

# Innovation can save American education – Part 1

**Innovation can fix the education problems in America.** As American as any value, *innovation* is the ‘think different’ approach that has saved us before, during historically hard times. It can restore and redefine education’s vision of getting youth ready for the world. From stone tools to Twitter™, innovation often produces replacements of the status quo by looking beyond incremental improvements. Innovation was the first human technology, a transforming “**CORE VALUE**” that can be adopted by both individuals and organizations wanting to replace the overused *thinking outside the box* chatter. The following ideas are the introductory basics, compressed from miles of varied research, offered here to reveal a new dialog and plant seeds of hope for a fresh CULTURE OF INNOVATION in and around education.

## 4 innovation basics

### #1. TECHNOLOGIES GET OLD

**Rip Van Winkle** wakes after sleeping for 50 years and is overwhelmed by the all changes in transportation, communication, medicine and other technologies. He searches the new world looking for something familiar and is finally relieved when he walks into a building to find one thing that has not changed – it’s a school. This story is often told during school-improvement conferences to illustrate that most schools are still training workers for factories long departed. If teaching is a *technology*, then education’s status quo exhibits symptoms common to being past its prime. When technologies approach the end of their shelf life, the common response is to push harder, go faster, sell cheaper and punish under-performance. These responses are diagnostic signs, telling us that a model needs reinvention and are echoed in current news reports about education reform efforts [*Excessive testing gets an “F”*, *The Buffalo News*, October 29, 2009; *ROOM TO IMPROVE, No Child Left Behind, 5 year report*, *US News & World Report*, November 2, 2007].

Old tools get replaced with new tools when it matters. Smart school money needs smart investments in emerging technologies in education.

### #2. PIONEERS LIVE ON THE FRINGE

**Tom Peters**, a leading authority on corporate reinvention says that we must always keep an on the fringe because that is the source of our next big breakthrough. **Bruce Springsteen** recently accepted induction into his high school’s Hall of Fame, reflecting on his former outsider status, suggesting educators: “...keep your eyes on the ones that don’t fit in. They’re the ones thinking out of the box and re-imagining the place we live in ...our hometown...” There are just too many historical examples of breakthroughs coming from the fringe - first rejected, then embraced - for us to not be inviting the pioneer fringe thinkers to the decision table. Breakthrough fringe thinkers exist in schools everywhere, like independent researchers, driven by the human pulse for the new and better way. They use the classroom like a learning laboratory – some during the day, and especially in after-school hours. In fact, the classic conditions exist after-school to incubate breakthroughs, free from the tethers of the test-centered school day.

History suggests that the experimental tone of “after-school” settings will birth fresh and effective strategies if we can emancipate ourselves from ties that bind us to the older, narrow menu of options. Let’s study innovations delivering outcomes after-school and promote the breakthroughs as lessons and models for others.

> discover > measure > map > illuminate >

### #3. STUDENTS ARE CUSTOMERS

Experts say that the #1 challenge in schooling today is weak student engagement. Business understands customer engagement and if we learn to see the ‘student as customer’, business marketing has a lot to teach. Customer engagement is driven by the lure of getting what you want, of adding value. No lure, no customers, no sale. Disengaged students [customers] walk out, drop out or tune out. Students study when they care. In other words, **passion precedes performance**. For every disengaged student genius like Bill Gates, and an i difranco, there are millions with gifts that don’t find their true voice and destiny, despite school. Education re-imagined as student-centered might better engage the next age of visionaries. If school is a true marketplace delivering value in real world skills, students will spend [invest, trade, exchange] their *currency* of attending and engaging. Business customers drive innovation and schools can follow suit.

### #4. REPLACEMENT BEATS IMPROVEMENT

**Innovation is art, a teachable craft.** The classic metaphor for innovation, SLICED BREAD, reflects a creative process that is more playful than analytical. Sliced bread reinvented, blending 2 familiar things (bread & blades) in an impulse more back yard shed playful than boardroom formal. **Einstein** himself acknowledged that innovation was born more from mystery and art than science. Author **Max Depree**, popularized this as well in *Leadership Jazz* and *Leadership is an Art*. Breakthrough innovators rarely do strategic planning, they play and compose, *see and think different*, working with things already in the environment, sometimes ending and launching industries in the process. Cell phones are a mixed mash of telephone, radio, camera and computer, and will send wired phones to the museum. Edison’s legacy of inventiveness lives. Reality shows revolutionize TV, elbowing-out many high-cost productions. **Facebook** and **YouTube** reframe on-line marketing. **MP3s & iTunes** replaced record & CD shops. **Amazon** takes bookstores off the street. History tells us to innovate or join T-Rex. Institutions that resist get caught off guard by a new breed because they lost their original creative urge. Experts strain over incremental improvement, while fresh thinkers are outside the fortress with something brand new, energized and ready. When being slow and out-of-step gets exposed, running to catch up only reveals a role as a follower. This seems to be the here and now in the American classroom. The United States has become an educational follower of Japan, China, and India. We are not ‘ready’ and more contenders are closing in. It may be telling that this news is a companion piece to similar media stories about customer neglect in banking and medicine. Consider, perhaps, that Japan, China and India have replaced us in prioritizing innovation as a habit.

A creativity revolution can help save our ailing educational institutions. Easily said, but tough to do, demanding more than strategic thinking. It will take courage, and a unified will to face the fire.

## Save the VISION, face the fire

Change takes courage. Standing for replacing old ways confronts the old guard putting the speaker in harm's way. But, sometimes a failure to speak for renewal leads us down a darker road. **Elvis is dead** because his staff didn't take a healthy risk and confront the King's dysfunctional choices, a failure rooted in the desire for self-protection, and maintaining the system. The intention backfired, the kingdom fell and Lisa Marie lost her Dad. When the **CART** (organizational structure) slips in front and guides the **HORSE** (the goal or vision) the group's soul is at risk. Exposing backwards priorities takes heroism. **Joan of Arc** nearly escaped death by exposing dysfunction within the Church. When asked to submit to the will of the Church Court and deny her inner voices in order to save herself, she agreed, but only "...as long as God is first served." Her prosecutors temporarily retreated.

Today, resilient institutions {**APPLE, HP, AMAZON, SONY, FEDEX, DISNEY**} are models of living organic systems. They encourage reworking established order to help keep the vision continually on the horizon. For them, vision sits like a lighthouse, out in the distant future, beckoning the team forward through rolling seas and unpredicted weather. When a call for replacing the status quo sparks resistance, fresh partnerships with old guard shows more promise than fighting. In fact, **QUANTUM PHYSICS FORCE FIELD THEORY**, proves that lowering walls to progress is more efficient than pushing harder. Force for change can energize the opposition, which pushes back with equal force, maintaining the state of things. Seeking to first understand and then *convert resistance into partnership* can work on a large scale. **Gandhi did it**. He forecast that his foes would eventually become allies in ending British occupation of India and it worked. Remember, education's top leaders are successful graduates and defenders of the old school. These leaders are naturally protective of that system. It supported and insulated them from outside realities by the cushion provided by complex bureaucracy. But if those cushions are growing thinner these days, the conditions may be just right for genuine and brave advocacy with empowered leaders in promoting a fundamental reinvention.

A fresh dialog will not start without sparks. True students, both individual and institutional, that **MODEL LIFE LONG LEARNING** must face that fire of resistance if we hope to capture and raise the flag of renewal.

## Agenda for action:

- Include** the "fringe" of the school-community in planning and decision-making.
- Map** emerging innovations of pioneer teachers and after-school providers.
- Teach** innovation as a tool for achieving economic, academic and social excellence.
- Build more** school-business partnerships and real world career-skills training.
- Prioritize** promising innovations in national, state and local budget decisions.

## Final words

### **School failure = American failure**

The United States of America is, in itself, an innovation - designed to be the new model for a better nation - an inventive and continually experimental replacement of what was not working. The spirit of inventiveness is a key to the American soul - its how this country was formed - a cornerstone in our foundation. In fact, the Great Seal of the United States illustrates **vision** with both **Plan A** (PEACE) and an alternate back-up, **Plan B** (WAR, if needed). Take a look. It's right there on the dollar bill. If innovation was more the fabric of our nation's earlier days, then our capacity to regain the global competitive edge can be recaptured through re-booting the founding principal of innovation as a core value. Not doing this freezes our role as economic & educational followers.

### **If innovation drives GLOBAL competition then innovation should fuel AMERICAN education.**

As we imagine the future, we see no job shortages for innovative problem solvers. That quality rates high on the lists of what employers want and, perhaps, its what the world needs as well. **As education goes, so goes the nation.** Those with the deepest culture of innovation will own the global competitive edge. We once led the world, going to the moon and back (several times) using tools and technology never even imagined until John Kennedy forecast that vision, nearly a decade before it was made real. It's a great model for educators and others to follow: vision ignites innovation as the fuel for social, economic and academic leadership.

## Innovation can save American education - Part 2 - coming in October 2010

- will feature four best model examples from education pioneers in New York State.

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