The Greenfield Path to School Improvement

State policymakers can help clear away the rubble that impedes vibrant reform.

Frederick M. Hess

One of the many things the pandemic has illuminated is where schools get stuck. For more than a year, millions of children attended school remotely, and yet the quality of that instruction remained hostage to the capacities of geographically determined school districts.

The constraints imposed by the familiar web of rules, contracts, and programs were cast into particularly harsh relief during spring 2020, when rules intended to ensure that schools educate all students frequently seemed, in practice, to strip school systems of the flexibility and agency they sorely needed (which is why some states moved to waive some of these rules in 2020). Meanwhile, Oregon told *virtual* schools to stop teaching because, as the state's department of education explained, systems "cannot open a brick-and-mortar school in Oregon unless it is accessible to every student in their school district. The same rules apply to an online school."[1] In short, since the state's traditional school districts were not ready to educate their students, learning had to stop everywhere.

Such stories were manifold. Too often, rather than ensuring that all kids were well served, the latticework of regulation led to hesitancy and risk aversion. Education stalled as school systems fretted about bending the rules and awaited assurance that they had permission to educate kids.

For me, this period has brought back thoughts of *Education Unbound*, which I penned more than a decade ago. The book sketched a vision of what I call "greenfield schooling." The premise is simple: Profound educational improvement requires more than fine-tuning systems that have evolved over two centuries; it requires policymakers and educational leaders to revisit organizing assumptions about the grammar of schooling.[2]

Greenfield schooling borrows a metaphor more frequently employed by builders, who use the term to refer to land that is clear, level, accessible, and free of hazards—in other words, ready-made for a build. The idea of greenfield schooling, then, is an education environment that is inviting and hospitable for educators and problem-solvers working to tackle important problems.

The greenfield notion owes much to the thinking of economist Friedrich von Hayek. In his 1974 Nobel acceptance speech, Hayek observed that one can

approach public policy as either a gardener or an engineer. He was suggesting that policymakers can think like engineers, who construct sophisticated proposals that they try to execute from on high, or like gardeners, who strive to create the conditions that yield a robust harvest. Hayek thought it difficult, if not futile, for policymakers to operate as engineers, because they simply do not have enough control or information to design effective solutions.

Hayek's concerns are all too familiar to those trying to devise solutions for hundreds or thousands of schools across scores of extraordinarily diverse communities. In short, the greenfield approach to school improvement eschews grand solutions in favor of fertilizing the soil so healthy, vibrant reform can shoot up organically.

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The possibilities of a greenfield approach are unbounded, and the pandemic ought to have inspired several. Schools could allow high school students to deliver more computer-assisted tutoring. They could use virtual delivery to allow every interested student to enroll in Advanced Placement. They could make it easier for families to take advantage of remote learning options without forcing their children to forfeit other valuable formative experiences (for example, many states restrict athletic or extracurricular participation if a student is not enrolled locally—this should be revisited). They could allow validated competency tests to displace seat-time requirements where appropriate. They could tailor the school week and year to better serve families. They could enable high schoolers to create hybrid schedules as a matter of course. They could give families more opportunities to tell schools what services they need. The possibilities are as endless as the situations of 100,000 schools and 50 million children.

Greenfield vs. Grand Solutions

For those who appreciate how much better U.S. schools need to be and believe that big, sweeping action is the only appropriate response, a greenfield approach likely seems to lack the requisite urgency and scope. But I maintain that greenfield reform is deceptively bold. We spent years and billions on No Child Left Behind accountability systems, which infuriated educators, alienated parents, and fueled intense concerns about narrowed curricula and testing mania. We spent years and billions on teacher evaluation systems that frustrated teachers, created massive paperwork burdens, and had no impact on actual evaluations.[3] We spent years and billions on the federal School Improvement Grant program, which was found to have no significant impact on school performance.[4] I suggest that a more organic, evolutionary approach might have gotten us further, faster.

The organizing assumptions and grammar of schooling have evolved very little over the past 50 or even 100 years. Limitations in communication, transportation, video technology, data storage, and computing power once required a teacher to be in the room with students in order to effectively teach them. Such constraints no longer hold. Virtual instruction that would have qualified as sci-fi even 20 years ago is wholly possible, and its quality now rests primarily on the caliber of instruction, curricula, and technology.

But rules, regulations, and routines have grown up and calcified around the complex work of schooling, hobbling sensible adaptations. As a result, school improvement plays out in a brownfield environment—as if builders sought to erect a shiny, eco-friendly skyscraper before clearing away the dilapidated apartment building standing on the same site. Rather than cram good ideas regarding curriculum, instruction, or staffing into schools that are not built to accommodate them, state education leaders might ask how to reimagine schools and systems so they can take full advantage of a changing labor force, evolving societal norms, and emergent tools.

In practice, accumulated policies, political interests, and familiar practices tend to stymie new solutions. It can be hard for even a dynamic school leader to justify the expensive, extensive, and time-consuming work of navigating a bureaucratic labyrinth to cultivate greenfield. Especially when faced with immediate concerns like refining curricula or adding instructional coaches, plowing greenfield can seem like a daunting, exhausting task with little in the way of immediate rewards. Yet improvement is compromised when pursued in brownfield environments.

Greenfield as an Approach to Teacher Quality

In essence, a greenfield approach boils down to asking this question: How might schools and systems make better use of time, tools, people, training, and money if they were free to start from scratch?

Take teacher quality as an example. In recent decades, reforms to boost teacher quality have

focused on evaluation, tenure, amped-up recruiting, teacher pay, the equitable distribution of "effective" teachers, preparation, and professional development. I think it is fair to say that the fruits of these various efforts have disappointed. The greenfield approach flips this kind of thinking on its head, instead asking how schools might reimagine the teacher's role so it is easier for them to provide more high-quality instruction. Such a reimagining would entail unbundling the teaching job so that each teacher is not asked to excel at so many different things.

Especially in the midst of a pandemic, during which some "great" teachers struggled to teach remotely while "less effective" teachers found their stride, it should be evident that teaching involves lots of skills—and that teachers are not equally skilled at all of them. Figuring out how to let individual teachers do more of what they are already good at is a powerful place to start the improvement process.

When teaching talent was cheap and plentiful and demands on teachers were pretty basic, the notion of the do-everything teacher might have made more sense. Fifty or sixty years ago, highly educated women had few career paths other than teaching. Today, however, the talented women who once led classrooms are found more often in law firms than in schools. The job market, too, has changed. Whereas employees used to remain in the same occupation for most of their working lives, today's professionals are much more mobile. Meanwhile, new tools, such as distance learning and computer-assisted instruction, make it possible to deliver instruction and professional support in ways that used to be unthinkable.

Today's default staffing model is an anachronism, not because the model is "bad" or because anyone has done anything wrong, but because arrangements that made sense in the greenfield of years past have grown brown with neglect. Consequently, education leaders need not look far to find greenfield opportunities to rethink the profession.

It is time to reimagine geographic delivery. Remote learning can make online instruction or tutoring in any subject available whenever and wherever needed (provided there is adequate internet connectivity)—all provided by accomplished teachers and expert tutors from around the globe. Thus education premised on full-time, in-classroom teachers need no longer be the universal default for all students at all times. Other models become possible, including those that provide curated online offerings alongside in-person options, offer relationships with distant mentors, create cohesive civics classes of geographically disparate students, or simply use remote delivery to provide quality calculus instruction to students in schools or communities where local instructors are not available.

It is time to rethink the organization of teacher work. Teachers perform many tasks in the course of a day. They lecture. They facilitate discussions. They grade quizzes. They fill out forms. They counsel distraught kids. They monitor the cafeteria. And so on. No one believes all these activities are equally valuable. Yet teachers almost unanimously relate to me that they have never been part of a disciplined effort to unpack what they do each day in an effort to increase the energy devoted to the things that matter most. Having an exquisitely trained early literacy teacher watching students eat lunch, filling out forms, or teaching addition—simply because she's a "second grade teacher"—is a bizarre way to leverage scarce talent.

Elsewhere in these same schools, there are powerful examples of different ways to harness staff time and student energy. In their book, *In Search of Deeper Learning*, Harvard's Jal Mehta and High Tech High's Sarah Fine explore how the openness that characterizes extracurricular opportunities has given rise to dynamic, powerful learning experiences that just do not fit the conventional classroom.

It is also time to rethink who can teach. Today, early career transience, professionals routinely working into their late 60s, and the prevalence of mid-career transitions make it increasingly bizarre to see education systems intent on recruiting 22-year-olds and hoping to retain them full-time into the 2050s. This model is ill suited to the realities of professional life in the 2020s.

Meanwhile, balky licensure systems, seniority-based pay, and factory-style pensions create big practical burdens and financial penalties for engineers, auto mechanics, or journalists seeking to enter teaching mid-career. Even aside from those seeking full-time roles, one can imagine a raft of opportunities in 21st century America for senior citizens, grad students, or stay-at-home-parents who may be eager to take on part-time work as tutors or coaches—providing a pool of skilled, flexible labor at

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affordable rates. Unfortunately, existing licensure systems, job descriptions, and system practices make it prohibitive for even a creative superintendent or principal to explore these options.

Role for State Policymakers

The implications of a greenfield approach may be obvious for schools, systems, schools of education, nonprofits, and slick-talking reformers. But state officials also have an opportunity: to champion creative approaches and fund promising pilots. And they have a distinctive role to play when it comes to dismantling the impediments that currently make this kind of reimagining impractical. Greenfield-minded state officials can do the following:

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- Revisit preparation, teacher-of-record, and accreditation requirements so as to make it easier for school leaders, district officials, and teacher leaders to rethink teachers' work.
- Encourage, invest in, and assemble the research on new staffing configurations, as such resources can help local educators imagine new possibilities and assuage concerns about unfamiliar approaches.
- It is easy for rethinking to be stifled by convention and also for it to morph into faddism. There is a valuable role for data that captures both outcomes and operations in order to monitor results and flag opportunities for improvement.
- Work with educators to identify and address the rules, regulations, and ambiguities that leave them frustrated and confused.
- Move from "defined benefit" to "defined contribution" pensions, so that teachers have more professional flexibility, the field is more attractive to mid-career job changers, and teachers need not make decisions based on the fear of losing their contributions.
- Design teacher evaluation systems that are less dependent on individual teachers "owning" a set of student results for reading or math to ensure that evaluation is not working at cross-purposes with collaborative teaching or broader efforts to rethink instructional delivery.
- Modify statewide pay scales and licensure to make it easier for districts to create new job descriptions and professional opportunities for teachers. States should, for instance, have a framework for 12-month teaching positions, offering a template for accomplished educators to work full-time while taking on tasks like developing curricula or onboarding new staff.
- Authorize school districts and charter schools to operate as recognized teacher training programs so that teachers can be based in schools, work full time as aides, and learn from veteran educators, with schools of education subcontracting to provide expertise as needed.
- Cultivate localized ecosystems to tackle the chicken-and-egg dilemma of new roles and training. Schools cannot start to think about redefining roles until people are trained for those roles, but it makes no sense to train people for roles that do not exist. Escaping this paralysis requires school systems to partner with teacher preparation programs, but doing so requires state policymakers to provide requisite flexibility with regards to licensure, certification, and job descriptions.

Most of the time, education policymaking suffers from a fundamental asymmetry. It is easy to make the case for expansive new rules since the problems they are intended to address can be so visible. Meanwhile, concerns that additional directives will fuel inertia or rigidity come across as callous. But the past year has made it hard to ignore how blunderbuss rules can fuel paralysis among educational leaders. When policies designed to protect America's students cause educational leaders to tell teachers not to educate kids, it is time to rethink how we deliver schooling. ■

[1] Eder Campuzano, "Coronavirus Closure Won't Lead to Online Classes in Oregon Public Schools. This Is Why," *The Oregonian/Oregon Live*, March 19, 2020.

[2] Frederick M. Hess, *Education Unbound: The Promise and Practice of Greenfield Schooling* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development, 2010).

[3] Matthew A. Kraft and Allison F. Gilmour, "Revisiting *the Widget Effect*: Teacher Evaluation Reforms and the Distribution of Teacher Effectiveness," *Educational Researcher* 46, no. 5 (2017): 234–49, https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X17718797.

[4] Lisa Dragoset et al., "School Improvement Grants: Implementation and Effectiveness," NCEE 2017-4013 (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. January 2017).

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