Education Outlook

The Futures of School Reform: Five Pathways to Fundamentally Reshaping American Schooling

By Jal Mehta

Despite nearly 30 years of K–12 school reform efforts, the United States still has substantial gaps in student achievement by race and class. To make more substantial progress, reformers must question conventional assumptions and more aggressively reshape key aspects of the American school system. Five broad pathways could fundamentally improve American schooling: transforming the system by enhancing teacher quality and knowledge, replacing the current system with a set of new actors and institutions, "unbundling" the current system and reassembling it anew, expanding the system by linking school to society, or gradually dissolving the system and connecting students to the world of knowledge.

For almost 30 years, since the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, the United States has been seized by a blizzard of school reform strategies: Standards. Vouchers. Charters. Merit pay. Alternative teacher certification. More money, more data, and more accountability. These strategies have been embraced by districts, states, and, eventually, even the federal government with great gusto. But if we were to honestly appraise all of this activity, we would have to conclude that the results have not been what we had hoped.

Here are a few facts, likely numbingly familiar, but no less important for being so. In a post-industrial economy, good schooling is the ticket to middle-class life, but huge swaths of students continue to drop out of school—as much as 40 to 50 percent in some urban districts—and many students do not graduate from high school ready for a four-year college.[1] Large gaps in student skills persist by race and class: National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) results suggest that the average black twelfth grader scores lower than an average white eighth grader.[2]

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Among American schools as a whole, recent studies continue to suggest low levels of cognitive challenge in classrooms: the most recent Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) results show that the United States ranks 14th in reading, 17th in science, and 25th in math, trailing

Key points in this *Outlook*:

- Many efforts to reform American schooling over the past few decades have done little to address substantial student achievement gaps or improve the US educational ranking internationally.

- Existing efforts make limited headway because they do not seek to fundamentally change the core structure of American schooling.

- Substantial change is possible if reformers craft a longer-term strategy to alter the school system itself, and possible pathways include transforming, replacing, reassembling, expanding, or even gradually dissolving the system, all of which would require the courage to effect bold change.

countries such as Estonia and the Slovak Republic.[3] Schools serve not only economic but also civic and other functions; therefore, the failings of US schools do, over time, become the failings of America's democracy.

The array of existing reform efforts have done little to fundamentally improve this situation—"so much reform, so little change," as one scholar dubbed it.[4] There are a number of reasons why, but perhaps the most basic is that on the whole, these reforms have not actually changed much of the Progressive Era school system erected a century ago. Created as a way to efficiently sort and process a burgeoning school population, the "one-best system" of administrative progressives has proven remarkably impervious to change.

Reforms such as standards, merit pay, or even charter schools have not fundamentally altered much of how schools are organized or what happens in classrooms: overall, the United States has the same teachers, in the same roles, with the same level of knowledge, teaching in the same schools, with the school day organized the same way, with much the same set of tracked courses, with the same materials, and much the same level of parental support. It might be more accurate to say "so little real reform, so little real change."

There have also been a number of programs or pilots that seem to have worked for some children in some settings but have failed to scale. The challenges of scaling are usually attributed to a failure in program design, limits in available human capital, or weakness in the fidelity of implementation. But when failure to scale is the rule and not the exception, it comes time to question the whole idea of scaling up best practices. To put it another way, *we put reforms through our existing system, and when they do not work as we had hoped, we ask what is wrong with the reform, when we should instead be asking what is wrong with the system.*

So how might we change the system? I argue that there are five broad avenues we could take. Specifically, we can (1) *transform* the system by changing who is doing the teaching and what they know; (2) *replace* the institutions that currently comprise the system with new institutions filling the same functions but performing them better; (3) *reassemble* the system by changing its roles, structures, elements, and incentives; (4) *expand* the system by integrating school and nonschool factors; or (5) *dissolve* the system by providing students with more direct access to the ever-growing universe of knowledge.

What follows is a sketch of these possibilities, in which I briefly make the case for each approach. My work here builds on and in some case summarizes the work of the authors of a book I coedited with Robert Schwartz and Frederick Hess, titled *The Futures of School Reform* (Harvard Education Press, 2012). A fuller description of each vision and a more in-depth appraisal of the tradeoffs among them can be found there.[5]

Transforming the System: Remaking a Bureaucratic System into a Professional One

The first possibility would be to keep the structures of the system largely intact, but transform what happens inside them. From this perspective, the core of the problem in the United States is that schools are staffed by people who just do not know how to do the work well enough. Top PISA countries draw their teachers from the top third of their young people, give them extensive practice-based training, and then create ongoing opportunities for professional development and growth. In contrast, the United States draws its teachers from the bottom two thirds of the distribution, gives them, by teachers' own accounts, little practice-relevant training, and puts many of the least experienced among them into America's most challenging classrooms.

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Making this choice would not imply soft talk about professionalism. It would mean rethinking all aspects of the human capital pipeline: attracting more able applicants to the field, creating more extensive field-based training, lengthening the time to tenure and making tenure a high bar of demonstrated teaching effectiveness, and then providing continued opportunities for growth and professional development for practicing teachers. At the same time, a new knowledge infrastructure for the profession would need to be created that would grow out of practice but would play a similar orienting role as in more-established fields. Over time, mastering this knowledge would become the sine qua non of membership in the profession. This, in turn, would assure a consistency

across teachers and schools that is sorely missing in the present environment.

From one point of view, this proposal is the least radical one. America's basic governance system could remain unchanged: schools would still look like schools, and most students would still go to the physical building down the road. But what happens *inside* these familiar structures would be radically transformed. Teachers would teach on the basis of developed and shared knowledge about good practice rather than whatever wisdom they could acquire individually.

Power relations would likewise change to be more akin to stronger professions like medicine: rather than being seen as the lowest rung on an implementation chain, teachers would be seen as experts in their field and so acquire a degree of professional power. Similar to countries in which ministries of education have greater control over the education system, increased professional power could serve as a counterweight to political efforts to toss education about like a political football. In turn, this stability could allow the new system to develop the long-term perspective and consistent priorities that have marked the improvement trajectories of nations with higher-performing education systems.

Replacing the System: Reform from the Outside In

A second possibility is that the system constructed in the Progressive Era will gradually be replaced by a new set of actors and institutions. Each of the institutions that serve a major function in the current system faces challengers that are seeking to replace it. Charter operators such as KIPP, Green Dot, and Achievement First are competing with traditional public schools; Teach For America, TNTP, and a variety of other alternative certification providers are creating new routes for entering teachers; charter networks have created their own teacher preparation institutions such as Relay Graduate School of Education in New York and the High Tech High Graduate School of Education in San Diego to replace traditional education school training; and foundations like the Broad Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation are actively funding economists and others from outside the usual educational research world to do what they view as more rigorous analysis.

Consequently, a longstanding cartel now has an active challenger. While numerically still small in comparison to the much larger traditional cohort, this group of challengers has received enormous media attention, has considerable influence in a number of major cities (for example, in Washington, DC, New York, and New Orleans), and has increasingly had its ideas incorporated into federal policy.[6]

The advantage of this vision is that it essentially already exists in nascent form; the challenge is more about whether it could reach the needed scale to serve all of the nation's students, or at least all of the high-poverty students that it aims to reach. There is also a possibility that this movement could increase its reach by developing ideas and practices that would then become part of the more traditional structure, creating new possibilities by essentially hybridizing existing institutions.

For example, networks such as New Visions for Public Schools, Expeditionary Learning, and the Mass Math and Science Initiative, which partner with districts and schools rather than running their own charters, provide a hybrid model that is somewhere between a charter management organization and a conventional district. In the longer run, an even greater scale would be possible if conventional districts and states were to adopt more of the practices that characterize the work of the reform community. While newer is not necessarily better, at least these reformers have had the opportunity to start afresh in their thinking about what it takes to create good schooling.

Reassembling the System: Putting the Parts Together Anew for the 21st Century

If the reform community wants to replace the existing system with a parallel, hopefully improved one, a third possibility is to "unbundle" the system and reassemble it anew. The core idea here is to break apart the composite structures that make up schooling today. Therefore, rather than have a school that offers math, science, English, and history, have a school function as a general contractor, bringing in different organizations that excel in teaching the various subjects. Some of these subjects might be taught online rather than in person, or through a combination of online practice and in-person coaching. Teachers might specialize: some might teach lots of small discussion sections while others might teach large lectures; some might teach fractions to all upper-elementary students as opposed to teaching a range of math subjects to one fourth-grade class.

In this system, schools might function more like hospitals, with star teachers analogous to doctors and a

range of support personnel performing functions that do not need to be done by teachers. Students would also be able to create learning experiences that are much more customized, as they might choose different providers in different content areas, or, within content areas, students would have access to varied materials that would allow each student to proceed at his or her own pace. An unbundled education system is one that allows and invites real creativity to think freshly about how to assemble the core elements of schooling in a way that is responsive to the diversity of student needs and teacher skills. It thus creates a much more flexible system than the batch-processing factory model that has governed the US education system for the past century.

One virtue of this approach is that it offers a different, and potentially more compelling, tack to addressing the question of scale. Rather than trying to replicate existing programs—which inevitably raises the question of where one would find the same level of talent, skill, and will that exists in pilot sites—the unbundlers instead suggest that if we reimagine how we fundamentally organize the work, scale will no longer be such a daunting challenge. Specifically, rather than trying to find 3.6 million highly knowledgeable, competent, and creative teachers, they argue, we might be able to find a much smaller number of people to create really good lessons in different subjects, and then a larger group who would take on the role of building relationships with students and respond to their questions. Unbundling schooling is currently in its infancy, but it potentially provides a much more creative and imaginative way to rethink how schooling might be organized and delivered in the future.

Expanding the System: Linking Schooling and Society

A fourth possibility is that we are simply asking too much from schools, and we will not see consistently better academic performance unless schools are complemented by an equally robust out-of-school support system for students. While each of the previous three pathways was trying to rethink schooling, this one seeks to rethink the relationship between school and external society.

Schools can be improved, but the really significant opportunity is in how students' out-of-school time is used. Academic studies have clearly shown a significant gap in students' test scores that already exists when students enter kindergarten or first grade; other studies suggest that the trajectory of more- and less-affluent students during the year is roughly similar, but that less-advantaged students suffer significant "summer learning loss" that leads to them losing ground relative to their more advantaged peers.

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In response, one could imagine an integrated educational system in which the services for students do not stop at the schoolhouse door. Rather than asking schools to take on additional responsibilities, in this approach, an array of governmental and nonprofit providers would pick up where schools leave off, providing a safe and positive environment for young children before they begin school, after school, and in the summers. Harlem Children's Zone is the best-known version of this approach, as it seeks to provide enveloping support for children including workshops for parents of children from birth to age three, all-day prekindergarten, an extended-day charter school, health clinics, and a community center for afterschool and summer hours.

There are also examples from abroad of universal prekindergarten systems, and of concerted efforts to address children's basic needs in ways that support teachers' efforts to improve academic outcomes for students. While the United States currently lacks the political will to do this nationally, one could imagine a mayor making this a central part of his or her agenda, and coordinating a range of social agencies and nonprofit partners in pursuit of an intensive and integrated approach, which might then serve as a model for other cities in the future.

Dissolving the System: Give Students Direct Access to the World of Knowledge

A fifth possibility is that we gradually "dissolve" the existing system. The argument here is motivated by two observations, which run in opposite directions. The first is that schools are places that are frozen in time—still passing out textbooks in the age of e-readers; still using

computers as screens for worksheets rather than connectors to the world of learning; and still employing committees of adults at the state, district, and school level to decide what should be learned rather than opening up the world of learning to the learners. The second is that the world of information outside of school is opening up faster than anyone can take it in: for example, Google is digitally archiving much of the world's reading materials and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology is giving away its lectures for free. It has never been a better time to be a learner—as long as one is not spending one's day cooped up in school. As Harvard Professor Richard Elmore succinctly put it, "Learning outside of schooling is exploding; learning inside of schooling is imploding."[7]

Taking advantage of these possibilities would mean a far more radical shift than replacing in-person courses with online versions. Rather, it would suggest moving away from the restricted "portal" represented by the school—where a small fraction of available knowledge is certified by various committees of adults and passed on to the students—and instead directly connecting students to the world of knowledge. This more open world will not only give more people access to knowledge, it will also empower many more of them to be creators of knowledge, as Wikipedia, the blogosphere, and the rest of Web 2.0 have already shown.

While presumably this vision would need to be guided by adults, particularly for younger children, the emphasis would shift substantially toward responding to student interests. This approach draws on students' intrinsic motivation, offers them deep inquiry into subjects that are of interest, and links them directly to the web of knowledge that is ever-growing and accumulating around any given topic. This approach also has the virtue of being egalitarian in its conception—many of these opportunities are already offered to students in good private schools, colleges, and graduate schools; we should make similar options available to all students.

Easier Said Than Done

None of this will come easily. Public schools are conservative institutions. These proposals ask states, districts, unions, and many other actors to make dramatic changes, particularly to relinquish more control and choice to teachers, parents, and students. The understandable urgency for immediate improvement also works against the larger proposals presented here, because many of the incentives in the system are for quick fixes rather than

longer-term trajectories of improvement. Creating a new system may also mean eliminating aspects of the old system, which will necessarily engender considerable political conflict with those who benefit from the status quo.

Of course, that does not mean that change is impossible; it simply means that significant political mobilization is needed if the system is to be seriously revamped in any of the previously mentioned directions. In *The Futures of School Reform*, we sketch scenarios in which governors, mayors, courts, advocacy groups, foundations, professional organizations, and social movements—singly or in concert with one another—provide the needed impetus for change. Ideas are important, but they need actors to make them happen.

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Conclusion: From "Tinkering to Utopia" to Remaking American Education

Despite nearly three decade of "reform" efforts, the United States still has substantial gaps in achievement by race and class, and remains in the middle of the international pack in student performance. If we are to seriously confront this reality, we will need to make more fundamental changes than we have thus far been willing to try, therefore challenging the existing system rather than running more reforms through it.

To do so will entail keeping an eye on the longer-term view. We can cycle through lots of programs of the moment, put lots of effort into carefully evaluating small reforms, and express disappointment when yet again these modest efforts fall short of the high aspirations we have for our schools. Or, we can make a bigger bet (or a series of bigger bets) with a longer view and make a significant-enough change to the structure to actually yield the results we seek. PISA-leading nations did not get results overnight, but they were able to make substantial changes in their outcomes with a concerted and long-term strategy.

Imagine a world in which a state decided to significantly raise the entry requirements for becoming a teacher and single-handedly created an example of what it would look like to have a profession filled exclusively with top-third teachers. Or one in which a foundation decided to put all of its efforts into creating the kind of knowledge infrastructure that undergirds medicine and other leading professions. Or one in which a city decided to commit all of its resources to providing a Harlem Children's Zone-like cradle-to-college support for all of its students. Or one in which a city and a state created the kind of ecosystem in which a variety of entrepreneurs could create new forms of schooling—an ecosystem that would give parents and students the ability to customize an education suited to their interests and skills. Or one in which a network of schools decided to organize its work anew for the 21st century, beginning not with schools as we know them but with the possibilities of the knowledge economy as their organizing point. All of these worlds are possible, and some are even beginning to come into being. The question is whether we will be courageous enough to make the significant changes necessary for achieving the schools that we aspire to.

Notes

1. See Greg Toppo, "Big-City Schools Struggle with Graduation Rates," *USA Today*, June 20, 2006.

2. Abigail Thernstrom and Stephan Thernstrom, *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003), 2.

3. Andreas Schleicher and Richard Hopper, *Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education: Lessons From PISA for the United States* (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011), 26, www.oecd.org/pisa/46623978.pdf.

4. Charles Payne, *So Much Reform, So Little Change* (Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 2008).

5. In this *Outlook*, I am describing positions that have been developed in more detail by the authors of *The Futures of School Reform*. See Jal Mehta, Robert B. Schwartz, and Frederick M. Hess, *The Futures of School Reform* (Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 2012).

6. Jal Mehta and Steven Teles, "Jurisdictional Politics: A New Federal Role in Education," in *Carrots, Sticks and the Bully Pulpit: Lessons From a Half-Century of Federal Efforts to Improve America's Schools*, eds. Frederick M. Hess and Andrew P. Kelly (Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 2011).

7. Richard Elmore, unpublished paper from The Futures of School Reform Project.