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From Improvement to Transformation?

Two recent broadcasts neatly illustrate a paradox endemic to education in every era of major social and economic change. Recently CBC's *Cross Country Checkup* asked listeners whether 'high school students are unprepared for higher studies.'¹ The majority of callers answered "yes" – students can't think or write well enough; they rely on Internet sources; high schools inflate marks and don't fail students; and parents aspire to university education regardless of their children's interests, aptitudes, or academic abilities. The problem is that schools and students are just not as good as they used to be. In a second broadcast of a speech by Professor Janice Stein, she argued that schools need to serve both individual and societal interests by educating "risk-takers in a world characterized by interconnections and innovation."² Schools, she said, must be allowed to innovate by trying new ideas that will sometimes fail. Public schools hear such conflicting messages all the time: improve what you're doing; innovate; do something new; transform the experience of students. There are of course different descriptions of the problems that correspondingly call for different degrees or scope of change.

Demands for change more radical than improvement of current practice in education seem to be getting louder and more public. The popularity of Father Guido Sarducci's satirical skit, *Five Minute University*, with 163 million references on the Internet; Malcolm Gladwell's, *The Outliers: The Story of Success* that reached the number one spot on the New York Times best-seller list; and Sir Ken Robinson's talk on how "schools kill creativity" that is among the Top 10 most watched TEDTalks (along with Al Gore on averting climate crisis), suggest a growing appetite for rethinking the nature if not the purpose of school.

The challenges to be addressed by improvement, innovation, or transformation are framed in different ways. In Canada the focus tends to be on raising achievement (and particularly on 'closing the gap' that requires disrupting the correlation between socio-economic factors and school outcomes) and establishing high school graduation for all students not just as the goal, but as the reality. A fairly compelling case has been made for a focus on 21st century skills that might be better named competencies: collaboration, problem solving, critical thinking, technological literacy, creativity and innovation, communication, and cross cultural competence. These are not really new aspirations for students. Society has always nurtured some people with the attributes, aptitudes, knowledge, and skills to thrive as compassionate and contributing citizens. And Canada has done that better than most. What's new is that the aspiration that what was once available to the few can become the experience of the many.

Assuming that such ideas are worthy of our attention, it is not clear whether some of the more radical innovations being developed at the level of the school can be scaled to produce substantially different outcomes at a systems level. Change in school systems can be accomplished through incremental improvement. Educators can acquire new skills, curriculum can be improved, and large-scale assessments of achievement can become ever more sophisticated and accurate. Some jurisdictions drive improvement through directive strategies. Others adopt a more facilitative stance towards local school authorities. Improvement efforts have raised student achievement. But the plateau effect – the point at which incremental improvement in student achievement stalls – is now recognized as a common feature of otherwise well designed improvement plans.

The public has little appetite for experiments that might fail, so building support for new designs for school is critical. The most promising ideas are usually research-based although obviously if they are new, their effectiveness cannot be determined empirically in advance. Linda Kaser and Judy Halbert, leaders of the British Columbia's Network of Performance Based Schools write, "It is now widely accepted that transforming schools is at the heart of system-wide transformation."³ The future of public education as the system that serves society may well depend on such system wide transformation.

The resources offered here include examples of innovations in education and examples of strategies to engage the public in thinking about the future of public education. |

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Resources

Canada

Galileo Educational Network <http://galileo.org>

Network of Performance Based Schools <http://www.npbs.ca/>
Inspiring Education, Alberta

<http://inspiringeducation.alberta.ca/Home/tabid/37/Default.aspx>

Imaginative Education Research Group <http://www.iereg.org>

United Kingdom

Innovation Unit <http://www.innovation-unit.co.uk/>

FutureLab <http://www.futurelab.org.uk/>

United States

Big Picture Learning <http://www.bigpicture.org/>

High Tech High <http://www.hightechhigh.org/about/>

Transforming Education in Vermont http://www.education.vermont.gov/new/pdfdoc/dept/transformation/transformation_080108.pdf

International

OECD 2008 Innovating to Learn, Learning to Innovate http://www.oecd.org/document/7/0,3343,en_2649_35845581_41656455_1_1_1_1,00.html

2009 European Year of Creativity and Innovation

http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc56_en.htm

Notes

- 1 CBC Radio. *Cross Country Checkup*, "Preparing for University." Sunday April 12, 2009. Podcast at <http://www.cbc.ca/podcasting/pastpodcasts.html?52#ref52>
- 2 Janice Gross Stein, "Educating Risk-takers in a World of Innovation." Quest Conference 2008. Broadcast by Rogers Cable at <http://www.rogerstv.com/get.asp?lid=132&rid=17&mid=13&arid=4>
- 3 Linda Kaser and Judy Halbert, *Leadership Mindsets: Innovation and Learning in the Transformation of Schools* (Oxford, UK: Routledge, 2009): xv.

