



Will technology help transform moribund learning institutions?

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New technologies have transformed the way we communicate, keep up with the news, pay the bills, and even how we learn. But will they change the way that we run schools?

Recently, Terry Moe and John Chubb spoke in Minneapolis about their new book, “Liberating Learning.” Moe, a professor of political science at Stanford University, and Chubb, founder of EdisonLearning, first gained national attention in 1990 with their book “Politics, Markets, and America’s Schools.”

In that book, Chubb and Moe said that the formula of “better courses, better teachers, higher standards, more money” are not enough to produce effective schools. Those schools, they wrote, schools should be “organized like teams, held together by consensus, cooperation, and shared goals, not primarily by rules and regulations.”

Most schools aren’t organized that way. Instead, they are mired in bureaucracy, with typically unsatisfying results.

“Our reform efforts are doomed to failure unless and until we transform the institutions that control the schools,” they wrote. “The only alternative to bureaucracy is choice.”

Fast forward nearly 20 years to July 22, 2009 when Chubb and Moe spoke to over 100 people at a luncheon held by the Center for the American Experiment.

“While we try to educate kids for the 21st century,” John Chubb said at the event, “we educate kids in schools that look very much like the 20th century or even the 19th century.”

The results? Only one-third of American students are proficient in math and reading. Two-thirds of children of color score “below basic” on core subjects. (Minnesota does better than the average state, but on national tests, no more than half of its students read or do math at the proper grade level.)

Why haven’t the reforms of the last 20 years delivered on their promises? Because most of them “are not worthy of the name.”

Blame the “politics of blocking,” Chubb and Moe say. Pay teachers more for outstanding student performance? Blocked by the teachers unions. Get rid of incompetent teachers? Blocked. Impose high-stakes testing? Only if it’s watered down. Charter schools? Completely blocked in 10 states, hamstrung in many others.

All these reforms, plus others, have been opposed by teachers unions, which do what they’re supposed to do—look out for the interests of their members, and especially of their leaders. School boards, administrators, and legislators often line up on the anti-reform side.

With its checks, balances, and multiple veto points, our political system promotes blocking. That's good if you want to prevent a messianic tyrant from taking over. But it makes institutional reform difficult: Advocates of change must win at every step of the legislative process, while opponents have to win only once.

Online classes and other new technologies can transform the classroom experience. But can they do what Chubb and Moe called for in 1990—"transform the institutions that control the schools"? Yes, they say. Not only will new technologies change what happens in the classroom—self-paced lessons, more-engaged students, students connected to expert teachers who live at a distance—but they will change school governance itself.

That's because a hybrid approach of classroom and online learning will diminish union power, and in turn, the possibility of blocking.

Online classes aren't limited to 20 or 25 students in a classroom, so schools will need fewer teachers.

Won't the unions, school boards and administrators be able to keep blocking? No, says Moe.

They "can't really stop technology from shaping our society, from shaping our attitudes, from shaping what parents and kids want." Call it a technologically induced people-power revolution. Thanks to new technologies that can track student and teacher performance, and link the two, people will be able to know when their children are being badly served. Two education-reform pressure groups within the Democratic Party are breaking with the unions.

How long will institutional change take? Chubb and Moe say "we don't know, but it will surely take a long time."

For some extra perspective, I talked with Joe Nathan, who is the director of the Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs. Nathan has watched and advocated institutional change for 25 years. And it's fair to say that he has some doubts about power of technology to bring about change.

In a phone interview, he told me "there's no doubt that technology is transforming learning, but it's not transforming schools." Ever since the 1930s, he said, people have said that this or that new technology would revolutionize education. But "we're still using the same pattern we've had for 60 years." He cited as one example the recent completion of mega-scale high schools in the Twin Cities suburbs.

Still, he sees some modest changes. In the last seven years, enrollment in traditional district schools has declined 40,000, while charter school enrollment is up 22,000, though he cautions that not all charter schools are good. Nationally, the charter school movement, which enrolls 1.4 million students, is the largest institutional change to date.

Business and community groups are calling for reforms, he said. More and more people are saying "the traditional structure is not working for me." In this last session, the Minnesota Legislature created site-governed schools, which will give districts an opportunity to respond to charter schools.

Nathan resists forecasting, and he's a wise man for it. I like the optimism of Chub and Moe, and I certainly hope they're right. As my conversation with Nathan drives home, technology doesn't in itself change institutions. That comes only when coalitions of people come together to use the technology at hand.

For the sake of the next generation and indeed for all of us, institutional change can't come soon enough.