

Educational Freedom & Technology

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As American Experiment has written and published—heck, as every think tank, regardless of point of view is writing and publishing these days—the increasingly imperative political and policy goal is finding ways of ways of reducing expenses while simultaneously improving public services. There’s no need here to detail why this is acutely so, only to acknowledge that both Minnesota and the rest of the nation are in the early days of what likely will be a generation-long siege of demographically destined budget headaches. In other words—and it’s not a happy sentence—the shortfall with which legislators and the governor currently are grappling in St. Paul is but an early installment of more to come.

Talking and thinking about ways of saving public dollars while also improving governmental performance has a compelling ring to it, but is it really feasible? More specifically, is it really possible in an immense and immensely politicized field such as elementary and secondary education? The answer actually is yes, with a portion of the route getting there less pot-holed than some people might imagine.

Let’s start with that more navigable stretch of road.

Two important and persuasive books in the last two years have argued that the United States and the rest of the world are on the cusp of a period in which advanced computer and other technologies will enable students to learn more successfully than ever before. Lest I leave the wrong impression, let it be understood that I’m less inclined than just about anyone I know to believe that

mere machines—no matter how miraculous they may be—could ever truly lead the way in significantly reforming American education, as I’m not exactly an electronics maven. Rather, I invariably focus on the more elusive social and cultural aspects and impediments to learning, starting with family fragmentation rates in this country that are just about the highest in the world. Nevertheless, it’s clear that technology can lead the way in customizing and, therefore, expanding and deepening learning as never before. This, for instance, is a slice of how Clayton Christensen, Michael Horn, and Minnesota’s Curt Johnson make the case in *Disrupting Class*:

“If we acknowledge that all children learn differently, then the way schooling is currently arranged—in a monolithic batch mode system where all students are taught the same things on the same day in the same way—won’t ever allow us to educate children in customized ways.” Some of the places and vehicles, they say, with the biggest potential to “circumvent the system and create a new, modular education system” are the growing number of online learning networks.¹

Political scientists Terry M. Moe and John E. Chubb argue similarly in their 2009 book, *Liberating Learning*. Here’s an example of their take on matters, pertaining especially to the two-thirds of American children who, they contend, have problems with reading comprehension.

For many of these students the issue stems from a failure during the primary years to gain fluency—the ability to decode letters and sounds quickly, automatically, and un-

consciously into words, phrases, and sentences. Without fluency, students cannot comprehend complex text because the sheer concentration required to decode leaves little mental capacity to think about what is being read. Ideally, schools would catch and remediate these fluency problems during the primary years, before they cripple comprehension. But fixing fluency requires attention to individual decoding issues and lots and lots of practice. Instructional programs have been created to accomplish this, through instruction in very small groups. But this is expensive—requiring lots of teachers—and time consuming. In recent years, technology has provided promising solutions that appear superior to teacher-led approaches.

Or, if you will, relying more on technology—which is not to suggest relying *exclusively* on it—is already demonstrating that boys and girls can learn substantially more while potentially taxing their parents measurably less.

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Taking greater advantage of what scientists and engineers create in the service of learning is the aforementioned relatively smooth route and sure bet. What's the rockier state highway when it comes to improving academic achievement while constraining costs? The answer is just about anything dealing with increasing competition in education, but most of all, anything dealing with vouchers or tax credits aimed at affording parents more freedom in choosing best possible schools for their children, regardless of whether such places are publicly or privately operated, religiously inspired or not.

Voucher critics are at least partially correct when they say there has not been a huge amount of research demonstrating their effectiveness. The unremarkable main reason for this, of course, is that those same critics have often led the way

in making certain that voucher (or tax credit) programs never get passed or adopted in the first place. It's akin to bludgeoning one's parents—and then seeking mercy as an orphan. "Your honor, just because my educational cartel friends and I killed all those proposed voucher initiatives before they ever got started, that doesn't mean we can't rail about how they haven't been studied a lot."

Still, that's not to say there isn't a significant body of rigorous research which makes a compelling case for vouchers, because in fact there is. As noted by political scientist Jay Greene, a number of voucher programs have been studied in depth. There have been eight "random assignment" studies—the gold standard of research designs—of five voucher programs around the country: Milwaukee, Charlotte, Dayton, New York City, and Washington, D.C. All programs, except for Milwaukee's, have been privately funded. All eight studies, he has written, found positive academic effects, with the benefits in seven out of the eight studies rising to statistical significance.²

Drawing on such results, political scientists William G. Howell and Paul E. Peterson discuss the implications for reducing achievement gaps: "The findings," they write, "are consistent with other scholarly findings: attending a private school, compared with attending a public school, boosts African American student's test scores, educational attainment, likelihood of pursuing an advanced degree, and future earnings."³ The fact that Professor Peterson, currently at Harvard, is originally from Montevideo, Minnesota, only reinforces confidence in what he concludes.

When it comes to how voucher programs might not only improve achievement but also save money, the point to keep in mind is that there is no one way to conceive of any such plan. Is it possible to design a voucher program that saves large amounts of money? Of course. Is it also possible to construct one that ultimately saves no money at all? Yes, again, as everything de-

depends on questions such as the size of vouchers, number of eligible students, limits on family income, amount of state aid remaining with school districts if students leave, etc.

Bottom line: Is it possible to design and pass voucher programs that are both academically and fiscally sound and fair? Absolutely—if routine power politics are first and somehow put aside, since some players equate educational freedom with the demise of all that is good and wise and holy.

This ridiculous but realpolitik view is the paralyzing currency of special interests (such as Education Minnesota, but not only it) which hate vouchers and other types of choice, condemning them as incongruent with their parochial self-interests. As they say in diplomatic quarters, this is “unfortunate,” as vouchers, tax credits, charters, virtual schools, homeschooling and the like are very much in the best interests of the (young) people who matter most.

This leads us to three recommendations, the first pertaining to technology.

Technology is not a “reform” but a “force.” Lobbyists might be able to stop attempts at the former, but they are ultimately powerless to foreclose the latter. This is how Professor Moe (he teaches at Stanford) put it during an American Experiment luncheon forum last July:

The unions can block proposals in politics, but they can't stop technology from shaping our society, from shaping our attitudes, from shaping what parents and kids want, from giving rise to entrepreneurs all over the place who are developing new things for education and pursuing them in various ways. So as a result, technology is going to seep into the system. It's going to seep in slowly because the unions are trying to block it, but it is going to seep in.

Focus particularly on what Dr. Moe says and implies about entrepreneurs: How unknown numbers of them, in coming years, will develop new and hard-to-imagine ways for taking greater advantage of technology in the service of learning. They will pursue all kinds of approaches in all kinds of settings: district schools, charter schools, private schools, brick-and-mortar classrooms, virtual classrooms, kitchen classrooms, the gamut. The range and mix are impossible to predict. But to the extent that such invention and experimentation are unreasonably restricted by powers that be, students—not to mention Minnesota and the whole of the nation—will suffer. Hence, this encompassing recommendation:

- ***Any proposed policy, current practice, or budget adjustment that makes it unreasonably difficult for entrepreneurs and imaginative educational leaders to take greater advantage of technological breakthroughs ought to be rejected, as legislators and others should explicitly embrace responsible innovation and, therefore, freedom and progress.***

The recommendation is offered cognizant of recent backtracking in other states. In 2009, for instance, the Florida Virtual School, the largest such program in the nation, received a 10-percent per pupil cut while funding for traditional schools increased. Connecticut, Delaware, and Oregon also curtailed on-line initiatives. Without question, hard economic times call for hard budgetary decisions. But on-line learning is one area where (1) savings are demonstrably possible; but (2) where teacher unions and other unbending interests are hell-bent to remain athwart up-beat history declaring “Stop.”

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Here's quick background on a second technological possibility before moving on to a third and final recommendation, on a new education tax credit.

Everyone recognizes that 19th Century agrarian school calendars are incongruent with just about anything and everything about the 21st Century. Barriers, however, to extending the traditional school year in brick-and-mortar Minnesota schools are nearly insurmountable, starting with a decided lack of funding at all levels, but also including a frequent lack of air conditioning, the certain opposition of the tourist industry, and the unsurprising fact that most educators relish long summers, often relying on them to supplement their incomes. As a result, great numbers of student are education non-consumers for months at a time. But according to Harvard's Professor Christensen and his colleagues, meeting the needs of non-consumers is precisely the way disruptive innovations such as on-line learning spread. Or inexorably "seeps," as Drs. Moe and Chubb might put it. Meeting the need for additional and enriched summer instruction via customized technology is a natural and invaluable progression. All of which leads to this second recommendation:

- *The governor, in conjunction with legislative leaders, should appoint a high-level commission to investigate lengthening the school year by taking greater advantage of on-line learning and other technological opportunities, thus increasing achievement and providing Minnesota students with substantial advantages over counterparts elsewhere.*

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In a bow to Minnesota political reality circa 2010, the third recommendation pertains, not to vouchers, but to educational freedom via tax credits and is tied to a bill set to be considered again by the Minnesota Legislature. Called

the "Equity and Opportunity in Education Tax Credit" and authored by Sen. Linda Scheid (DFL-Brooklyn Park) and Rep. Paul Thissen (DFL-Minneapolis), it's aimed at encouraging contributions to scholarship-granting organizations benefiting low-income boys and girls at private *and* public schools. Students and families in Arizona and Pennsylvania have profited from similar programs for years now.

According to the Coalition for Kids, led by Jim Field of the Minnesota Independent School Forum, the Minnesota tax credit (which would be limited to \$100,000 for corporations and \$10,000 for individuals) would allow "nonpublic school students who qualify for need-based scholarships to stay in the school they choose." It likewise would provide tutors and other types of assistance to low-income students in public schools. This is a more than worthy initiative, hence a final recommendation:

- *The governor and legislators ought to support the bipartisan Equity and Opportunity in Education Tax Credit in order to increase educational options and, therefore, academic achievement by Minnesota students.*

Endnotes

¹ Clayton M. Christensen, Michael B. Horn, and Curtis W. Johnson, *Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns* (New York: McGraw Hill, p. 225.

² Jay P. Greene, *Education Myths: What Special Interest Groups Want You to Believe About Our Schools – and Why It Isn't So* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), pp. 147-56.

³ William G. Howell and Paul E. Peterson, *The Education Gap: Vouchers and Urban Schools* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2002; 2006), p. 186.

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