The Power of Education Innovation: A Cautionary Tale

AN INTERVIEW WITH

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"As an innovation spreads, a threshold is reached beyond which adoption provides legitimacy rather than improves performance." -Sociologists Walter Powell and Paul DiMaggio on Isomorphism

One of the most prevalent education reforms will soon turn 25. Started in 1991 to disrupt what was considered the traditional school districts' exclusive franchise over education, charter schools broke philosophical ground by uniting people on both sides of the political aisle. The goal of charter schools was to make public education more responsive to the individual needs of its students, more nimble in facing ever-evolving issues, and more innovative in discovering solutions to complex problems.

Charter schools today serve more than 2.5 million students in almost 7,000 schools across 43 states. These schools have changed how education is delivered, measured and met, including playing a large role in creating the online education movement, state accountability systems and new career pathways for teachers. The fact that the public system itself has adopted many of the same reforms is cause to celebrate. When innovations become established, they can have a larger impact. However, when innovations become too established they can lose the very conditions that made them able to innovate; this is the precarious position in which the charter school sector currently finds itself.   The operational flexibility and freedom once afforded to charter schools almost universally has caught a regulatory fervor that its own advocates have invited, slowly "morphing" them into organizations like those they sought to disrupt- they have become more bureaucratic, risk averse, and fixated on process over experimentation. This organizational behavior is, in academic parlance, called *isomorphism-* the behavior that allows once innovative organizations to resemble those they once disrupted.

Charter Innovation. As a response to decades of declining educational competitiveness and achievement, the idea behind charter schools was to empower parents and teachers to create and choose among diverse learning environments. Charters resonated quickly across states and political lines. Between 1991 and 1999, Democrats and Republicans enacted 36 charter school

laws. The result was not only the mainstreaming of school choice, but it was the beginning of a competitive environment that shook the traditional public school establishment, leading to the first state-wide standards and assessments, and consequently, to improved academic performance nationwide. By introducing choice and diversification into public schooling, school districts lost their "exclusive franchise" on their customers, akin to what Clayton Christiansen has argued caused industry giants to lose their competitive edge to innovators able to compete with greater agility to meet consumer needs. While leading firms (in this analogy, traditional public schools) were focused on low-risk "sustaining" improvements that shored up their significant role in their established markets, smaller, cutting-edge firms (i.e., charters) worked to transform labor, capital, materials and information into new "disruptive technologies."

The Innovator's Dilemma. Igniting a revolution in teaching and learning, charters not only disrupted, but also in some cases displaced or reinvigorated established systems, such as those in New Orleans and Los Angeles. Sometimes, however, innovation in a field reaches a point of diminishing returns after the field is perceived either to need or to have attained legitimacy. As Powell and DiMaggio note, "once a field becomes well established there is an inexorable push toward homogenization."

For charter schools, the push has come from philanthropists and even some advocacy groups, who have grown increasingly sensitive to critiques of their industry- criticisms that come largely from inaccurate studies as well as misinformation. Supporters demand a certain "look and feel" from charter schools as a condition of their ongoing support, causing the greater movement to begin to adopt constraining language and processes that aim at ensuring continued support. Those networks that are already established and have "proven" themselves are supported over organic "mom and pop" schools (often developed by minority leaders) or non-traditional service providers. What is generally forgotten is the fact that established organizations were once a single unproven school!

At the heart of this behavior is data from the CREDO Institute, a research organization. Despite employing questionable research methods in its findings of both increased impacts as well as charter school failure, the CREDO Institute's findings have become conventional wisdom and have resulted in widespread calls to close failing schools without third party vetting of the data or valid evaluation science. According to Stanford Economist Caroline Hoxby, CREDO studies are full of negative biases that can only be resolved by employing rigorous research methodologies such as randomized controlled trials, which compare students who applied and were lotteried-in to charters to those who were not. Apples-to-apples comparisons could reveal dramatic positive differences in charter student achievement.

Leading charter school advocates, such as the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) and the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA), have embraced CREDO data without investigation. These organizations are increasingly providing support for isomorphic one-size-fits-all

charter school laws and accountability systems to address the reported charter school deficiencies, thus creating laws rife with top-down compliance and discouraging innovation and new entrants for fear that changes in their data without a long view might result in pressure on policymakers to close them.

While it is natural for any disruptive field to experience criticism, rather than simply accepting or ignoring the criticism, the field should be deepening its understanding of the conditions under which these schools operate and the complexity of data that once understood may tell a vastly differently story.

Establishing Innovation. Cities like Washington, DC and Indianapolis demonstrate that having an innovative and independent charter school sector results in diverse and successful charter schools. In these cities, where charter schools serve 46% and 28% of students, respectively, traditional districts have been driven to innovate, netting overall improved education and economic climates. [Charter schools must rise above the current "isomorphic episode" in order to establish the kinds of organizational blueprints embraced by high tech startups, a context wherein entrepreneurs place high value on lean experimentation to allow constant iteration of products and services.](#) By frequently evaluating how a reform is doing, we can improve the odds of establishing a pattern of innovation that can continue to transform schooling for increased benefit of students, schools, and communities. The history and [data show](#) that from [New York](#) to Arizona and across the United States, in places where the charter movement has rejected demands for convention, charter schools retain their influence as positive and disruptive innovations. They have thus created an exciting environment where all schools are being driven to innovate for the benefit of all learners.