Gravity, Innovation, and System Change

by Jennifer O'Day

My son's third-grade teacher opened the world to him. No trudging through disconnected lessons in reading, multiplication, and science. Not that year. Rather, he and his classmates collaborated in teams to explore broad themes, often tied to historical transitions like the Enlightenment. Social studies, reading, science, and even mathematics became connected through their intellectual, social, and historical contexts. Learning was both collective and individual, and students had considerable choice in their collaborators and in their projects. Moreover, when I pointed out to the teacher that her initial curricular themes were solely European based while many of her students, including my son, had roots in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, she responded immediately. She found new sources, made alterations, and helped students develop projects that carried personal meaning as well as global connection. I was thrilled! Finally my son had a class that reflected my own teaching philosophy and tapped into his own modes of learning. Not surprisingly (to me), he took off intellectually that year as he would at no other time until college.

I begin this commentary on Ron Wolk's essay "Think the Unthinkable" with that bit of family history for two reasons. First, I wanted to demonstrate that my affinity for Ron's vision of what education should or could be is not only professional but personal. I was not surprised by that affinity. I knew that Ron and I shared that vision long before I was asked to comment on his essay. Over the years, we have had many opportunities to visit both innovative and traditional schools, discuss at length what we saw, and consider possible systemic changes for students.

Yet the story of my son's third-grade class has another point: the need for variation in curriculum and approach to meet all students' needs. You see, while I was busy praising that third-grade teacher, another mother was complaining that the class lacked sufficient structure and step-by-step instruction for her daughter. Were two parents just inter-

preting their children's experiences through their own educational or philosophical lenses? Perhaps. The two children *did*, however, have very different experiences and outcomes in that class—a pattern I have witnessed time and again in my own teaching as well as in the many classes I have observed and studied over the past twenty years.

The Need for Variation—in Whatever System

The need for variation in what schools are, how they are organized, and what they present to and ask of students is an important theme in Ron's essay, as it is in much of the literature on individual learning and on systemic and organizational change.

As Ron points out, students differ widely in their backgrounds, experiences, interests, and abilities. Learning is shaped by those differences as students strive to make sense of any new information they encounter, whether in school, at home, or in the community. For that reason, the National Academy of Sciences panel on "How People Learn" identified "learner-centered" as the first of four central characteristics of effective learning environments.

> Learner-centered [refers] to environments that pay careful attention to the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs that learners bring into the educational setting . . . [and assumes] these can serve as a foundation on which to build bridges to new understandings (National Academy of Sciences 2003, pp. 133, 136).

Variation is also integral to *systemic* learning and change. Without variation, there is no new information to provide a basis upon which to modify existing practice. As the organizational theorist George Huber (1991) explains: "An entity learns if, through its processing of information, the range of its potential behaviors is changed. That definition holds whether the entity is a human or other animal, a group, an organization, an industry, or a society." What that means for school change is both complex and straightforward. Variations in instruction, in school structures, curricula, and cultures, and even in the ways districts organize schools and policies are the foundations of educational change and improvement. Ron's conception of the charter district as a potential research and development (R & D) arm of the state derives from his argument that U.S. schools—particularly secondary schools—lack the meaningful variation necessary to respond to their students' diversity or to provide needed alternatives for systemic change. (I'll return to the notion of R & D later.)

Finally, systemic variation also contributes to motivation. Ron proposes establishing a parallel system in part to afford young people and

their parents choices in the kinds of schools they will attend and the directions their educational careers will take. Linda Darling-Hammond's study (1996) of high-performing high schools in New York City found that the element of choice motivated both teachers and students. Others have argued that parental and student choice will also motivate the system as a whole to improve—or at least to respond to the desires of its "clientele."

Another facet of Ron's argument, as I understand it, is that the current system is simply too entrenched: unable or unwilling to engage in the fundamental changes needed to serve our young people well. Barriers to change include the traditional academic curriculum and rigid schedule (particularly in high school), underscored by accountability pressures from the No Child Left Behind Act and state policies and by opposition from unions, defenders of the status quo, and institutions of higher education. Ron's conclusion is that it is "easier to make significant change by starting something new than by trying to reform something old"—hence his proposal for a parallel system, a nongeographic district chartered by the state.

Having emphasized my many points of agreement with Ron's vision and analysis, I now turn to the specific proposal. Recognizing that Ron's proposal is meant as only a sketch of what a parallel system *might* look like, I hope that raising questions about the sketch might determine whether and how its lines should be fleshed out.

Getting from Here to There

Strength in Numbers

What do innovative schools have to gain from participating in the proposed statewide districts? Ron says only that they might find "sanctuary and support that they often lack as outliers in the conventional system." Yet for either the schools or the state to support such an effort requires clear and explicit gains. One could argue that participating schools would garner, at the minimum, a significant degree of autonomy with exemption "from all regulations governing public schools except those involving safety and civil rights." The requisite removal of barriers flows directly from criticisms of the current monolithic system by Ron (and others). However, since charter *schools* are in general similarly exempt, the focal question becomes not the proposal's "charter" element, but its statewide "district" element. What advantages would participation in such a *district* bring to its member schools?

Perhaps the most obvious benefits are those of membership in a larger network of innovative schools. Networks offer not only "sanctuary and support," in Ron's words, but also opportunities for collective learn-

ing among like-minded educators. The Carnegie Middle Schools initiative of the early 1990s, for example, provided the model for several state-supported networks of reforming or restructuring schools in California, within and across instructional levels. Participants included the network of elementary schools in the "It's Elementary!" initiative, of high schools in the "Second to None" program, and of restructuring schools funded through AB 1274. Those networks in turn provided the basis for the more independent, foundation-funded Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC), which at this writing is in its ninth year, working with 128 schools in 28 districts. Similar collaborations were formed at other Annenberg sites, and many national comprehensive school reform (CSR) models—from the Coalition of Essential Schools to Success for All—also offer networking among their member schools. In each case, the network's purpose is to provide connections and exchanges of ideas and resources, so often missing from the local school district.

Unfortunately, even with modern technology, geographic distance can be a problem for large collaborations of schools, particularly in large states such as California and Texas. Indeed, the success of the small high schools movement in New York City may be attributed in part to geographic concentration and a local collaborative network. By contrast, spreading the parallel "district" across an entire state could actually dilute its ability to support, coordinate, or cross-fertilize innovative enterprises.

Of more substantive concern than geography is the question of what rationale will hold the parallel district together. Will any school that does not fit the traditional model be eligible, or will other specific criteria or principles help bind the member schools together? If there are specific criteria or principles, who will decide them? Ron argues, on one hand, that schools in the charter district would be exempt from all regulations governing public schools except those involving safety and civil rights; on the other, he says that all primary schools would be "*required* [emphasis added] to focus significantly on math, literacy, and the arts." Where does that requirement come from and who determines what "significantly" means?

Similarly, Ron's description of the district's secondary schools assumes certain structures: advisories, personalized curricula, and internships. They are all attractive-sounding ideas, but each reflects a particular approach to secondary schooling. Would other approaches be allowed? How much similarity among participating schools is necessary for the parallel system to qualify as a system?

I'm not asking those questions to be ornery. Having argued that variation is critical to organizational growth and development, I think *how much* and *what kinds of* variation can exist in a "system" are difficult and critical organizational problems. In 1998, Tom Hatch, now at the

Columbia's Teachers College, wrote about the differences in "theories of action" among the four models that formed the Atlas Project of the New American Schools. It became clear that in the Atlas collaboration, apparent and often strong *general* agreement about improving education masked real, *specific* differences that hampered the group's collective progress. (See also Deborah Meier's discussion of the Annenberg Foundation's "Learning Zone" in this issue.)

Gravitational Pull and the Problem of Parallelism

The preceding point leads me to my main concern. Ron describes his proposed charter district as a "parallel system." My fear is that for a state to establish a truly parallel alternative system may simply be impossible. Consider the word itself. Webster defines *parallel* as: "1. Extending in the same direction, equidistant at all points, and *never converging or diverging* [emphasis added]; 2. Having the same direction, course, nature, or tendency."

On the surface, the term *parallel* would seem to apply well to Ron's proposed district. The two systems—traditional and innovative—would presumably share the "same direction" (à la Webster): the goal of educating young people as competent and productive citizens in a modern and diverse democracy. At the same time, the systems' methods of achieving the goal would also be separate and distinct—thereby providing alternatives from which students and parents may choose.

The charter district's complete dependence on the state presents two challenges to the notion of parallel (or we might say "separate but equal") systems.

R & D. The first challenge concerns a contradiction between the two proposed roles of the charter district. One role is "to coordinate and support innovation and experimentation in education and youth development . . . as the research and development arm of the state's educational system." This sounds good. Unfortunately, most R & D efforts fail—and are expected to fail. They are the parent organization's way of taking risks without jeopardizing current practice. As such, R & D represents what organizational theorists call "slack"—an activity or investment that may be prevalent in flush times but that is likely to diminish or disappear when resources become scarce. R & D is inherently marginal and unreliable.

Compare this R & D function with the parallel district's second role: to provide the state's young people with an ongoing (and growing) source of educational alternatives. This role implies the need for consistency of support over time, even when budgets are tight. The incentives for the state to maintain the necessary support—either fiscal resources or other less tangible backing—are not immediately apparent, however.

As Ron himself points out, "If a state is committed to success, success is possible. Otherwise, failure is guaranteed."

Imbalance of Power. The second challenge to the notion of parallelism relates to the first in that both stem from the imbalance of power between the traditional state system and the proposed parallel one. Traditional practice in secondary schools persists not only—or even mainly—because of state policy but because of deeply embedded, institutionalized conceptions of what a "real school" looks like (Metz 1989); because of assessment and textbook publishers that reinforce traditional conceptions; and because of postsecondary institutions' and employers' expectations of applicant knowledge or experience. Indeed, admissions requirements for higher education are among the most powerful influences maintaining the status quo in secondary education.

Those influences constitute a veritable gravitational force that pulls teachers, students, parents, and schools back toward conventional practice. To the extent that the innovation depends on the state system for its initiation and maintenance, the pull will be that much more powerful. State fiscal support carries with it demands for accountability and control. Such demands, which might also pertain to individual charter *schools*, are likely to intensify when the schools unite as a more visible and concentrated entity, such as the proposed statewide charter district.

One defense for the parallel district would be an unambiguous alternative vision and strong mutual support among its schools to reinforce implementation and advancement of the vision. A mutually reinforcing network might create a truly alternative center of gravity that could hold the schools on a parallel course rather than one converging with traditional practice. Unfortunately, if the alternative district is to include many approaches to innovation, as Ron's essay suggests, the alternative center of gravity would weaken, and pullback into the orbit of traditional practice would more likely prevail.

Who Gets Left Out?

An additional concern involves schools—and students—that remain in the mainstream system. Certainly, some may choose to stay because it represents their preferred mode of learning. Others, however, will have little choice. Assuming that the charter district will take considerable time to build even if the issues discussed above are resolved, the alternative will be limited for some time to a relatively small proportion of the state's students. If the current system is bankrupt, would supporting the statewide charter continue to doom most of our children to educational failure? If so, what are the implications for equity?

To be fair, it is important to note that Ron never claims his proposal is the answer to all problems in the current system (including the prob-

lem of "scaling up" to a larger system), or even that it will help most schoolchildren. Rather, his interest is in providing a meaningful alternative to at least *some* children now, in hopes that the numbers may grow over time. Meanwhile, he notes, "[S]tates should continue their efforts to improve the current system."

Whatever the intention, however, it is necessary to address the potential implications of parallel districts for the broader system. At the very least, policymakers and the public need assurances that the proposed districts will "do no harm" to those remaining in the mainstream, whether by choice or for lack of access to alternatives. Anticipating that challenge, Ron argues forcefully that alternative districts will not divert resources from other public schools.

On the fiscal level, he is probably correct. But it is likely that participants in the alternative enterprise will try to attract reform-minded personnel from the larger system into their alternative. Indeed, the success of the alternative depends on it. Similarly, reformers in the larger system will have plenty of incentive to join a more supportive venture. The result likely would be an outflow of the very people we might expect to champion reform in the larger system.

The outflow might not be a problem if it really involves an R & D operation with a clear mechanism for feeding advances back into the parent organization. Members of the charter district, however, will probably be preoccupied with building their system—or even insulating the district against state encroachment and the gravitational pull of conventional practice. Such insulation could erode needed political support for the alternative while potentially, if inadvertently, undermining change in the conventional system.

Some Alternatives?

The questions and concerns I raise stem as much or more from the elements of Ron's argument with which I concur as they do from any specific point of difference. I believe Ron's analysis of conventional secondary education's bankruptcy is accurate. I am drawn to his vision of what schools—and other organizations—could be doing to foster young people's learning and development: it is a vision supported by theory and research on learning. I agree with his argument for greater variation in instruction and organization and the need for supportive environments to help innovative schools succeed.

I am not convinced, however, that the state is the best source for such supportive environments. Indeed, encompassing innovative schools in a state-organized and state-funded nongeographic district—even a charter district—could weaken rather than strengthen their position vis-à-vis the traditional system.

What, then, might strengthen the role and influence of the innovators? One possible approach would be to develop pressure on the system from both outside and inside. That strategy relies on and extends existing networks of innovative secondary schools while also making concentrated inroads into system policy and practice, primarily in districts. Foundations and other outside organizations, rather than the state, would play the key supporting roles—as many such entities do now.

Outside sources could continue to support networks of schools that already exist or are forming around innovative approaches, particularly in secondary schools. Examples of such networks include Aspire and New Visions, both part of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation small high schools initiative. Supporting multiple networks, with collaboration among them, would allow strengthening of individual reform approaches based on common instructional goals and a shared theory of change. At the same time, the strategy would also promote the exchange of ideas and lessons among the varying networks and approaches and sharing among both public and private schools. Charter schools are likely to participate actively in those networks (although there is no reason to exclude private schools). Most important, by providing a center of gravity for innovation more independent than a charter district, the strategy could push on the system from the outside.

Besides supporting school networks, foundations and others are beginning to foster collaborations between reform networks and existing districts to support and extend reform efforts, particularly in high schools. Examples include the recent "place-based" grants of the Gates Foundation to support the development of small high schools within defined geographic regions, as well as the Carnegie Corporation's "Schools for a New Society" initiative, which supports partnerships of school districts and their communities to transform all general high schools in the districts. Such efforts have the potential advantage of geographic proximity, which can combine a more concentrated push on the system from the outside (the networks and foundations) with a similar push from reformers on the inside. In addition, the initiatives are consistent with the movement in some districts to promote greater attention to instructional change and the growing recognition that current approaches to secondary education simply are not working.

States, of course, have a role to play in all this as well—even without statewide charter districts. One thing states can do right away is to expand and improve support for charter school legislation and policies. For example, states could explore alternative accountability measures for charter schools, particularly in high schools. Such measures would ensure high-quality instruction and free innovative schools from the more restrictive effects of high-stakes testing. States could also encour-

age their public institutions of higher education to accept alternative indicators of performance from applicants enrolled in charter and other innovative schools. One might even imagine states, with the support of foundations and the federal government, encouraging robust independent research and development efforts on implementation and effects of alternative and innovative approaches.

I realize, of course, that the preceding few paragraphs are miles from a full-blown strategy; nor is my goal to develop such a strategy. I have neither the expertise nor the position to do so. Rather, I am simply suggesting that institutions other than state departments of education might play a more central and productive role in creating and protecting what Ron calls "open space . . . for new educational opportunities." I hope that we will find ways to capitalize on his creative vision, on the independence of current reform networks, on the openness of reform-minded policymakers at all levels, on the generosity of external funders, and on the creativity of teachers, students, and communities to generate a system—or systems—that can better meet the needs of our young people and provide them the learning opportunities they deserve.

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