Correspondence

Disrupting Class

Clay Christensen and Michael Horn’s essay (“How Do We Transform Our Schools?” features, Summer 2008) has a plaintive quality to it. Their argument about disruptive innovation is compelling in a for-profit setting, not so in elementary and secondary schools, which are positively hostile to innovation, nondisruptive as well as disruptive. It makes no difference whether the schools in question are public or private, not-for-profit or for-profit. They all look and act the same. Why? The culture: in the things that matter—organization, administration, curriculum, teaching, and learning—they are all cut from the same cloth.

Consider entrepreneurial behavior for a moment. It requires incentives (to think as an entrepreneur) and rewards (to behave as an entrepreneur). Neither exists in elementary and secondary schooling. To the contrary, schools are positively hostile to entrepreneurship, the key condition for successful innovation of any kind. What is more likely than a disruptive technology in the schools is a disruptive technology that end-runs the schools: indeed, all the things that kids like about technology—games, Facebook, texting, PDAs, cell phones, smaller and smaller computers, 24/7 uncensored web access—are off-limits in schools.

The authors’ conjecture about the “commercial system” in the U.S. beginning with the “writing of concepts in textbooks” reveals more than they perhaps intended. Made possible by Gutenberg and invented by Jan Comenius (The Great Didactic), the textbook was the technology that made mass education possible (and has come to symbolize the anti-intellectualism that is the hallmark of American schools). Wikis, collaborative web sites for storing and sharing data, may be the ultimate disruptive technology, spelling both the emblematic and literal end of the textbook, an event to be devoutly welcomed and applauded.

Denis P. Doyle
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The Governor

Daniel Weintraub’s chronicle of the tortured path of education politics under Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger (“No Country for Strong Men,” features, Summer 2008) hints at the frustration surrounding the death of the Year of Education Reform in California, but it fails to reach the obvious conclusion: if the “Governator” cannot do it, nobody is likely to do it—now or in the future.

The backdrop of current California education politics is a $2 million set of studies that convincingly argue that the system is the problem. The studies conclude that virtually any amount of added funding is likely to be swallowed up without a trace of improvement in student achievement and without significant changes in the rules, regulations, and incentives. Based on those studies, the governor’s own commission, of which I am a member, called for an array of interlocking changes that would break school districts free to deal with California students mired at the bottom of state rankings on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Governor Schwarzenegger, because of his immense personal power and because he became governor without the usual strings attached to California politicians going through the primary process, stands in a unique position to move the schools forward. But it appears that even he finds the task of securing the future for California children to be too difficult. If that doesn’t change, California will fuel its economy with imported workers from other states and countries, because California schools simply are not preparing students for a dynamic, skills-based labor market.

Stories of education politics always have their punch lines centered on which of the named combatants wins. The stories are grounded in the battles over propositions, budgets, and the like. And, they find it easy to ignore the real losers—the students.

Eric Hanushek
Senior Fellow
Hoover Institution
Stanford University

Daniel Weintraub’s article is an excellent overview of Schwarzenegger’s limited vision and impact on K–12 education. Just when the governor appeared ready to think hard about new concepts, an $18 billion budget deficit appeared. When there was money, in 2006, the governor and legislature created more than 20 small-widget categorical programs rather than addressing fundamental problems. They spent all the new money rather than saving it for years when state economic growth slows.
Reading First

Shep Barbash has done a masterful job of explaining the goals of the Reading First program and its journey through periods of legislative gymnastics, controversy, and success in selected states ("Looking Beyond the Reading First Controversy," features, Summer 2008). Barbash has underscored the unique nontraditional features of the program and how those features made both acceptance of the program and its implementation difficult. His analysis is timely given the recent Reading First Impact Study, which will no doubt provide fuel for gutting the program.

The need to design and implement a rigorous impact study was essential to the improvement of the evidence-based Reading First program. That is why Bob Sweet and I included evaluation targets in the law and substantial funds ($25 million) to address the targets. However, for this interim report, few evaluation tasks were completed, including the determination of which instructional materials improve reading proficiency. Unless the final report addresses this issue, it will not be possible to identify which programs and materials were most beneficial for which children and under what conditions.

The Department of Education was provided the resources to reduce misinterpretation of the study’s findings, positive or negative. Yet it delayed the evaluation by using a research design that was not originally intended, potentially limiting an analysis of factors essential to valid interpretation. Evaluations are about accountability and improvement. Improvement is difficult if you have to guess what the data mean.

Barbash’s review of Reading First programs in four states and in the Bureau of Indian Education is important because it highlights critical factors essential to reading improvement: strong leadership, effective professional development for teachers and principals, data-driven differentiated instruction, specific coaching and guidance to ensure implementation fidelity, and continuous program evaluation. Barbash has vividly described why change in education is so hard, but has given us examples of states and systems achieving the almost impossible on behalf of struggling readers. That is a real contribution.

G. Reid Lyon
Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy
Southern Methodist University

But my conclusion from his speeches and discussions is that the governor hopes his proposals for larger system change will trickle down to education. He is relying on voter initiatives for legislative redistricting and saving money from good revenue years. Redistricting may produce more legislators who are moderates and not as beholden to interest groups. Health care, however, is his top priority, so even these initiatives may never touch education.

The education coalition will not permit real policy change without a lot of new money. The coalition is more than teachers unions and includes school boards, administrators, PTAs, and noncertified employees represented by several different unions, including the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). Governor Schwarzenegger has no coalition that can overcome this alliance, with its proven pressure tactics that include student demonstrations. So the best strategy is to wait for economic conditions to improve and try to put together a deal that has more money and real reform. This approach has not been implemented since 1983, and this governor is term-limited in 2010.

Michael W. Kirst
Professor Emeritus
Stanford University

The governor is relying on voter initiatives for legislative redistricting and saving money from good revenue years.
Wrong Numbers

William Howell and Martin West have written an interesting article about Americans’ utter ignorance concerning the amounts their tax dollars contribute to public education costs (“Is the Price Right?“ features, Summer 2008). While homeowners and parents were somewhat more knowledgeable than others, they too were way off in their estimates of per-pupil expenditures in their districts and average teacher salaries in their states. Yet the vast majority of Americans support increased spending on schools and believe that more money will result in more student learning.

It is humbling for us policy wonks to see how far off the public is about not only their investments in public schooling, but what might make a difference in student outcomes. But frankly, I’m more concerned about the taxpayers’ and the pollsters’ lack of interest in the unfairness of how the nation’s only universal service is funded. Every level of government—local, state, and federal—underfunds the least well-off communities, with few exceptions, when considering varying student needs generated by poverty, disability, and language. Clearly, major efforts to educate the public are going to be necessary if school financing is ever to become fairer as well as wiser. We have learned that how money is spent is just as important as the amount. And given the lack of knowledge about funding, I shudder to think what a survey would show about what the money buys.

Homeowners deduct mortgages and lower-income renters get virtually no help. We provide much more support to the elderly than we do to young children. Even the pinch of high health-care costs has not yet generated a successful public demand for more government investment. My hunch is that the public’s knowledge of school funding is no less than their knowledge of other important funding issues.

Cynthia G. Brown
Director of Education Policy
Center for American Progress

A Matter of Time

We read with great interest the article by Caroline Hoxby and Sonali Murarka, which reports promising results from their randomized-control
study of New York City charter school students (“New York City Charter Schools,” *research*, Summer 2008). One aspect of their research in particular caught our eye: the association of more school time with improved learning outcomes. Their finding that a longer year (and in many schools, a longer day, too) correlates to higher student proficiency rates is yet another indication that the traditional school calendar in the U.S. is not sufficient if we are going to meet our goal of moving all students to, at minimum, academic proficiency.

At least one-third of charter schools across the country operate with an expanded schedule. In Illinois and New Jersey, 80 percent of charter schools have a longer school day or year or both. At the newly formed National Center on Time & Learning, we are firm believers that more time can improve student learning because, like Hoxby and Murarka, we have seen it work. In Massachusetts, 18 urban district schools have added at least 300 hours to their school calendar. An analysis after one year of the initiative (involving 10 schools) showed that students in these schools outpaced average proficiency gains in the state in math, science, and English language arts. Our research suggests that an expanded school schedule offers a multitude of educational benefits, including more time on task, a broader array of enrichment programs to engage students in school, and time for teachers to participate in real collaborative planning and additional professional development.

This year we mark the 25th anniversary of *A Nation at Risk*. That report outlined four key recommendations concerning educational content, expectations, teachers, and time, noting that progress on each of these fronts would require leadership and fiscal support. We can point to important federal and state progress on all the recommendations, except for time. Only Massachusetts has a statewide initiative to assist traditional public schools in expanding school schedules. Now that Hoxby and Murarka’s charter school data and the Massachusetts initiative show such promising results, we are hopeful that “time” will finally take its rightful place in our country’s education reform lineup.

**Jennifer Davis**  
President  
David Farbman  
Co-Director of Research  
National Center on Time & Learning

**Charters as a Diverse Sector**

Charter schools are too often treated as a monolithic reform and too rarely treated as a diverse sector. When we think of charter schools as a reform, we tend to either praise or criticize, depending on the particular snapshot of charter schools we’re discussing. When we think of them as a sector, we understand that charter schools mirror other sectors—private schools and traditional publics—in their range of quality and outcomes. And we can learn from their successes and failures.

Viewed from this sector perspective, your two charter school articles (“Brand-Name Charters,” *features*, and “New York City Charter Schools,” *research*, Summer 2008) offer valuable contributions. From a reform perspective? Not so much.

The article about franchise charter schools describes a vibrant subsector. It explores the problem of growing beyond a small number of successful schools while simultaneously addressing quality control. Where the article runs into trouble is when it tells readers, with no empirical backing, that the charter movement began “with tremendous potential for narrowing the achievement gap,” suggesting that there are “too few” charter schools to fulfill that promise. In truth, research has shown charter performance to be similar, on average, to the performance of traditional public schools.

The second article offers a more direct comparison of charters to other public schools, using a random lottery design. The results add one more data point to the diverse assortment of studies about charter performance: an example of the charter sector outperforming, on the whole, nearby traditional schools. The comparison here, it should be noted, is to New York City schools that have been criticized as underfunded and underperforming. The study thus tells us either that the charters did well, the other schools did poorly, or a combination of both.

The authors are careful to state that the significance of the findings is limited to large cities with similar student populations, to which I would add a caution about the generalizability beyond New York City itself. As with the first article, the second is strongest when it approaches charters as a diverse sector, teasing out the sorts of school practices associated with higher test scores. Let’s keep trying to learn about what works.

**Kevin G. Welner**  
Education and the Public Interest Center  
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As one of the next generation of Education Next editors, Martin Raymond West V (known to his friends as Quinn), lends a helping hand.