



Entrepreneurship in K-12 Public Education

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Abstract. The thesis of this paper is that American public education is sorely hurt by false certainty, and that greater openness to entrepreneurship could lead to more adaptable and effective schools. Educators like to say “we know how to educate every child to high standards” but they then line up into opposing camps that struggle for control of schools via regulation. The keys to improvement in a field with technical uncertainty are provider discretion and performance accountability. If public education is to be more effective, especially for children who are not well served now, it must become open to entrepreneurship in four areas: providing support services, managing human resources, delivering complete courses, and operating whole schools.

Keywords: performance, accountability, privatization, entrepreneurship, regulation.

1. Democracy, Policy-Making, and Entrepreneurship

K-12 education is plagued by a lethal combination of weak technology and false certainty. Despite educators’ claims to the contrary, we don’t really know how to educate every child effectively, or even how to create large numbers of schools that work reasonably well for the vast numbers of children with “normal” needs and abilities. Though these are some schools that do this very well, no one has found a reliable way to reproduce them.

But because education is controlled by public policy, both educators and policymakers constantly search for the kind of general prescriptions that can be codified in law and regulation. Thus, educators and policymakers often endorse goals that no one knows how to attain and prescriptions that can’t possibly have the positive effects claimed for them. For wildly unrealistic goals one need look no further than the National Education Goals established in 1989.¹

These were dead letters the day they were established, in part because no one knew how to attain them and in part because their lead-times were too short even highly effective programs. For example, first the goal: “By the year 2000, the high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent”, and the related objective that “The gap in high school graduation rates between

1. For complete information on the National Education goals see <http://www.negp.gov>.

American students from minority backgrounds and their non-minority counterparts will be eliminated” *were* unrealistic, in light of the fact that millions of members of the Class of 2000 had already reached the third grade without learning to read.

Twelve years later none of the education goals has been met, and it is debatable whether the scant progress made toward them can be validly measured.

More recently, all but two of the states have established standards for student learning in early grades, middle school, and high school. These purport to establish what every child needs to know and be able to do at a particular age: in theory a child who does not meet the standards will be unable to succeed at higher levels of education and ultimately be unprepared for productive work. But these standards have been created by political processes, usually featuring logrolling among groups of teacher committed to different subject matters. The result in many cases is standards that have no empirical basis: they might or might not be set too high, and students that fail to meet them might or might not be unable to succeed in college or find good jobs.

Goals and standards can be good things, especially when they call attention to big performance inequalities, e.g. between central city and suburban children, or between whites and Asians on one hand and blacks and Hispanics on the other. But when based on false certainty, they can cause confusion and misdirect effort.

The ill effects of false certainty are also evident in policies that prescribe particular methods of instruction. The struggles about whether to require or forbid the teaching of phonics, or whether to root out or promote programs of bilingual education, are prime examples. Competent reading teachers use a mixture of phonics and whole word approaches; none would ever consider using only phonics or no phonics. Similarly, effective schools teaching immigrant students use varying combinations of English and the students’ native languages, whatever it takes to help students learn. Policies forbidding or mandating a practice reflect the balance of political forces at a particular time, not technical certainty.

Defenders of policy-driven K-12 education are prone to quote Churchill’s dictum that “Democracy is the worst possible form of government except all the others that have been tried.” However, the democracy they refer to is not an open system in which government is limited and individual freedom always gets the benefit of the doubt. Their version of democracy is a centralized deliberation leading to prescriptions that everyone must then obey. Some even glorify the fact that such deliberation can lead to coercive results, saying that it maintains education as a public space and ensures that all citizens will share certain formative experiences.²

Democracy might be the best system, but defining democracy as centralized deliberation leading to uniform coercive results is surely perverse.

When controlled by policy, public education is defined by the relative strength of interest groups and their ability to control how issues are resolved in elections, legislatures, and courts. Policy reflects the interplay of adult interests, especially those of school employees and of parents who have intense views about their own children's education. Thus, education can be structured for the convenience of organized teachers, and activist parents can make sure the lion's share of money is spent on their own children. The bureaucracies created to implement policy also erect sharp boundaries between themselves and the rest of society, so that new ideas and interests have great difficulty getting a hearing.

These are the consequences of one strangely limited – if currently predominant – view of democracy. If seen more broadly, democracy is a system in which no individual or group is permanently excluded from influencing decisions and no issue is ever settled permanently. This is a Jeffersonian version of democracy, one that expects arrangements to be temporary, and institutions to be re-thought fundamentally as times and needs changed.

The latter form of democracy fits the realities of education. No process, whether deliberative or scientific, can validly prescribe a single solution for children from diverse needs; nor can it anticipate the skill requirements of a constantly changing society and economy. In education, only two things are certain: first, that not every child will learn best from the same form of instruction; and Second, that when today's children are adults they will need to know things that few if any members of their parents' generation know.

The best mechanism for coping with such uncertainty is entrepreneurship. As defined by Schumpeter, entrepreneurship is implementation of change via the introduction of new or better quality goods; new methods of production; new sources of supply; or reorganization of an industry. These are economic rather than political functions, but they can serve democracy, especially when there is so much uncertainty about how to accomplish a great goal, like effective public education.

The thesis of this paper is that American public education is sorely hurt by the lack of entrepreneurship, and that greater openness to entrepreneurship could make public education more adaptable and efficient.³

The paper has three parts: areas in which public education is weakened by being closed to entrepreneurship; how public education could be opened up to

2. See Gutmann, Amy and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement; Why Moral Conflict Cannot be Avoided in Politics, and What Should Be Done About It*. Cambridge MA, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996, p.63-66.

3. Though entrepreneurship is usually inspired by the desire to make a profit, many potential entrepreneurs in education are nonprofits. These can become forces for innovation if the public school system will pay their costs and allow them to operate freely.

entrepreneurship; and what would be the greatest opportunities for education entrepreneurs.

2. How the Lack of Entrepreneurship Weakens Public Education

A common observation among social service workers and foundations is that the public school system is the toughest and least malleable bureaucracy they deal with. Putting aside paramilitary organizations like police and fire departments, the public school system is the one city agency that most jealously guards entry into careers, most reverently follows its own rules, most suspiciously eyes outsiders offering to collaborate, and most carefully steers philanthropists and investors away from its own core functions.

Moreover, public education has little capacity to invest in new ideas. The vast preponderance of money in K-12 schools goes for salaries, and employment is controlled by certification rules and union contract provisions. Even when government increases education spending, union contract negotiations ensure that most of it is used for salary increases. Though there are substantial amounts of funds for teacher on-service training, the money is separated into small pots controlled by different federal and state programs. When there are new investments – e.g. California’s recent major spending increase to reduce elementary school class size - there are targeted via policy.

These facts make it difficult for new ideas and new people to penetrate public education. Public schools allow small-scale innovation by individual teachers, but these are usually limited to one classroom or school. Not everyone in public education is happy with this situation, and there are many complaints about the futility of “random acts of innovation” and the impossibility of scaling up good ideas. There is no mechanism for a promising idea to capture a wider market, and no incentive for other teachers or schools to adopt a promising idea.

Becoming an unfriendly environment for entrepreneurship hurts public education in two ways: first, it is not able to adapt to changes in student demography and needs; and second, it can seldom take full advantage of ideas and resources available in the broader society.

With respect to student demography, anyone who studies big-city public school systems is aware of schools whose population has been transformed by neighborhood turnover, from predominantly native English speakers to predominantly non-English speaking immigrants. In many localities these schools continue employing employ the same teachers, and the same methods, as before the population change occurred.

With respect to use of ideas available in the broader society, our cities are treasure houses filled with human talent and great institutions - museums and universities, orchestras, religious institutions and foundations, all of them

dedicated to learning and to uplifting the human spirit. Unfortunately, the way we now run public education has kept these institutions on the sidelines. They can give money and moral support, but they cannot create or operate public schools, nor can their musicians, scientists, writers and artists teach students, except before and after school hours or as volunteers.

Some districts use help from “outside” sources like businesses, health clinics and arts institutions. However, these are generally used as supplementary resources rather than integrated into the basic instructional program.⁴ Superintendents in districts where the school system has low technical capacity (e.g. Memphis and San Antonio) have purchased comprehensive staff training and instructional guidance programs from New American Schools, a nonprofit. However, these actions generated hot opposition and were ultimately reversed, largely because school board members and permanent central office bureaucrats resented spending “their” money on “outsiders”.

This combination of inflexibility and distance from the rest of society gives many cities a much weaker and less effective public education system than they could have. Important functions are performed far more badly by public school systems than by most other long-lived American institutions, both non-profit and for-profit.⁵ These include:

- Quality control: Careful assessment of the performance of individual schools or teachers, and intervention either to improve or replace them.
- Creation of new products: Creation of new schools to meet emerging needs and to provide options for children now in low-performing schools.
- Reaction to competition: Marshaling resources to upgrade low operations whose customers are unhappy and threatening to leave.
- Staff recruitment and career development: Recruiting the ablest people available and nurturing their capacities via carefully managed developments assignments.

4. See, for example, Celio, Mary Beth, *Random Acts of Kindness*, Seattle, Center on Re-Inventing Public Education, 1995.

5. I say long-lived in order to include the incompetent organizations and businesses that continually arise but are quickly destroyed by competition of lack of funding.

- Financial control: Ensuring that costs of all activities are transparent and can be closely tracked, in support of program management and investment decisions.

School districts are constrained from performing these functions by many things: union contract provisions that allocate teachers on the basis of seniority; senior teachers' tenure in particular schools; the beliefs that teachers are interchangeable and that schools are created only by assembling a sufficient number of teachers; teacher allocation rules that allow experienced teachers to avoid the most challenged schools, and guarantee that those schools will have constantly-shifting casts of inexperienced teachers; central office expenditure of all money; and functional accounting that makes it impossible to treat any unit – whether a central office bureau or a school – as a cost center.

The result is a system in which no one has significant discretion over who is hired, where they are assigned, or how money is spent. People who recognize new needs and have new ideas are regularly thwarted by the fact that the system is bound up in rules and customs. A few superintendents (e.g. Alan Bersin of San Diego) have recognized that entrepreneurship is possible only if dollars and jobs are managed more flexibly. However, as new studies of school district budgeting have shown, the forces for stasis are strong and have – at least to date – resisted the most determined efforts of reformist superintendents and school boards.

3. How Public Education Can Become Open to Entrepreneurship

The key to entrepreneurship is discretion. If entrepreneurs from outside or inside the system are to make a contribution to its performance, someone must be capable of making real choices and reallocating real money.

However, as the foregoing section shows, public school systems are structured to minimize discretion and to obscure the flow of money. The system is, moreover, structured in these ways for what some people consider good reasons. It minimizes the power of principals, so that teachers are not subject to arbitrary treatment, and it hides transactions that could be controversial, e.g. reductions in regular instruction to support costly placements for small numbers of handicapped children. Many people benefit from these attributes of the system; so opening public education to entrepreneurship will not be easy.

For years, people unhappy with the performance of public school systems have exhorted teachers and administrators to get outside the box, to innovate. However, experience has shown that exhortation and celebration of heroes does not change anything. The system tolerates a few zealots like celebrated school principal Debby Meier, and points to them as evidence of its flexibility

and openness to change. But their initiatives remain scarce and short-lived.⁶ The system also encourages philanthropists like Walter Annenberg, who gave hundreds of millions of dollars to support initiatives that school districts themselves could not pay for. Annenberg's money is now mostly spent, and though the initiatives he paid for were visible for a while, many have already faltered or disappeared.

There is no escaping the conclusion that public school systems can be fully open to entrepreneurship only if money that is now tied up can be released and reallocated. New public spending can encourage potential entrepreneurs, but entrepreneurship can flourish only if the anti-entrepreneurial features of the public education system are weakened. This requires change in policies and contracts, and also discipline on the part of entrepreneurs.

At the policy level, the most direct way to free up money is to eliminate any routine funding for central administrative units, and put all the money in schools, based on enrollment. Many current reform proposals are based on the idea that money should follow children to schools and that schools should then make the major purchasing decisions – what teachers to hire, how to mix teacher labor with use of technology, and what forms of advice and assistance to buy. This is one idea that unites the vouchers, charters, and school contracting movements.⁷ All of them intend to make the flow of funds to schools transparent, and make sure that schools are free to buy what they need from a competitive marketplace of vendors. Under any of these proposals, school district bureaucracies might continue to exist, but only if voluntary fees paid by schools could sustain them.

Leaders of individual schools then will become entrepreneurs who commit to welldefined approaches to instruction and then assemble the necessary teachers, administrators, materials and links to Internet sites that provide learning materials and interactive experiences. Principals (or groups of teachers who form cooperatives to run schools) will attract students on the basis of quality instruction and demonstrated results. They will be funded, in effect, by families that choose to enroll students and therefore bring public dollars. School leaders and teachers will have strong incentives to cooperate with one another and to search constantly for better ways to promote student learning. Everyone's ability to keep a good and satisfying job will depend on

6. See Hess, Frederick, *Spinning Wheels*, Brookings 1999, about how many initiatives are tried at a small scale but abandoned before they spread. On the difficulties of resolving within-district financial inequities, see Roza, Marguerite and Karen Hawley-Miles, *A New Look at Inequities in School Funding: a Presentation on the Resource Variations within Districts*, Seattle, Center on Re-Inventing Public Education, 2002.

7. For a much more extended discussion of similarities and differences among these reform initiatives see Hill, Paul T. and Mary Beth Celio, *Fixing Urban Schools*, Washington D.C., The Brookings Press, 1998.

the school's ability to maintain parents' confidence that it is the best possible option for the children served.

A less radical-sounding proposal, standards-based reform, could lead in the same direction. As adopted by all but 2 of the states, standards-based reform makes individual schools responsible for students' performance on state tests. In return for accepting stringent new performance expectations, schools are supposed to gain control over funding, spending, hiring, use of time, and selection of instructional methods. If these commitments were kept, schools would have the same kind of financial discretion sought by vouchers, chartering, and school contracting proposals. Though all major elements of the public education establishment once endorsed standards-based reform, the pro-standards coalition is now fraying badly, as teachers unite in opposition to standards-based tests and administrators balk at relinquishing control of funds. It is still possible, however, that standards-based reform will ultimately free up some funding and create some room for entrepreneurship.

People who believe in the power of entrepreneurship, or who want to be entrepreneurs themselves, must recognize the importance of policy change. In the past, some business leaders have opposed money-follows-the-child proposals, arguing that big sales of millions of dollars worth of computers or books are possible only if decisions are centralized. However, as these businesses have found, the decisions of politically controlled school systems shift with election results and have little to do with the relative merits of products.⁸ Though a few firms can make money selling to big centralized school districts, most will remain limited, as now, to administrative and supplementary services. Public education will not be fully open to entrepreneurship until spending is in the hands of people who manage individual schools and take responsibility for students' results.

Entrepreneurs can, however, advance their own cause by developing products and services that schools, as they gain control of critical decisions, will need. The next section suggests what those products and services will be.

4. The Most Promising Areas for Entrepreneurship

Because few aspects of public K-12 education have been subject to competition or cost control, it is likely that virtually every function could be done more efficiently. Some functions are demanding, however, and it is not clear that "turning it all over to the private sector" could lead to prompt

8. Recently, New American Schools has determined that its school designs cannot be properly implemented in districts that retain central control over schools' funding, staffing, use of time, and selection of instructional materials. See Berends, Mark, Susan J. Bodilly, Sheila Nataraj Kirby, *Facing the Challenges of Whole-School Reform. New American Schools After a Decade*, Santa Monica, RAND 2002.

improvements. It is also unlikely that entrepreneurs would be completely free to pursue every alternative that might look more effective or less costly. As voucher proponent Terry Moe argues so convincingly, K-12, education will always be subject to some regulation and public oversight.⁹

However, if the laws governing public education are changed to allow money to follow children and individual schools to make spending decisions, many important opportunities for entrepreneurial innovation will arise. These will be of four kinds:

- Providing support services
- Managing human resources
- Delivering complete courses
- Operating whole schools

This section will provide examples of entrepreneurial opportunities in each of these categories.

4.1. Providing Support Services

Private enterprises already provide bus transportation and food service in many school districts, and property maintenance service in a few. These are significant activities, but they do not control as much money or influence instruction as much as other services that entrepreneurs might offer, including:

Creation of local real estate investment trusts to own, develop, sell, purchase, and lease school facilities. This is a remedy for one of the costliest inefficiencies plaguing school districts: they own many buildings that are outmoded, costly to operate, and in the wrong place. The mission of such a trust would be to ensure that all publicly funded schools (traditional schools, charter schools, and contract schools) have timely access to the space they need. A trust would have the freedom and incentive to use a variety of tools to make sure every publicly funded school has a decent facility. It might allow other community organizations to rent space while schools are not in session – so-called mixed-use agreements – in order to squeeze some of the market value out of school properties.¹⁰ It might also enter partnerships to take advantage of private providers' capital-raising advantages.

9. Moe, Terry M., "The Structure of Choice," in Paul T. Hill, ed., *Choice With Equity*, Stanford, Hoover Institution Press, 2002.

Underwriting insurance to pay for schools' special education liabilities. This is a remedy for uncontrolled growth of special education costs, drawing funds away from regular classroom instruction. Underwriters could cover schools in the event students needed expensive special services. Schools could eventually be loss-rated, so that fee structures would encourage schools to use expensive special services only when absolutely necessary. Handicapped children would benefit, since insurance would guarantee funding for services when they were truly needed.

4.2. Managing Human Resources

This is a “core” function that districts normally keep inside. However, district human resource departments do not serve schools: instead, they administer district policy and ensure that personnel allocation is consistent with seniority rights and other union contract provisions. If schools were free to hire teachers and other staff, they would need vendors that could find the kinds of teachers they needed and provide payroll services and benefits packages. Opportunities for entrepreneurs could include:

“Head hunting” to find teachers who fit individual schools. This is a common private sector function, and one that many private schools use. But school district personnel offices do not perform it. Firms that built long-term relationships with individual schools could make reasonable incomes and contribute to maintenance of good schools.

Developing new sources of teachers. Science, mathematics, special education, and other teachers with rare skills could be employed by independent organizations, which would be manpower vendors, providing teachers on a contract basis. Such organizations could employ teachers and provide their salaries and benefits. Individual schools would contract with them for instructional services; the amounts paid could combine current salaries, benefits, and expenditures for in-service training and substitutes. The providers would then be responsible for recruitment, training, and compensation. As contract employees, teachers would not be covered by the same rules on pay and certification that now constrain school districts.

Providing portable employee benefits. Current teacher retirement funds are tied to particular school systems or states, and subject to benefit limits that discourage senior teachers from working past their mid-50s. Inflexible

10. Most districts have under-used school buildings in the wrong place, and overcrowded schools elsewhere. Innovation Partners in Portland is developing an independent real estate trust that manages, leases out, and redevelops existing school buildings and either builds or rents others. They are also moving toward private development of school facilities that can easily be remodeled, e.g to accommodate smaller or larger class sizes, more intense use of technology, or even rental to businesses.

government benefit packages also give teachers less freedom than private sector employees to select among health insurance, housing assistance, and other benefits providers. Current benefits for teachers are typically good for married, settled middle-aged people, but less valuable for younger, single, mobile people. Privately managed, portable retirement funds would expand the pool of potential teachers in two ways. First, they would allow people to move more readily from private sector jobs into teaching, and vice versa. Second, privately-managed portable retirement funds would ease the problem of “maxing out”. This common provision of government retirement plans means that senior employees eventually reach a point at which they cannot add further to their retirement savings. Understanding that their real incomes have suddenly dropped sharply, many leave public employment at about age 55. More flexible benefits plans could solve this system and thereby reduce premature teacher retirements.

4.3. Delivering Complete Courses

Though vendors often provide books, filmstrips, and other materials used in instruction, teachers then use these items. The use of materials, and the coherency of overall presentation, remains with the teacher. The teacher’s salary is also the most expensive part of any instructional package. However, there are some subjects that few teachers are qualified to integrate well. The result is that mathematics above basic algebra, laboratory sciences, and advanced language courses are taught poorly – and in some localities, not at all.

Providing such coursework on-line, whether via programmed instruction or interaction between students and an expert instructor, is a major entrepreneurial opportunity. Microsoft cofounder Paul Allen’s company APEX is creating on-line courses for high school AP (advanced placement) courses. However, there is still room for regular mathematics, science, and language classes, at the junior and senior high levels. These could be sold to schools that cannot find qualified teachers, or that prefer to use teachers as seminar leaders or British-style tutors.

4.4. Operating Whole Schools

Big city school districts often struggle to transform schools that have failed generations of children. The efforts districts are capable of – re-training of teachers, replacement of principals, and “reconstitution” of teaching forces – seldom work, for several reasons. Teachers in the lowest performing schools leave those schools as soon as they gain even a year’s seniority

and can claim a job elsewhere. Training they receive while working in a failed school equips them to work in their next assignment; meanwhile the failed school receives another batch of green, poorly prepared teachers. Principal replacement can make a big difference, if the district can find an excellent principal willing to take on a risky and difficult job. On average, new principals are no better able to cope with failed schools than the people they replace. Finally, district-managed reconstitution does not make a school more attractive to teachers or administrators. Thus, the new post-reconstitution staff is seldom any more skillful or capable of strategic action than the group they replaced.

By hiring independent organizations to take over failed schools, district leaders hope to gain many advantages: an independent group can start with a definite approach to instruction, and can hire teachers and administrators who understand and want to follow that approach. Edison is the best-known school provider; its curriculum and teaching methods are well known, and it can search nationally for school staff that want to work in a particular way. Edison also trains teachers and principals in its methods, and exercises some quality control over school processes and performance. Other smaller for-profits following similar business models include Mosaica, and Advantage Schools. A growing number of non-profits (e.g. Aspire and KIPP schools) are offering similar services.

School providers are finding this a tough business, in part because districts seldom give the operator full control of the school. Edison, for example, has accepted some contracts that require it to hire the same teacher union members who worked in the schools before Edison took responsibility for them. For-profit operators also encounter ideological opposition from community activists who distrust business. As this is written, ideological opposition to Edison, as the largest and most visible for-profit, has led to dramatic declines in the company's stock price and might threaten its existence.^{11 12}

Independent school providers also contract with community groups that have received charters to operate individual schools. Charters give the school operator greater freedom on hiring, hours of operation, and pay scales. However, many of the community groups that hire school providers are fractious and inexperienced. As Edison has found, these small governing boards can micromanage and disrupt the instructional program.

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11. The wave of ideologically driven opposition to Edison has crested in three cities, San Francisco, New York, and Philadelphia. In each city the company was portrayed as a carpetbagger taking money that should be controlled locally. ACORN, a leftist community action group with chapters in many cities, has also made headlines by portraying Edison as a white organization that can victimize Black children. This is so despite the fact that many Edison top managers are African-Americans.
 12. Ideological opposition is not the only threat to Edison's stock price. The company has also been criticized by the Securities and Exchange Commission for overstating earnings.

Despite these troubles, school operation is and extremely important entrepreneurial Opportunity. It can allow independent providers to use school time in ways forbidden by district teacher contracts, and it can reward providers that combine teacher work and technology in innovative ways. The school provider that becomes a good “systems integrator”, using technology-based instruction well and focusing teacher work on tutoring and diagnosis, can become a low-cost, high-performance provider.

The need for new school providers is still strong. In the course of a recent state takeover, Philadelphia’s hiring of such organizations was limited only by the supply. There are not enough whole-school operators to meet the needs of one big city. State and federal laws are now in place that could require dozens of cities to hire operators for large numbers of schools.

Edison’s experience has convinced many investors that non-profit school operators are more likely to succeed. However, successful school operation requires capital to devise and test instructional methods and create hiring, training, and quality control capacities. Some of the invests can come from philanthropy, but profit-seeking investors are also needed. Smaller forprofit operators – with less flamboyant management – might be far less newsworthy and therefore more viable.

Some critics have suggested that Edison and other for-profit providers are struggling in part because their schools are not very distinctive. This is possibly true; most for-profit providers use off the shelf curricula and training program that school districts themselves can buy. (Edison, for example, uses John Hopkins University’s “Success For All Reading”). Some school districts have cancelled their contracts with such providers, claiming they can run the same programs themselves. Truly successful for-profit whole-school providers will probably need to develop proprietary methods, including novel uses of technology for core instruction, that cannot be readily imitated.

5. Conclusion

For decades, public education has been frozen by laws, regulations, and labor contracts. Money is tied up in many unproductive uses – e.g. unneeded buildings, inefficient central offices, teaching forces not disciplined by performance pressures. Entrepreneurship is needed in every aspect of school and system operations. But it is not easy. As we have already seen, “the private sector” might, but does not always, find ways to increase efficiency. Entrepreneurs who recognize the potential for improvement in public education, but also know that the work is hard and demanding, can make a difference, especially in those places where public education now performs most badly.