

CHOICE AND INNOVATION

Stimulating Education Reform

DWIGHT D. JONES
COLORADO COMMISSIONER OF EDUCATION

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A Note to the Reader

“What’s your view on choice?”

During my first week as commissioner, I was asked this question, and 22 months later, my answer remains the same: “Parents have spoken, and choice is here to stay.”

In fact, my view on choice has expanded greatly. For many of us in Colorado, choice has long been equated to charter schools. The evolution of online learning expanded that notion. But choice is so much more than only charter schools and online programs. Across the state, district-level choice is proving quite successful. Many site-specific choice options also yield outstanding results. And I am sure there is a cadre of ideas waiting to be developed into effective choice strategies.

I am convinced that if we are to successfully educate today’s students, we need to engage in real conversations about innovation and change. We need to discuss how to best reform education and how to capitalize on choice opportunities for students in the meantime. I believe these are the right conversations to have.

My intent in writing this paper is to start these conversations.

~ Dwight D. Jones
Commissioner
April 6, 2009

The Urgency for Change

There are more than 47,800 teachers in 1,771 schools in 178 districts across Colorado who are dedicated to teaching our children. I have seen them in action; I have visited classrooms and spoken to principals and administrators. Literally thousands of people are focused on raising student achievement in Colorado. All of them are working hard. And students are learning. But are all of our students learning enough?

Consider these facts:

- Colorado ranks 46th in the nation with respect to the high school completion rate.
- Hispanic students graduate from high school at *half* the rate of white students.
- Colorado's gap between postsecondary degree attainment of white students and Hispanic students is the largest in the United States.
- For the first time in history, American young people are less likely than their parents to complete high school.

At a time when nations like India and China are producing more and more college-educated citizens, industries with the greatest potential for future job growth in the United States are requiring more postsecondary education. And we're struggling to get many students through high school.

As resources decline and the economy remains uncertain, our success will depend on our ability to provide students with the knowledge and skills they need to thrive in college, the incentives and motivation to work hard in the marketplace, and the opportunities and outcomes to contribute to society.

To ensure our prosperity (or regain it, in some cases), we must change the way we teach to match the many contexts of student learning. We must be innovative and expand our notion of school choice to improve capabilities, incentives, opportunities and outcomes for students in Colorado. The innovation grant program included in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 provides an extraordinary opportunity for us in this regard. Our mission is clear: We must reform education.

Choice as Education Reform

Education reform is easy to talk about, and harder to do. By definition, *reform* means doing something better. If we are to reform education, however, we must not only do things better, we must get better results. One way to begin the reform process is to rethink our view of choice.

For me, the notion of choice in public education has more to do with every child's right to an education that prepares each of them for success, and less to do with freedom to pick the style of school you like best. I believe that to deliver on the promise of success for all students, we must cultivate new ideas and find ways to expand and sustain effective options. In a world of growing diversity, no single approach to schooling works for all students.

While schools must be well-adapted to current conditions, they also must be adaptable to changing conditions. Though resources shrink, expectations continue to rise. Changes in demography, law and technology should prompt us to rethink basic assumptions about how schooling is carried out – especially in light of the emerging economies that challenge America's leadership position in the world.

Choice and Innovation

To expand options for parents, students and educators in Colorado, we need a system that supports and provides incentives for innovation. Clayton Christensen, author of *The Innovator's Dilemma*,ⁱ argues for two types of innovation: one that improves on existing processes, and one that boldly changes an entire system. He suggests that this combination is necessary because it drives improvement and transforms operations.

Most existing school reform consists of process improvement. And when implemented well, process improvement can indeed yield positive results. However, substantial reform requires system redesign – anything less is like sailing to find new lands but hugging the shoreline. To find new lands you must cut across open water, which is risky and thus viewed as undesirable by the mainstream. But it also offers the greatest potential for attaining the goal. Thus, bold leadership is required to commit the resources necessary for successful implementation. In the words of Frederick Hess, “Solving new problems or more effectively addressing stubborn problems has been the province of new entrants. The challenge is not simply promoting best practices or loosening regulations but encouraging new ventures that can solve problems more effectively.”ⁱⁱ

By encouraging these “new ventures,” we recognize that innovation and choice are inextricably intertwined. Only with innovation are meaningful options created; greater incentive for innovation exists because of the opportunities to choose from these options. In Colorado, open enrollment has allowed parents to select schools best suited to their children’s needs, while the charter school and innovative school acts, as well as the creation of alternative teacher certification pathways, have led to even more options for parents, students and educators.

Choice and innovation present themselves in a variety of ways:

For parents and students:

- Gender-specific schools.
- Home schools.
- Charter schools.
- Online schools and learning centers.
- Alternative schools.
- Virtual schools that provide customized curricular interventions.
- Residential schools.

For educational delivery:

- Postsecondary trade schools, colleges and universities.
- Education management companies.
- Charter management organizations.
- Proprietary schools that businesses develop as alternatives to traditional school settings.
- Industry-partner schools that provide students the opportunity to study within a given field.

Incentives for innovation:

- Developing creative funding solutions by increasing collaboration between the public and private sectors.
- Establishing incentive funding for schools and districts that show exceptional improvement in student performance.
- Developing new incentives to reward students for educational performance.
- Partnering with existing institutions to develop performance-based compensation systems.

Choice and Innovation in Colorado

Recently I visited with the superintendent in Aurora Public Schools to learn about new career-pathways programs the district has implemented to engage students within science, math, engineering and technology fields. The Galaxy Initiativeⁱⁱⁱ is designed to guide students to STEM-related professions through rigorous academic programs and associated field experiences beginning in elementary school and continuing through high school and into college. Aurora's LIGHT's program^{iv} provides career-pathway experiences for students in the health sciences. This program has been developed in partnership with the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center and the Community College of Aurora. The career-pathways programs include specialized training, tutoring, mentoring, field experiences and college counseling. The district is also developing a P-20 integrated-instruction campus^v that provides a seamless education from preschool to graduate school. The P-8 school is scheduled to open in 2010; the high school, in 2011. The physical site also allows for the construction of a college facility.

I was reminded of the power of online learning opportunities when I attended the Hope Online Learning Academy graduation ceremony in June 2008. The valedictorian, the first in her family to graduate from high school, spoke of her difficult road to graduation. With a full-time job and financial responsibilities not commonly required of a 17-year-old, she would not have been able to succeed without the opportunity to learn outside a traditional classroom setting and schedule.

In 2007-08, Denver Public Schools used a licensing waiver to implement the alternative teacher program Teach For America^{vi} to recruit, train, place and mentor teachers to teach in hard-to-fill positions in schools with high poverty and low achievement growth. TFA develops a national corps of top college graduates who commit to teach for two years in under-resourced public schools. Working in collaboration with the Colorado Department of Education's licensing department, TFA has become an approved alternative teacher-preparation program. (The 2009 Colorado General Assembly is considering legislation that would allow non-profit groups like TFA to receive designation as statewide teacher-preparation programs.)

At the Denver School of Science and Technology,^{vii} each student has his or her own advisory group of 14 peers and an advisor. As DSST's first senior class gets ready to graduate in May 2009, 96.5 percent of seniors have been accepted into four-year colleges (the goal is 100 percent). A large sign shaped like a thermometer hangs in the entryway, displaying the school's progress toward that goal.

Highline Academy Charter School^{viii} in Denver uses "benchmark grading" to provide each student and his or her teachers and parents a 12- to 15-page report card detailing specific areas on which that learner needs to focus. Beginning in kindergarten, all students are taught Spanish. A partnership with Denver University involves 50 graduate students who help teachers identify students requiring specific intervention plans and who assist with one-on-one student tutoring.

The Job Corps^{ix} residential center in Collbran is making a tremendous difference in young lives. Job Corps is a true last-chance option for students who have been expelled, detained in juvenile corrections and the like. Students follow a regimented plan in this strict setting, and are paired with staff mentors who meet with them weekly. In the end, each student who graduates from the program receives both a high school diploma and a professional certificate in a trade such as culinary arts, carpentry, masonry or painting.

Some Colorado districts are fostering relationships with their charter schools to promote healthy change. Lamar School District is one such example of a district charter school and district leadership working in close collaboration to meet the needs of students and their families. In fact, when I visited the district with the superintendent, Alta Vista Charter School was our first stop.

Blueprint for Change

Innovation and choice are necessary, but insufficient, to successfully redesign public education. Once innovative choice models are proven effective, the system is responsible to take these effective practices to scale. Finding solutions that work on a small scale and using them to produce improvement in performance on a large scale is the challenge. And this challenge can be daunting.

Effective change depends on the system's ability to learn. As Frederick Hess stated, "The longer organizations exist and the more they thrive, the more difficult it can be to step away from established practices and adapt to changed circumstances."^x Public education, a well-established system, is a difficult one to change.

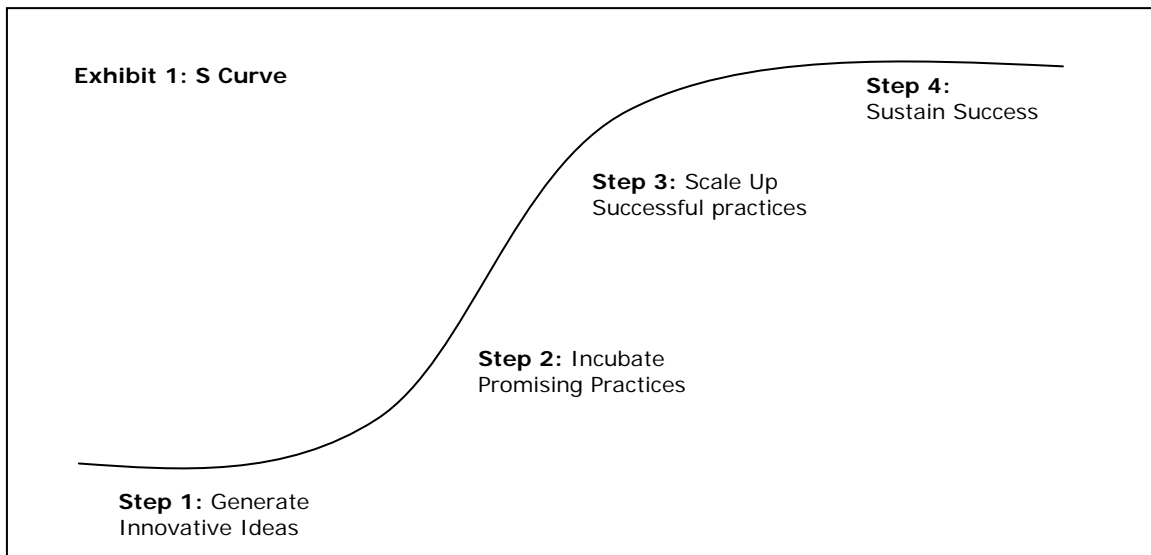
In broad strokes, the goal is to generate new ideas and then generalize them. There are four steps in this process (see Exhibit 1 below):

Step One: Generate innovative ideas by engaging people with multiple perspectives. Thinking about complex systems in new ways results in new ideas.

Step Two: Incubate promising practices and allow them to grow.

Step Three: Take successful practices to scale.

Step Four: Sustain success by tenacious implementation over time.



When it comes to improving public education in Colorado, we must have the courage to do just that. If we want students to be truly prepared for their futures, traditional schools of the last century won't cut it. For innovation and an expanded view of choice to benefit public education, certain conditions must exist. Prescriptions for change follow from basic assumptions:

1. To address root causes, we first must be explicit about our purpose. The purpose of public education goes beyond preserving access and opportunity. Equity of opportunity must be matched by equity of outcomes to ensure young people have what it takes to earn a living, live full lives and be contributing members of society in tomorrow's world. Success is – or should be – a birthright.

2. We must confront the facts and correct the mismatch between assumptions and how the world works. We are faced with a variety of mismatches. The skills schools teach are not well-aligned with workplace requirements – content proficiency, while necessary, is not sufficient. The way students are taught in school often does not match how today’s students learn. If we are in the business of success for all students, our education system must recognize that today’s students learn differently than did yesterday’s. Similarly, the system we need is one where students are the drivers of their education system, as opposed to the receivers of an inherited system. Districts need to recognize and leverage the increasing role of technology in learning and in social interaction.
3. We need to intentionally introduce innovative educational approaches. Adam Urbanski, a nationally recognized leader in education reform, had it right. “If we always do what we’ve always done, we’ll always get what we’ve always got.” The system we have is perfectly designed to produce the results we currently have. When it comes to improving schools, this much is certain: To expect better results, we have to do things differently.

Examples of efforts to generate new ideas, take effective innovations to scale and support their sustainability follow:

- Leadership Center: Research shows leadership is second only to instruction in factors that impact student achievement. The Colorado State Legislature agreed when it established the School Leadership Academy Program (H.B. 08-1386) and directed me to appoint a School Leadership Academy Board ^{xi} to provide advice on the implementation of a state leadership development center for superintendents, school board members, principals and school leaders. Strategic leadership development models being considered in Colorado include innovative entrance pathways, job-embedded training, mentoring, fellowships and networking opportunities.
- The Colorado Math, Science and Creativity Academy: Seventeen states have a residential high school that fosters the development of math and science. I propose establishing the Colorado Math, Science and Creativity Academy to provide an environment to grow the math, science and creative talents of Colorado students, thus reinforcing our capacity for statewide, national and global competitiveness. Such a school would also serve as a laboratory for teaching and learning.

The vision for the academy is a place where high school, higher education and business partnerships thrive and produce innovative efforts to improve math, science and creative education. Exceptionally gifted students from across Colorado would have the opportunity to learn, create and conduct research alongside Colorado’s most talented scientists, mathematicians and Nobel laureates. Teachers would be able to “intern” and gain professional development in a culture-rich environment. More, students would create relationships with local and state organizations and corporations, which would increase the likelihood of placing Colorado talent in the state’s fastest growing industries.

- Online Learning: How well prepared are states to lead, guide and support the shift of education delivery to online? According to some reports, by 2019 nearly half of all high school courses will be delivered online.^{xiii}

Colorado needs to make a larger commitment to grow fledgling online programs across the state. As more and more Colorado families choose online learning as either the primary means of education for their children or as a supplement to brick-and-mortar education, we are responsible for ensuring a level of accountability in order to deliver a high-quality educational program.

According to the 2008 *Keeping Pace With K-12 Online Learning* report by Evergreen Consulting Associates, a total of 44 states offer some type of online learning option for K-12 students. There are currently 25 state-led programs and eight state-led initiatives across the nation. Full-time online schools are the second most common online learning option, and 21 states have these types of

programs, most often as charter schools. Of those 21 states, only six – including Colorado – have no state-led program directly under the department of education (though they do have numerous multi-district, full-time online schools).

Research, Development and Information Management: I believe a state department should be an outstanding source for high-quality research and information about critical aspects of the performance of our educational system. The reality is, we do not have all the answers. Our ability to reach a high standard for capacity in this area requires that we partner with others. To that end, we are sponsoring efforts to make educational data more easily accessible to researchers. Through public and private partnerships, we are developing new information management tools for educators to manage the performance of their classrooms, schools and districts. These systems, such as the Colorado Growth Model and the forthcoming teacher identifier system, will allow us to more accurately make meaningful connections about successes and failures so necessary adjustments can be made.

- International Benchmarking: A recent publication on international benchmarking states, “We are living in a world without borders. To meet the realities of the 21st century’s global economy and maintain America’s competitive edge into the future, we need students who are prepared to compete not only with their American peers, but with students from across the globe for the jobs of tomorrow.”^{xiii}

Further, “Around the globe, governments are eagerly comparing their educational outcomes to the best in the world. Their goal is not just to ‘see how they rank.’ Rather, they want to identify and learn from top performers and rapid improvers. ... While education may not be the only lever for ensuring prosperity in an age of globalization, it is a tremendously important one.”^{xiv}

One example of how Colorado acknowledges the value of this global competition, if you will, is in an International Baccalaureate (IB) education. IB high school students in Colorado are guaranteed 24 college credits with an IB diploma. There are many IB programs being offered around the state: 19 primary programs, 27 middle year programs and 23 diploma programs.

4. We must set sensible boundaries for our creativity and inventiveness. Innovation is much more than just a big idea. Innovation requires creativity tied to a purpose. When schools are successful in providing an education that yields increased achievement for all students and decreased achievement gaps, they should have greater autonomy. When schools persistently underperform, they should be shuttered. While we as a society want to promote success for the individual student, we also want to enhance the common good. To effectively manage such choice and innovation, local school boards may be well-served to consider their role as education portfolio managers. The state should support school district capacity to carry out this role, placing greater emphasis on performance management and oversight of student outcomes.
5. We need to identify effective models and take them to scale. When choice models result in improved student learning and higher levels of academic achievement, we should encourage the expansion of these models into schools and districts across the state. Mechanisms to broaden the impact of effective ideas include the following:

Expansion of local success stories: Local education leaders are conducting research and piloting practices within their districts and schools to determine what works, as well as what doesn’t. Replicating local models statewide would expand the scope of their work.

Leveraging existing resources to expand effective practices: At present, Title I funding does not provide incentives for implementing proven practices. Repositioning Title I to ensure schools and districts with the greatest need provide the appropriate, educational choice for students is one

example. Establishing a portability process for Title I, so that funding follows the student who qualifies for it, is another.

Funding: Under the current system, funding for a given year is based on the annual Oct. 1 student count. To provide the proper incentives, dollars should follow both student need and student results. While adjustments should be made to ensure greater funding for schools and districts with high poverty and other challenges, such funding streams should continue to flow only in the presence of increased academic performance.

Richard Elmore says, “For every increment of performance I demand from you, I have an equal responsibility to provide you with the capacity to meet that expectation.”^{xv} In a local-control state like Colorado, the challenge is to provide state-level support that takes into account local needs while expanding the capacity for innovation and improvement. As we use these assumptions to provide direction and guide action, the state’s objective emerges clearly: Capacity building is central to the mission of the Colorado Department of Education.

In Closing ...

The Colorado Department of Education’s commitment to inviting, supporting and expanding effective innovations in education stems from a belief that what matters most is learning – for students and those who teach and care for them. An atmosphere that fosters innovation recognizes that both success and failure are part of learning, and that the generation of new ideas is systematically followed by the pursuit of promising practices and implementing what works.

To be a great state, we must be an educated one. I believe that creating an open sector in Colorado public education – one in which innovators are able to try new forms of school and schooling – will better serve our students and their learning. Such a system will not come without risks, but faced with our current economic challenges, we must stand firm in our investment in choice and educational reform.

Innovative approaches are the answer to difficult times. They are the bridge between today’s challenges and tomorrow’s opportunities. Responsible leadership requires that we take what we know and learn, and apply it in ways that raise achievement of all students, especially those who are currently underachieving.

It is *this* kind of educational reform that will produce citizens who are all knowledgeable and skilled, empowered with high expectations and truly prepared to create a successful future. □

ⁱ Clayton M. Christensen, *The Innovator’s Dilemma*. Harvard Business School Press, 2003.

ⁱⁱ Frederick Hess. *The Future of Educational Entrepreneurship*. Harvard Education Press, 2008.

ⁱⁱⁱ Galaxy Initiative: <http://www.aps.k12.co.us>

^{iv} Aurora LIGHTS: http://www.aps.k12.co.us/community/aurora_lights.htm

^v Aurora’s P-20/CAP4K Campus: <http://apscms.net/departments/bond/bond-projects/aps-ed-campus/>

^{vi} Teach for America: http://www.teachforamerica.org/newsroom/documents/TeachForAmerica_News_20070208.htm

^{vii} Denver School of Science and Technology: <http://www.scienceandtech.org>

viii Highline Academy Charter School: <http://www.highlineacademy.org/>

ix Job Corps: <http://collbran.jobcorps.gov/>

x Hess, 2008.

xi School Leadership Academy: <http://www.cde.state.co.us/scripts/reforms/detail.asp?itemid=657725>

xii Clayton M. Christensen, *Disrupting Class: How disruptive innovation will change the way the world learns*. McGraw-Hill, 2008.

xiii Nation Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers, "Benchmarking for Success: Ensuring U.S. Students Receive a World Class Education", NGA, CCSSO, and Achieve, December 19, 2008.

xiv Nation Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008

xv Richard Elmore. *The Price of Accountability*, 2002