-based organizations; special education students might adapt to out-of-school experiences better than they do to classrooms.

It's the Students' Work, Stupid! Students' work and accomplishments are at the heart of the new system. Common norm-referenced and criterion-referenced standardized testing would not be used. For diagnostic purposes and to assess value added, the charter district would use computer-adaptive online testing. In all the students' activities, teachers, mentors, and other adults would view the students' work and accomplishments to determine progress. Evaluating the work would be more complicated but far richer than assigning test scores. The evaluations of advisers and mentors would reveal infinitely more about a student's ability, attitude, and effort than simple letter grades.

At age sixteen, each student would have three options: continuing in the system for two more years; leaving to enroll in postsecondary education; or leaving to take a job, which could include the military, the Peace Corps, and other such occupations (which today is usually considered dropping out). If students left school at age sixteen for any reason, they would have the right to return to the system for two years before they turned twenty-one.

Instead of receiving a high school diploma, which tells an employer or a college admission officer virtually nothing about who a student is and what he or she has accomplished, students would receive a certificate of completion and a dossier. The dossier would list the courses they took, the internships they served, their volunteer work, and the organizations to which they belonged, along with the evaluations submitted by their adult supervisors. It would include selected samples of their work. Employers are much more likely to be satisfied with such an evaluation than colleges, suggesting that higher education needs to reassess admission requirements and find more substantive ways to evaluate student ability.

Obstacles

As much as I believe such a system would be superior to the present education system, I have no illusions about the difficulties of making it a reality. It will surely provoke opposition, most likely from those who have resisted efforts to reform the current system: the unions, the defenders of the status quo, and the higher education establishment. In addition, a new system could draw new opponents into the fray: e.g., those who believe the downgrading of interscholastic varsity athletics would mean the end of American education as we know it. If a truly different parallel system of public education is to succeed, those who would implement it must guard against creating adversaries where none need exist. The unavoidable adversaries will be daunting enough.

The Traditional Curriculum. The traditional academic curriculum and the rigid school schedule are deeply rooted structures that have been formidable barriers to change over the decades. The pressure to cover all the academic bases is unrelenting. Even those who may be philosophically sympathetic with personalized and progressive education fret over the prospect that children could reach age sixteen without having had courses in grammar, algebra, and biology, or without having studied Shakespeare, the Civil War, or the Great Depression. Pundits in the news media wring their hands when a poll reveals that today's students can't find Mississippi on a map or provide the dates of World War I. However, for a fourteen-year-old who has never been out of the Bronx, those may not be the most egregious educational omissions.

Because it is all-encompassing in its approach to knowledge, the traditional curriculum is guilty of what I call "chasing infinity." With knowledge proliferating at an astounding rate, it must be clear even to the most orthodox curriculum traditionalists that it is impossible for schools to cram all of mankind's accumulated knowledge into young minds. It is foolish to try!

Deciding what every child should know is arbitrary, and academicians always err on the side of wanting more coverage rather than less, as the current standards movement is demonstrating. As a result, even though teachers may race through their courses, they often cannot cover all the specified topics. One study found that just covering the material in the national standards would require nine more years of schooling.

Even if teachers do cover all the specified topics, students retain little information for very long. The majority of students are not mastering the present extensive academic curriculum that consumes them five or six hours a day, 180 days a year. Although the traditional curriculum attempts to keep up with mankind's infinitely expanding body of knowledge, students are not learning more. At best they are learning less about

more, and in many cases, less, period. Returning to my earlier example of presumptive educational failure, I would be surprised if a majority of adults today could correctly fill in a blank map of the United States or provide the beginning and ending dates of World War I, the overwhelming detail of the traditional curriculum notwithstanding.

There is evidence to suggest that learning in context, studying something that the student really wants to study, cultivates curiosity and sparks a passion for more learning. Would students be worse off with a personalized curriculum that might omit more traditional subjects if they learned what they did study? Which is worse: for a student not to have taken a course in algebra, or to have taken it and not learned anything?

Cost and Competition for Resources. The United States spends about \$2.5 billion per school day on the current system—some \$7,500 annually per student. The cost per student in a new system should not be greater than in the present system—perhaps less—but the funds would be spent much differently after primary school. The average per-pupil allocation would go to the charter district to cover the costs of the primary schools and fund the secondary learning centers and the activities that the students chose. In addition to personnel costs, the allocation would cover the costs of such things as contracting with conventional schools for some coursework, paying course fees in colleges, recruiting and training mentors, and expenses for student travel and research.

Naysayers fret that a new, alternative system would divert much-needed resources from traditional schools. That is what teacher unions tell legislators all the time about charter schools. In practice, however, the primary schools and secondary learning centers in charter districts would receive only the per-pupil allocation for the students who enroll in them. If the conventional school lost a student, then it would not have to pay the cost of educating that student.

The unions argue further that a conventional school may lose enough students to create a financial hardship for the school, but not enough to allow the school to reduce the number of teachers or downsize the curriculum. In other words, it would have to do everything it was doing, only with fewer dollars. In truth, the strength of that argument lies in the highly debatable assumption that everything the conventional school does is absolutely imperative.

Under the system I've sketched here, any resulting competition would not be between public schools and nonpublic schools. The charter district would be created by the state and the funding would come from the state, so any competition would be within public education, pitting the traditional approach to education against alternatives.

If we anticipate that under a state policy of educational choice, conventional schools will lose students to charter schools, our response should not be to protect the traditional schools. Rather, we should ask, why are parents and students choosing charter schools over conventional schools?

Putting a "Proven System" at Risk? Skeptics argue that it's risky and irresponsible to experiment with our children in an unproven new system. Any such argument is fatuous, for it assumes that we currently have a proven system. We do not. True, the current system has proven that it can open the school doors every autumn and pass students through the grades, but the appellation "proven system" implies some degree of effectiveness. In fact, the current system of education is so ineffective that it would go bankrupt if it were a private business.

The argument that an unproven system is risky assumes that there is no risk in maintaining the status quo. In fact, there is a huge risk in maintaining the status quo, but it is not the school system itself that is at risk; it is perhaps our society, even our very civilization. The real risk is in forcing all children to participate in a system that is failing so many of them so dramatically.

Too Big an Undertaking? The system I've outlined above is complicated. Critics will see it as a logistical nightmare. Is it, however, any more complex than the present system, which sorts more than 50 million kids into thirteen grade levels in more than 85,000 schools, and buses a majority of them to and from school every day? I think not.

I am not proposing that we try to throw the switch on one system and substitute another. States should continue their efforts to improve the current system; however, with the help of proponents, they need to make a public case for the creation of the parallel system.

Creating a public system that is parallel to the existing system will take considerable time and thought. Some states have weak charter laws, so those who would implement an alternative system would do well to study existing legislation and model their efforts on the most effective charter laws. At the same time, recognizing the logistical challenge, states might want to limit the number of students, primary schools, and secondary learning centers in their charter districts at first. As successes are recognized and interest grows, the systems can be gradually expanded.

There will be stern challenges during the start-up period. Protocols and procedures will have to be put in place. Arrangements will have to be negotiated with community-based organizations, regular school districts, and colleges. Mentors will have to be recruited and trained. Parents and students will have to be educated and oriented about their roles. Certainly, not all will go smoothly. Therefore, if a state decides to create a

new, alternative system, it should commit itself to its success and provide as much help as possible, especially during the transitional period.

If a state commits itself to success, success is possible. Otherwise, failure is guaranteed.

In the words of Virgil, we should be “favorable to bold undertakings.” If we want to find the right answers, we must begin by asking the right questions—a “bold undertaking” indeed, for it will lead us to consider actions that have been unthinkable previously.

I would begin with what is perhaps the most important among those questions: Do we love our schools more than we love our children?

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