

## Big Ideas and Reform Fatigue

### Working With Educators to Redesign Learning

By Lisa Petrides

Since Horace Mann introduced the common school in the early 19th century, the United States has been no stranger to big ideas in education. In the last century, the introduction of the GI Bill and the creation of community colleges expanded access to higher education and helped fuel a century of economic growth and prosperity. And in recent years, too, big ideas have swept the field, from the development of standards-based reform and the expansion of charter schools to dozens of other improvement strategies that have captured the imagination of their funders, but been met largely with shrugs and mistrust from educators.

Reform fatigue is so prevalent that if we could create a utopian school system tomorrow, many educators would be likely to greet it with more skepticism. They have been subjected to so much policy churn, and seen so many fads enter and exit the system without impact, they would rightly say, "This too shall pass."

How can educators come to embrace new—and potentially transformational—ideas? One way is to invite them to help create solutions based on their own experiences. Another is to bring them into contact with other educational innovators from the United States and abroad, and with change-makers and big thinkers from creative and high-tech fields, to engage in a process of identifying, designing, prototyping, and scaling up new concepts for education processes and services.

The nonprofit group I head, the **Institute for the Study of Knowledge Management in Education**, recently tried to accomplish both, hosting the inaugural Big Ideas Fest, a meeting that brought together more than 175 teachers, educational innovators, and leaders from schools, colleges, research labs, government, science, philanthropy, cultural agencies, and a broad range of creative fields to identify and design strategies that can be brought to scale.

**"Schools can be made more relevant if they are reconceived as 'learning studios' where students design, manage, and are measured by their success in carrying out complex projects."**

The meeting raised crucial issues that reinforced what innovators have been saying for some time, which is that the transformation of schooling as we know it is inevitable. Speakers and participants found common agreement that our system of schooling will either be made obsolete by innovation or will eventually crumble under its own weight. **Videos from the Big Ideas Fest** provide ample evidence of the following:

- Our current education system does not prepare a vast number of students (estimated at about 40 percent of all high school graduates) to be college- and work-ready. Meanwhile, 2 million students drop out of school each year, including more than half of those living in our cities.
- Many talented young people, some of whom are considered failures in school, are being held back by a system that does not spark their interest or engagement.

- The cost of educating all Americans could be provided much more efficiently and inexpensively if schooling were designed and leveraged in new ways that harnessed the natural curiosity and self-motivation of students of all ages as learners and mentors.
- New and emergent technologies hold significant promise for changing how we organize education and make it available. Open-source content can be expanded and remixed to provide a richer and more dynamic curriculum than is typically offered in schools. Video games and hands-on simulations can be used for educational purposes, to capture student interest, and to help young people viscerally understand how civilizations are built, how the body works, the physical laws of the universe, and many of the most challenging concepts students take years to learn in school.
- Schools don't need to be irrelevant. They can be made more relevant if they are reconceived as "learning studios" where students design, manage, and are measured by their success in carrying out complex projects. In these studios, self-directed learners would connect with teacher advocates and coaches who helped them take on challenging real-world projects. Visits to research and learning centers, museums, libraries, and workplaces, along with road trips, would all be part of an integrated learning-studio process.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan **endorsed this perspective** when he told attendees that the nation is challenged to find better ways to "balance formal and informal learning, harness technology and new forms of pedagogy to improve learning, take advantage of emerging virtual and collaborative learning communities, and make teaching and learning more relevant and learner-centric."

To create the conditions needed for these transformations to take place, policymakers will need to think through what it will take to do the following: reformulate the statutes that govern how and where learning happens; alter the structure of the school day and year to take advantage of formal and informal learning; change the roles for educators, parents, peers, the community, employers, and others involved in advancing learning; reconsider the supply, content, cost, and distribution of learning materials; and reformulate notions of what we want young people to know and do and how we measure learning.

We also will need to **identify new rewards and incentives**, sponsored by philanthropy, government, or entrepreneurs, to encourage innovation to flourish.

These changes cannot wait for big thinkers to hand down ideas from above, however. Brewster Kahle, the founder of the Internet Archive, suggested at the Fest that change had to occur not by following rules, but by urging participants to buck the trends, flout the rules, and "ask for permission later." His message: These changes will be the byproduct of efforts by educators and policymakers to work together to break through current constraints, including the traditional use of school time, limits on technology use in schools, testing regimens and accountability requirements, isolation of teachers, and other factors.

Many years' worth of data collected from educator surveys indicates that teachers have long been clamoring to take on new roles and work collaboratively. New federal resources for innovation provide an opportunity to bring educators to the table to think through new ways of doing business that will help us break through the cycle of endless tinkering and indifference. This is an opportunity that should not be wasted.

As states, districts, and communities consider strategies for innovation and collaboration, we need to make sure that we are bringing the right people to address the right problems. It will require doing more than rounding up the usual suspects to develop yet more proposals; it will mean bringing together a broad range of talent, including those in the

classroom who can help bring the wisdom of practice into policy development and system redesign.

Contrary to the views of some policymakers, efforts to reconsider directions and approaches for schooling must include those who understand the needs of students and experience daily the problems in the current system. Linking together the skills and knowledge of innovators and educators from around the world to tackle some of these challenges may prove to be the biggest idea of all.

*Lisa Petrides is the president and founder of the Institute for the Study of Knowledge Management in Education and a former professor at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her organization sponsored the Big Ideas Fest with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the KnowledgeWorks Foundation, the Lumina Foundation for Education, the Making Waves Education Foundation, the MetLife Foundation, Microsoft Research, and Red Hat.*

Vol. 29, Issue 27