Addressing (Six) Neglected Elements of School Redesign

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Plans to address persistent Industrial Age flaws in our secondary schools intensified and took on deeper meaning in the 1980s and 90s. A host of thinkers and organizations nationwide shared the work of identifying problem areas that constrained deeper learning and impacted organizational good health. The spirit was one of abandon-and-replace, smart risk-taking and experimentation, and with the involvement of the business sector.

Yet, serious redesign never proceeded. Scores of high-profile sieges failed to penetrate the thicket of statutes, authorization, contractual obligations, binding curriculum doctrines, time allotment/scheduling paradigms, licensure requirements, and, perhaps most vexing, tradition. Once looked to for new models, charter schools, too, were hemmed in by the same factors that stymied innovation in conventional schools.

Would-be reformers and innovators were worn down and such endeavors fell deeply out of favor. And, as Sal Khan wrote, "human nature being what it is, those who prosper under a given system become supporters of that system", explaining why it is that decision-makers have a bias toward the status quo. The education sector, including its associated "think tanks", state bureaucracies, funders, and higher education, have consciously or unconsciously foreclosed on innovation.

Breaking the taboos

In particular, the sector has been reluctant to address a short list of major impediments to learning-- structural, cultural and programmatic-- without which we leave intact an institution more adept at sorting and indoctrination, separating students according to future promise and social caste.

Over the past five years, ERC has convened innovators from several fields, educators at various levels, cognitive scientists, and experts from both organizational and developmental psychology to address these critical yet neglected domains. It's past time for us to deal with the forbidden elements of the architecture of our schools, systems and practices that have ceased to work long ago.

Six areas loom the largest, carrying the greatest negative impact due to their "protected status". Far from accepting those six issues as insolvable, we are more than capable of imagining viable alternatives and improvements if we are given the chance and can show the will. We know the science. We know the policy running room required. We have experience, organizational wisdom (much of it from outside of the education sector) and analytical prowess, and working prototypes of the new. We are at the ready for an "infrastructure bill' of our own and here's the critical work to be included:

1-**Updating and remodeling a 19th-century curriculum approach** that is constraining and problematic and which rigidly shapes and defines school organization. In particular, we need to address the counterproductive fragmentation of learning caused by an assembly-line allotment of time and a piecemeal approach to subject matter. Why we fail to capitalize on the richest learning opportunities, those provided by urgent environmental, social and economic issues facing the planet remains a mystery. As curriculum guru Marion Brady put it, "there will be no significant improvement in learning and school academic performance until systems theory and thinking replace school subjects and disciplines as the primary organizer of information and general knowledge." More appropriate organizational frameworks abound, ones that will support Step 2.

2- **Committing to greater focus on student engagement pedagogies and learner interests informed by brain research,** to compete more successfully with information saturation from other sources, and to employ the forces of curiosity and passionate learning that are sorely lacking as evidenced in virtually every "student voice" opinion poll. Choice, engagement, deep learning and achievement go hand in hand as scientists now can demonstrate, but these can hardly be pursued within our present organizational structures where vague ideas like courses and credits and the grip of "Power School" stymie the teaching that brain scientists promote. The structural freedoms required to support deep learning are currently unavailable.

3- **Piloting multiple, flexible configurations for learning and social-emotional support,** to address severe limitations imposed by K-12 age-like cohort model, grouping and tracking procedures, fragmented special services, and combining those with strong and strategic implementation of youth development and wellness programming. Success in helping young people to thrive both socially-emotionally and intellectually requires a comprehensive re-design approach, one that fully acknowledges the school's central role in mental health and social-emotional life and the harmful impact of unaddressed social determinants.

4- **Replacing normative assessment and reporting and developing new accountability metrics** with the development of curated digital archives, portfolios, public presentations of learning experiences in and beyond the school, and both expert and student-led assessments of activities, growth and learning. The normative paradigm fixation is out of step with the demands of equity in our contemporary society, and does more harm than good. In addition, we should be developing specific and tailored **RBA frameworks** around key challenges and initiatives will enable us to use data in positive, proactive, and student-centered ways**.**

5- **Facilitating deeper, authentic interaction with external communities,** with greater regular access to global expertise beyond school; this will greatly expand rigorous learning opportunities and infuse curricula with industry, scientific and liberal arts standards; capitalizing on these inert but potentially powerful forces will require the re-thinking of our educational programming --curriculum, schedules, adult roles, and information technology architecture, among others.

6- **Reimagining educator professional life** by developing working agreements that provide adequate time for collaborative analysis and problem-solving, professional learning and growth, wellness, and passage through the teacher life cycle, along with creating new ways to implement and assess the effectiveness of those methods. Years ago, Yale psychologist Seymour Sarason identified teacher's professional lifestyle and culture as factors in low job satisfaction, lowered expectations, and diminished growth in her/his craft, asserting that the conditions which often prevail in defining a classroom teacher's ecology and routines contribute to demoralization and self-defeating behaviors. We know that teacher quality, support, and job satisfaction are keys to high performance and superior learning for all involved, but we seldom provide the conditions that undergird those three elements.

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We now have working models of a school – a learning organization- that incorporates each of the above six elements in a fully integrated manner. With the help of "outside activists" such as families, community leaders, the public health sector, arts and youth organizations among others, we can and should bolster the will of policy makers to confront the dilemmas and opportunities associated with each of these six critical elements. Perhaps then we can begin to make the difference demanded by young people and the post-COVID era.

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