It was the kind of defiant act that most school principals probably have contemplated wistfully at one time or another. Disgusted by what he and his staff considered to be poorly written, poorly stapled, and generally disorganized mandatory citywide exams sent to Fritsche Middle School by the Milwaukee Public Schools central office in the fall of 1999, Principal Bill Andrekopoulos committed an act of ownership theretofore unheard of in the 100,000-student school district. Andrekopoulos and his staff stuffed the exams back into the box and shipped them back, Return to Sender. They included a brief message: What you produced wasn’t good enough for our students. Please try again.

Among schools all across Milwaukee that autumn, word about the test-box rebellion spread quickly, if only because acts of subversion were such rarities in a system where power was closely held by bureaucrats and where schools were expected to respect, honor, and obey the central office.

At a time when Milwaukee’s schools were attempting to show they could compete with new publicly funded alternatives, Fritsche Middle School became the poster child for public schools’ trying to reinvent themselves. Andrekopoulos, who at the time was a student of a national performance-management program, proved what could be done when sound decisions were made by entrepreneurial leaders at the school.
How Do School Entrepreneurs Create Change?

level rather than at the central office. (To remind the bureaucrats in the Milwaukee Public Schools that they existed to serve their school, for example, the Fritsche team later developed a report card, which it used to grade all of the various central office departments, based primarily on the value added each provided for Fritsche’s teachers and students.)

Do Andrekopoulos and Fritsche Middle School represent the future of American education? Or are they the exceptions that prove the rule about immovable bureaucracies? Though it could be a bit of both, there is increasing evidence to suggest that entrepreneurship can, and does, exist within the modern public-sector education system.

More educators and school leaders are taking risks to transform their classrooms, schools, and districts. They take ownership of the success or failure of everything that happens under their watch, often welcoming innovative ways of improving the delivery of education to students. In many cases, these public-sector school entrepreneurs have a keen ability to recognize opportunities that exist for improvements to (or abandonment of) the status quo in their schools and to find imaginative ways to take advantage of those opportunities to benefit students.

Modern public-school systems have a poor track record in taking bold steps to solve clearly identified problems. Poor

BY JOE WILLIAMS

Anthony Lombardi

The standard manual for disciplining teachers, says Lombardi, is counterproductive.

PHOTO / ANTHONY LOMBARDI

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PHOTO / ANTHONY LOMBARDI
The plethora of choices available to Milwaukee’s parents has forced the Milwaukee schools over time to be more responsive and enterprising. As Andrekopoulos says, “Innovation is now part of our DNA.”

problems, however, our public-school system seems to have absorbed them, made them part of the system.

Schools like Fritsche in Milwaukee have historically been the exception within public education. Increasingly, though, the trends that made Fritsche possible, including strong leadership in the principal’s office and shifts in power caused by private-school vouchers and charter schools, are apparent throughout the United States.

Andrekopoulos advised other schools in the district on how to control their own destinies, then went on to become the superintendent of the Milwaukee Public Schools in 2002. He described the new environment: “It’s a matter of schools’ self-actualizing and pushing the school community to take on a leadership role, to take ownership.” The plethora of choices available to Milwaukee’s parents has forced the Milwaukee schools over time to be more responsive and enterprising. As Andrekopoulos says, “Innovation is now part of our DNA.”

The New Educators
Not every education entrepreneur is a Bill Andrekopoulos. But the increasing number of such risk-takers suggests that there are others out there and that they may just be changing the landscape of education. They are independent thinkers, creative bureaucrats; their efforts are being encouraged by programs like Teach For America, alternative certification programs like New York City’s Teaching Fellows, and leadership training initiatives like the Leadership Academy and Urban Network for Chicago, New York City’s Leadership Academy, and San Diego’s Institute for Learning.

The upside of these programs is that they attract professionals who are less inclined to settle for bureaucratic inertia and incompetence and care little what is said about them in the teachers’ lounge or at the administrator’s conference table. They are the kinds of teachers and administrators willing to go public, in the press, at town hall meetings, or in Internet blogs, and they’re not afraid to talk about real barriers that classroom teachers face within their school systems. Education writers across the nation are drawn to them because they are considerably more interesting than the status quo.

Mitch Kurz is one of these new educators. “I am determined to be a foot soldier in the movement to inject equity into our education system,” said the 51-year-old executive. Kurz left his job managing 8,000 employees in 250 offices in 77 countries for the advertising firm Young and Rubicam in 2002 to teach in a Bronx middle school. He graduated from New York’s Teaching Fellows program, created in 2000 by former chancellor Harold Levy, who himself left his job as a corporate lawyer for Citigroup to take on the nation’s largest school system. Instead of three years at a teachers college talking about teaching in the abstract, Kurz participated in an intense summer program and then jumped right into the classroom while earning a master’s in education at night through the teaching fellows program.

Beginning their work without formal pedagogical training in education schools, some of these career changers are more open than traditional entrants to the profession to discovering and implementing teaching methods that they can see work with their students. (For example, on leaving the advertising world, Kurz found classroom discipline to be the biggest challenge in his school, and he set out to find the best strategies to deal with disruptive students.) Critics have complained that such career changers are too inexperienced and ill-prepared to be helpful to children. Stanford’s Linda Darling-Hammond has argued that they tend not to stick around in their jobs. Groups like Teach For America have disputed that concern, pointing to research it commissioned that found their corps members outperformed veteran and certified teachers in their schools.

Aside from friction created by education-school scholars like Darling-Hammond, however, career changers face other obstacles in school systems, which, at their core, tend...
to be disdainful of those who exercise initiative or who rock the boat. Many New York teaching fellows in the early years reported that they felt like second-class citizens in their schools and were even set up to fail by administrators who had little interest in seeing them succeed. Chuck Lavaroni, codirector of the International Academy for Educational Entrepreneurship (IAEE), notes, “While the ‘system’ says it respects and wants creativity, more often than not, it does nothing to encourage or support it.” The IAEE, a California-based organization, encourages and supports teachers who turn innovative ideas about how to improve education into action. “The creative teacher,” says Lavaroni, “often has to literally fight for time, money, resources, and/or equipment necessary to truly create and become involved in all aspects of the creative process. The ‘system’ makes it difficult for teachers to share ideas, plan mutual activities, and build upon each other’s strengths and interests.”

Sometimes teachers find themselves at odds with the school administration’s low expectations for their students and staff. Zelman Bokser, 42, a Fulbright Scholar with a Ph.D. in music who had taught at the university level, couldn’t have been hired as a New York City teacher without the alternative certification program because he didn’t have the required education-school courses under his belt. But even after landing a teaching job in 2000, he had to overcome institutional habits that discouraged innovation. His proposal to teach violin to students in his struggling Brooklyn school was met with disbelief: “Too difficult,” a waste of time. These kids had enough trouble getting through the school day, administrators counseled; why throw more hurdles their way? One administrator advised him to forget the whole idea, suggesting she was doing him a favor by preventing the failure that was sure to follow.

But as a career changer with an attitude, Bokser didn’t let the naysayers stop him. Two years later, as his students tuned their violins inside Manhattan’s Hammerstein Ballroom for a performance welcoming that year’s crop of new teaching fellows, Bokser reminded his peers what they were up against by telling the story of the nay-saying administrator.

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Rebels with a Cause
Some call them crackerjacks, others call them hard-nosed, and still others would say they are just difficult. For our purposes, we’ll refer to them here as education’s James Deans; except that these subversives are rebels with a cause. Perhaps it’s the principal in Queens, New York, who blatantly disregards the clear directions of her regional supervisors by throwing away the kindergarten curriculum because she has concluded that her kids haven’t even come close to mastering the skills taught in the pre-kindergarten curriculum (instead using a pre-K curriculum that she has discovered produces better results). Or maybe it’s the principal in Jersey City, New Jersey, who figures out it is easier and more efficient to get school supplies for her teachers by creating an account at the local Staples store than to go through central purchasing. These James Deans use what they consider to be common sense when picking and choosing their battles within the system’s regulatory framework. Often they are driven by their determination to simply do the right thing.

Like some of the maverick school leaders in Milwaukee, the education rebels tend to become folk heroes of sorts, and they often have rather complicated power relationships with administrators and union leaders. They also tend to have a healthy chip on their shoulders and some degree of confidence in their own ability to make things happen. Often they remain employed only because they can point to measurable results and have used their entrepreneurial skills to create political support among key stakeholders like politicians, business leaders, parents, and the media. School superintendents tend to allow them to exist quietly at the margins rather than tempt the political fates by messing with them.

Anthony Lombardi, principal of Public School 49 in Middle Village, Queens, is a perfect example of a James Dean, but there are thousands of them quietly forging their way through
dysfunctional school systems nationwide, getting the job done for their students and teachers. On Lombardi’s desk, which he moved into the hallway to create more classroom space, are three portraits of Frank Sinatra and a copy of *Regulations and Procedures for Pedagogical Ratings*. He loves the crooner, but

Once a teacher gets an “unsatisfactory” rating, he or she is prevented from transferring elsewhere, further adding to the probability that such ratings are futile exercises for school leaders.

doesn’t believe a word of *Regulations and Procedures*. For principals who want to rid their schools of incompetent teachers, the directions contained in the manual make disciplining bad teachers counterproductive. “It’s impossible to prove incompetency,” Lombardi says. In giving a teacher an “unsatisfactory” rating, a principal is preparing for a two-year process that may not even result in the teacher’s being removed from the school. More important, once a teacher gets an “unsatisfactory” rating, he or she is prevented from transferring elsewhere, further adding to the probability that such ratings are futile exercises for school leaders.

Lombardi is obviously not the first principal to figure this out: of the city’s 80,000 school teachers, only a few hundred a year on average receive ratings of “unsatisfactory” from their principals. Lombardi’s entrepreneurial skills, however, persuaded him not to give up. Rather than avoiding paperwork, he crafted careful memos to all of his teachers based on his in-class observations. He drafted detailed plans for improvement for each teacher, set the bar high, and encouraged all of his teachers to work according to high professional standards. In short, he created a climate in which his weakest teachers found themselves asking whether they even wanted to stick around at the school to see whether or not they could rise to the occasion. “I’ve set a high expectation and when they hadn’t met it, they had to make a professional

decision if they wanted to be a member of this staff,” Lombardi said. It becomes a kind of compact between the bad teacher and the principal: he won’t give the “unsatisfactory” rating if they agree to take their act to some other school.

Lombardi has been able to survive through several regime changes in the city’s school scene in large part because these schemes have paid off. In 2002 the school made it onto the list of the city’s 200 most-improved schools. Test scores in math and reading shot through the roof at the 500-student school under Lombardi’s leadership. Clearly as a result of his sidestepping the normal way of doing business, PS 49 students and teachers are better-off today. The school was even recognized by the New York State Education Department in 2004 for its success in narrowing the achievement gap between white and minority students, and it has received numerous other awards from business and civic groups for its success.

Another warrior is Mary Beth Minkley. In the mid-1990s she was a principal at Congress Elementary in Milwaukee. She, too, got used to hearing about all the things she wasn’t allowed to do and got used to ignoring it. She managed to start the city’s first year-round school, then battled bureaucrats who refused to fix the air-conditioning in the summer months. When she needed more space to accommodate the swelling student population of kids who suddenly wanted to be a part of her popular school, her bosses warned her to slow down. At a 1999 breakfast honoring her work in creating the year-round school, Minkley told the crowd: “I know there are people from the central office in the audience, but you made things extremely difficult for us when we were trying to make this happen.” (Minkley retired from the Milwaukee Public Schools soon thereafter and became an administrator in the Racine, Wisconsin, Unified School District.)

Planting Seeds of Change
Despite the obvious successes of people like Lombardi and Minkley, the question remains: Are they the exceptions that prove the rule? Is there anything systemic about what is happening? Lombardi, through his careful consideration of which rules are worth following and which are worth avoiding, has effectively taken care of business for his school, but he admits that he has done so at the expense of the city’s other schools, which have been forced to accept bad teachers who have been driven out of his building with “satisfactory” work evaluations.
in their files. “I made my school better, but I made your system even worse,” Lombardi told the city council’s education committee during 2003 hearings on the impact of contractual work rules on the running of good schools.

In fact, creating leaders like Lombardi and Minkley is what a number of people have turned their attention to. A growing number of entrepreneurial programs, like the legendary Johnny Appleseed, focus on planting seeds to produce school leaders who will someday lead transformations at the school level. The goal? An army of agents for change.

The Leadership Academy and Urban Network for Chicago (LAUNCH) is one such agent. A joint effort of the Chicago Public Schools, Northwestern University, and the union that represents principals in the Chicago schools, this program to train new school leaders was started in 1998. The program intended “to seize that opportunity by finding and training the best and brightest candidates,” according to Albert Bertini, an education professor at the University of Chicago at the time, “creating a critical mass of ‘change agents’ with the promise of transforming individual schools and—potentially—the entire system.”

Aspiring principals in LAUNCH participate in hands-on lessons that emphasize leadership and management, in addition to education. Participants take summer courses at Northwestern’s Kellogg Business School and are then paired with a principal mentor for five months of intense professional development. The principals’ union participated in the creation and implementation of LAUNCH, essentially eliminating one potential internal obstacle.

To date, 100 LAUNCH fellows have become principals in the Chicago schools, and many others have assumed other leadership roles within schools and at the district office. Not wanting to put all of its eggs in one basket, the district also partners with the University of Illinois-Chicago and the nonprofit group New Leaders for New Schools to help find and train promising change-agent school leaders. Similar leadership programs have been run in districts like St. Paul, Minnesota; Columbus, Ohio; Norfolk, Virginia; and elsewhere.

As mentioned, seed-sowing programs such as these, because they are aligned with and sanctioned by the official school leadership, tend not to produce the kind of rule-breaking James Deans mentioned above. (Neither Lombardi nor Minkley graduated from a leadership academy.) The leadership programs tend to encourage their students to look for ways to do a better job of leading schools within the existing rules and framework. On a visit to training sessions conducted at New York’s Leadership Academy in 2004, I observed a session conducted by the education department’s legal division, instructing principals in how to build an airtight case against an incompetent teacher. The lawyers went over the common technical mistakes that often cause arbitrators to rule against management before they can discuss the substance of the charges. Essentially, these budding school leaders were being taught how to dot their Is and cross their Ts so that they can find effective ways to level the playing field with labor. One longtime administrator who was present for the session remarked to me: “The way it used to work, you were lucky if someone pulled you aside and talked to you about these issues. The labor contracts were something nobody felt comfortable bringing up at meetings and training sessions.”

The NCLB Effect

Of all the types of school entrepreneurs, the one least understood, perhaps, is that which could have the most impact: the NCLB opportunists. These secret entrepreneurs were silent
until the 2001 federal No Child Left Behind act and other standards-based reform efforts opened a window of opportunity for them to use their creative and risk-taking skills. They have seized on the new accountability measures to turn around their own struggling schools. These old school entrepreneurs see sanctions for repeated failure as opportunities rather than punishment.

Another new approach is what some believe to be the emergence of “teacher partnerships,” being pioneered in Minnesota and a few other places, in which teachers literally own charter schools and are ultimately accountable for learning. These teachers help select the staff, decide teaching methods and curriculum, evaluate their performance, and decide their compensation.

Similarly, the United Federation of Teachers, the union representing New York City teachers, took the unusually entrepreneurial step in 2005 of applying for and opening its own experimental charter school in an impoverished neighborhood in Brooklyn. The school operates without a principal (it uses a lead teacher), and teachers sit on the schools’ board of directors. Union leaders have said they hope to show through increased student achievement that it is possible to run successful schools in the city within the confines of the teachers’ contract.

The key question will be whether districts can reinvent themselves in ways that no longer require school leaders to break the rules or to put their own necks on the line to do what is best for their kids.

Two things that entrepreneurial school leaders have in common is a desire to improve the delivery of education to students and the willingness to try every means imaginable to make it happen. They understand that empowering principals and teachers to be change-agents will create fundamental change in the culture of school systems, a culture that has historically stifled and even frowned on creativity and innovation.

A prominent example of a modern entrepreneurial catalyst is Philadelphia schools’ CEO, Paul Vallas. He comes from a nontraditional background, he has little invested in preserving the way things have been done in the past, and his own professional background convinced him that radical change is not only necessary but will occur only with poking and prodding from multiple directions.

Vallas, who helped Mayor Richard Daley transform Chicago’s schools, sent clear messages to entrepreneurial types when he took over in Philadelphia in 2002: your innovative spirit is welcome here, so let’s talk. Business leaders, who for years sat on the sidelines because their efforts to assist the school systems were often squandered by ineffective school leaders and systems, suddenly found hope and became early partners in reform.

Vallas has engaged in internal tinkering and engineering in ways that are not unique, such as breaking up large campuses into smaller learning communities, virtually eliminating middle schools, and attempting to infuse schools with better technology that can be used in conjunction with the city’s instructional programs. But he has also turned Philadelphia into a stomping ground for outside groups trying to push innovation. In that regard, his support from the highest levels of the school system has been unprecedented. Private companies, like Edison Schools, have found a welcome home under Vallas and are operating several schools in his district. The University of Pennsylvania and Temple and St. Joseph’s universities also are now running schools for the system.

While such privatization schemes are often extremely controversial, Vallas has managed to win some degree of support from teachers and from the larger community. From day one he has unveiled a dizzying array of reforms, programs, and partnerships, creating the image that things are moving at lightning speed toward improvement. One teacher union leader went so far as to note, “I don’t remember a superintendent ever being on a honeymoon for three years.”

In addition, businesses that are peripheral to education have been brought onboard as well by Vallas’s vision. The software giant Microsoft is building an experimental new high school in the district. The result is what Thomas Toch, a writer on education, calls “the early stages of a revolution in public education.” Vallas, Toch noted, “has forced the Philadelphia education community to rethink the status quo and question the effectiveness for kids of a system built around rules and regulations designed to protect adults.”
Can We Institutionalize the Incentive to Reform? Entrepreneurs within the public school system clearly play a role in improving conditions for learning in the schools under their charge. In cases like Philadelphia’s Vallas, their efforts have the potential to go a long way toward transforming entire systems. It is still not clear whether it is possible for entrepreneurship alone, however, to change the overall culture of public-sector school systems, which are as a rule disdainful of innovation and imagination even in the face of obvious failure.

Entrepreneurial educators face common obstacles in their efforts to improve education: institutional resistance from forces within the system, the bureaucrats, labor unions, education schools, and the state’s tight control over entry to the teaching profession. In fact, there is strong evidence that public-sector school systems themselves are their own most formidable barriers to more entrepreneurial thinking and leadership. Thomas Edison, it could reasonably be argued, would never have been able to invent the lightbulb had educrats been breathing down his neck all day. As Bill Andrekopoulos, who is now superintendent in Milwaukee, puts it, "Creativity and problem solving disappear in a bureaucratic structure."

Policymakers who wish to unleash more entrepreneurial energy in struggling school systems should consider an approach that makes risk taking more glamorous and rewarding than is currently the case. Pay scales for teachers and principals currently leave little room for incentives that reward risk taking to find better ways to educate children.

As more districts seek ways to attract alternatively certified teachers and administrators, careful consideration should be given to the aspects of plans that provide meaningful training and continuing support for educators coming from other sectors to work in schools. And given the pressure of No Child Left Behind, policymakers should also continue to consider actions that encourage educators to take advantage of the accountability measures in the law to reform their schools. The current climate of ferment has the potential to unleash an unprecedented wave of entrepreneurship from school principals and teachers who wish to be part of the solution rather than the problem. The key question will be whether districts can reinvent themselves in ways that no longer require school leaders to break the rules or to put their own necks on the line to do what is best for their kids. Soon, perhaps even rule followers will be capable of running great schools.

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