

A Third Ground Between Public and Corporate Education: Globally Competitive Schools Show Us How It's Done

Genevieve Tran

Abstract

Several US national consensuses over the past 50 years have aimed to reform its globally uncompetitive public education system. New school charters and free-market reforms, along with billions of dollars pledged by the US Congress and private entrepreneurs alike hope to revive education. After 26 years since *A Nation at Risk* was issued, there is still no one existing school model that seems to be the answer. Each model excels, fails and equals others in inconclusive measures. However, there is evidence of excellence found in an array of different schools around the world. Evidence shows that their individuality may hold the civic and moral heuristics for success in education that have been overlooked in the search of a winning model.

Our world is increasingly preoccupied with business and the economy, such that many see a rationale in aligning our schools to match these goals and principles. So, what if we were to apply a business model to children--namely, to the business of educating them? Would it be socially acceptable to sell the responsibility of educating our children? The answer seems to be yes, in some cases, in the education

communities of North America and Europe. Often, the traditional style of government-run education has under-achieved for so long, that alternative ways have had to be sought—often seen in new charters, free-market, and competition schooling models—in the attempt to best educate children—and some have proved their worth. However, it is a traditionally-run public education system in Finland, for example, where students consistently score the highest on international standardized tests. Similarly, the Edmonton district school board is a beacon of success for principals in North America, who regularly come to learn from its model. Thus, the question remains: which model is it that will guarantee American children a place on the leading edge of global competition? These excellent schools seem not to be bound by public or private ownership, by geography, demographics, nor style of schooling. Education has succeeded in this changing world, on a third ground, in large part due to ability of the leaders and communities of these successful schools to adapt their format to the local needs of their students, which by virtue of having a catered and thoughtful approach, has caused the students to be well-equipped for this competitive world.

The Rise and Fall of the US's Global Competitiveness

The last time America was truly shocked into drastically changing its education system to reflect the technological changes of the times and global competition, might have been at the sight of superior Russian technology—at the launch of Sputnik in 1957. This 2 feet-in-diameter ball of metal was able to instigate some deep reflections on how America should improve education for its students. In 1969, not only did America rise to the challenge by putting a human on the moon, but science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields became heavily promoted prompting the refrain “I wanna to be an astronaut when I grow up,” (Farmer, 2009, p. 42). After Sputnik, the US federal government invested an “unprecedented” amount of money in pre-collegiate curriculum and teacher development, the bulk of which went to the National Science Foundation, which aimed to revise and create curricula in biology, chemistry, physics, math and later, social sciences (Canavaugh, 2007). 50 years later, one would think that the rapid pace of technological

revolutions of today and the advent of other economic super-powers such as India and China would similarly stoke the fires of competition in the US. However, if the interest in STEM and space programs is any indication of the US society's drive to meet the challenges of this world, as it once was, private venture capitalist for NASA Elon Musk observes, "We used to be able to go to the moon . . . Now we can only get to orbit in those creaky old space shuttles. . . We've regressed." (Watson, 2007). Something had happened to the US's savvy and know-how in the global competition arena.

Between 1969 and 1983, with the publication of *Nation at Risk*, which implicated public education as the chief purveyor of the "rising tide of mediocrity" in US education ("Nation", 1983), and the creation of the 2001 policy of *No Child Left Behind* to try to pinpoint accountability for failing students, NASA saw its line-up of prospective astronaut candidates dry up (Farmer, 2009). In 2009, the brainstorm of alternative ideas to revamp the traditional school system is still ongoing in order to "generate reform of our educational system in fundamental ways," ("Nation", 1983). Taking education out of the complete control of government and into the hands of other forms of school management has slowly become an accepted way to meet this need for change. Charter schools, with more tailored mandates than regular school districts started opening in the early 1990s and at the same time, entrepreneurs like Chris Whittle, CEO of Edison Learning, tried to lead education into the free-market to see if the discipline of efficiency and competition might whip it into shape—these being the same forces that led America to be the super-power it once was. Furthermore, in August 2007, the US Congress passed the *America Competes Act*, 50 years after the launch of Sputnik, which pledged to spend billions on math, science and other curricula in order to improve the US's ranking in the world. Despite these measures, many concede that the threat of global competition in 1957 was different in nature than it is today. "It's more of a slow, creeping crisis," says the chairman of the Intel Corp., Craig Barrett. "We're not going to see another Sputnik. . . Absolutely, it's more difficult," (Barrett in Canavaugh, 2007). Thus, it has been crucial that the US sort through these school model options and come up with the correct antidote to reverse its descending ranking in the world.

Looking at Alternate School Models

Of the above alternate solutions, charter schools seemed to hold a lot of promise. The US Department of Education currently highlights 8 successful charter schools on its website, one of which is the KIPP Academy Houston, which has a 99% attendance rate and whose 8th graders have earned \$13.5 million in scholarships to high schools over 5 years (“Innovations”, 2009). The school was recognized as a Blue Ribbon School in 2003 by the US Department of Education (“Innovations”, 2009), the highest honour an American school can achieve. In fact, to encourage the progress of charter schools like KIPP, the February 2009 US Stimulus Bill, pledged \$25 million to improve charter school facilities (Robelen, 2009), plus \$5 billion to be doled out at the Education Secretary’s discretion as “incentive and innovation grants,” in addition, there was a call by the US President to urge states to raise or remove the caps on how many charter schools are allowed to operate (Sager, 2009). However, despite the documented stories of success and more money being channeled into the charter school cause, it is unsure that there is a discernible long-term framework of their success, even within states. In Ohio, 50% of the state’s 328 charter schools were deemed failures in 2007 (Dillon, 2007). A study of charter schools by the University of Indiana found that there were “no practical differences in student performance for charter and traditional public schools,” in their state in 2009 (Akey et al., 2009, p. 10). Even on the US Department of Education’s website itself, the 2003 progress report shows that overall, charter schools actually under-performed regular public schools in Reading and Math nation-wide (“National”, p. 4 & 7). Thus, despite the US President’s endorsement, it is unclear that charter schools work any better than traditional public schools.

In addition to charter schools, the element of for-profit management of schools became a reality in the early 1990s. If perhaps public education had its failures rooted in the inefficient use of public funds, then surely businesspeople would use free-market efficiencies to correct it, motivated by their interest to gain a profit-margin. The business of education, so to speak, seemed to be an attractive venture, as Edison Learning’s Whittle would have analyzed before entering this

arena in 1992 (“Corporate” , 2009). After all, there is 700 billion dollars in public funds geared towards education spending every year (Shaker & Heilman, 2008). Such is a source of capital, which any business would dream of. Also, there is a steady stream of customers—students—who have to use the service of schools by law. Additionally, traditional government schools are often saddled with bureaucracy and unions, which make many kinds of decision-making, even as simple as re-painting a school, delayed and costly (Snell, 2001). Furthermore, schools tend to be housed in traditional school buildings that may have wasted space and energy usage. Thus, an enterprise that lacks these constraints can potentially operate more cheaply. Finally, there is officially, the current national consensus that a new format, an alternative format, of schooling is welcome. Therefore, all of these factors have made education an attractive and potentially profitable business.

In the 2008-2009 school year, “Edison Learning will serve over 350,000 students in 24 states and the United Kingdom, through 120 school partnerships,” according to the business’s website (“About”, 2009), however, ten years after its foundation, according to Whittle himself, the company had yet to make a profit and he foresaw no more than a 5% profit margin in the best-case-scenario future (“Interview with Chris”, 2003). As of 2002, the company had accumulated about \$338 million in debt (O’Reilly, 2002). However, there were returns to be had on this investment. For instance in Baltimore, Maryland, Edison came in to reverse a trend of only 10% of students passing proficiency tests (“Inside”, 2003). Montebello Elementary thrived under Edison’s management, winning the Blue Ribbon for high student achievement and having 700 parents signing a petition to expand the Edison school in 2003 (“Inside”, 2003). However, there were failures in similar measure. With the falling price of technology, one of Whittle’s mandates had been to equip each Edison student with a laptop computer. At Boston Renaissance in 1995, which was co-founded by Edison, all 650 students went home with a computer, but did not know how to set them up at home, proving the endeavour costly without corresponding benefits (O’Reilly, 2002). In fact, despite the good intentions and splashy beginnings, the school ended up breaking ties with Edison’s management 3 years early due to high-test scores that never materialized (O’Reilly, 2002). In Wichita, Kansas’s public school board, the Superintendent Winston Brooks

explained his district's similar banal end with Edison's for-profit management model:

I think they were succeeding. I don't think they were succeeding any better than many of the other schools that we have in the districts with similar demographics. ("Interview with Winston", 2003).

Thus, the for-profit model after almost a generation of trials, has yet to prove itself as the reliable model of schooling that will deliver American students into the 21st century of global competition and technological advancement. Whittle himself doubted that his model was the final solution for such a lofty cause:

I would never position us as the be-all, end-all. In a sentence, it's saying there's got to be a better way than what we are currently doing. We, as a society, have got to try lots of solutions, and we're one of those. ("Interview with Chris", 2003).

Similar stories can be told of public schools and private schools. Not one fixed model of schooling seems to be immune from failure, and each model has its example of excellence: within each model, there is a failure-excellence continuum, which does not help inform a framework of a type of excellent school.

Looking at Successful Schools (not Successful Models)

Perhaps to define excellence, it would be helpful to look into the elements of success of individual schools or districts (keeping variable their type, location, demographic and geography).

The US Department's highly descriptive account of KIPP Academy Houston (a charter school) told a story of students whose school day spans from 7:25 am to 5:00 pm—9½ hours ("Innovations", 2009), which is almost double that of Illinois's minimum of 5 hours (Roska, 2007). This, coupled with 2 hours of homework every day, leaves scant time to get involved in gangs--an issue rife in KIPP's community; their core classes are 80-minutes long (Math, Language Arts) and art, music and Spanish classes are 45-minutes each ("Innovations", 2009). Longer school days and more instructional time align with the current US President's latest educational

initiative to do away with the old agrarian school calendar and have all schools extend their days or years in order to match the success of global counterparts and even the success of the 82 schools in the KIPP network, whose 8th graders outperform their districts in state Math tests since having longer school days (“Obama”, 2009). Many states including Massachusetts and New York have already extended their school days since *No Child Left Behind*, by hundreds of hours per year (“Expanding”, 2009). Detractors have warned that extending ineffective teaching time might even worsen students’ motivation and dropout rates and recommend instead: social after school programs, which may do more to keep students engaged (“Expanding”, 2009). However, in addition to the fact that long instructional time is the thread that links the best performing countries against which the US competes, the unstructured time that US students have in the summer has been proven to contribute to their decline in Math, Spelling and especially Reading (St. Gerard, 2007). Thus, extended school time has been key at KIPP. Furthermore, parents, teachers and administrators seem deeply entrenched in their roles as leaders and stakeholders in the success of the school. At KIPP, the students have their teachers’ cell phone numbers to ask questions about homework after hours and the principal picks up garbage on Saturdays to cut costs; teachers are ever busy preparing weekly progress reports to parents, six-week report cards, student writing portfolios, and marking unit tests, projects, and standardized tests to give a more well-rounded assessment of each; the current principal Elliott Witney has been known to partner with a parent to confiscate a home TV from a boy who watched it to the exclusion of doing his homework; parents work at the school as Spanish translators, they serve food in the cafeteria and help supervise study halls (“Innovations”, 2009). Thus, the strong sense of community is important to this school whose students were at risk of falling into gang violence and unstructured lives. Full engagement of the community contributed to the school’s success and the students’ motivation. Similarly, Osmond A. Church School, one of many low-socio-economic, ethnically populated schools studied by the Achievement Alliance and the Harvard Graduate School of Education in 2007, showed student success due to actively involved parents and community. This school engaged the parents by inviting them on field trips, offering social work assistance, and having

Saturday workshops on how to assist their children in school (“Reading”, 2009). Osmond experienced high motivation among students and recorded that 82% met or exceeded state standards in Language Arts (“Reaching”, 2009). The awareness that KIPP and Osmond have had in terms of tailoring their school concept to match the needs of their students and families has been essential to their success.

Another charter school featured by the US Department of Education is the BASIS, Inc. school in Tucson, Arizona started by a husband and wife team of economists who applied the best practices of European and American Education to create the school charter in 1997 (“Basis History”, 2009). Many critics of charter schools claim that success is often owed to the skimming of the best and brightest students and this might be true for BASIS whose special needs children number under 1% (“Innovations”, 2009), however not only is their admissions policy publicly wide open, their students score within the 90th percentile on standardized tests every year, in all grades in Math and consistently outperform the state in other subjects (“Innovations”, 2009). The school is ranked the number one high school in 2008 of 1426 US schools by *Newsweek* magazine (“The Top”, 2008). Independent documentary filmmaker, Robert A. Compton, who has covered the issue of the US’s lag behind more globally competitive students in India and China in his controversial documentary, *Two Million Minutes: A Global Examination*, sought out BASIS uniquely to document the US’s best response to this threat. In the sequel: *Two Million Minutes: A 21st Century Solution*, BASIS’s teachers are revealed as not necessarily being certified, but knowing their subjects “inside out”; challenging subjects which include Game Theory, Latin, and Fine Art (“Two Million”, 2009). The students also have project-based learning where they apply the year’s skills by putting on an Opera or going to Mexico for a marine biology project (“Innovations”, 2009). As well, the students have the unique opportunity to do a research internship either in the US or abroad toward their diploma (“Senior”, 2009). The high standards, creative and challenging curriculum and dedicated staff of BASIS attracted Al Sharpton and Newt Gingrich, well-known political opposites, who came to the documentary’s premiere in a rare bipartisan endorsement of the movie’s message that the US needs to be more globally competitive, with BASIS as the leader as to how it should be done (Canavaugh, 2009).

In Alberta, Canada, the city of Edmonton's public school district has similarly been studied by US education reformists in Houston, Oakland and Seattle hoping to replicate its formula (Lips, 2006). Edmonton started its reform over 30 years ago under Mike Strembitsky, a pragmatic hog farmer and teacher, who had an entrepreneurial mission for the city's schools: for them to be more fiscally responsible, the way businesses are run (MacQueen & Wells, 2006). In 2006, under Strembitsky and subsequent superintendents, Edmonton's school principals came to control 92% of their own budget (MacQueen & Wells, 2006). This is compared to just 6% on average that a survey of 1500 New York City principals were shown to have, before a major reform (they now have 85% control, which in preliminary studies showed to correspond with an 11% increase in the number of students scoring above 'proficiency' level in Math) (Ouchi, 2008). The significance in this is that it has allowed Edmonton principals to be like entrepreneurs, whose school success and competitiveness rests largely in their hands. Principals can choose the best cost vs. quality option to clean the carpet or to hire a consultant (MacQueen & Wells, 2006). Any unused funds go back into the school to build up diverse and varied programs such as Ukrainian, Aboriginal Studies, Ballet, Hockey and Mandarin (a program, which has won awards from China) to attract and retain students whose savvy parents--89% of them--want to exercise choice in schooling in Alberta (MacQueen & Wells, 2006). The district is in touch with this sentiment of wanting choice, stating in their mission, "We believe that the "one size fits all" model of education is no longer appropriate in today's rapidly evolving society," ("Mission", 2009). Schools must meet provincial standards in tests or lose their funding (MacQueen & Wells, 2006). Although teachers' unions, such as The Edmonton Public Teachers Local 37, fear that should these atypical schools not meet the standards, there is a danger of lost jobs due to school closures, this usage of free-market know-how has actually made the district create highly competitive schools, so much so that even some private schools have been absorbed by the more diversified public system (MacQueen & Wells, 2006). Thus, site-based control of the school budgets and the offer of innovative choices to the student population have made this whole district successful, its students competitive in the province, and the district a good example for other countries.

In Finland, the students of the nation's public schools consistently score at the top of international standardized tests, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment, or PISA, which is a triennial educational survey of OECD countries ("The Programme", 2006). Gamerman, a writer for the Wall Street Journal aroused great interest in early 2008, when she wrote that Finnish students like US students, "waste hours online...dye their hair, love sarcasm and listen to rap and heavy metal. But by ninth grade they're way ahead in math, science and reading," (2008). Like Tucson and Edmonton, Helsinki is sure to be studied the world over by those seeking to reform education. Teacher training in Finland is rigorous—10% of applicants are accepted and go on to study for 5 years; consequently, their salaries are high (Gamerman, 2008). Teachers must hold master's degrees and in exchange, they have "full autonomy" with the way they teach their classes ("Education", 2009). School inspections and standardized testing are rare, yet performance variation between schools was less than 5%, which showed great consistency among OECD countries surveyed ("The Programme", 2006). Schools practice segregation of students who need more academic help by putting them in separate classes. However, this would-be controversial program in the US, but it actually causes the gap between the highest and lowest achievers in Finland to be the smallest in the world (Gamerman, 2008). In the US, where family income and upbringing could determine one's education and future earnings, it is not so in Finland, where one could switch economic classes easily due to the strength of education (Gamerman, 2008). Students do not have sports teams or proms and they start school at 7 years old, and despite being globally competitive in test scores, Finnish students still take in lessons using chalkboards and overhead projectors instead of white boards or PowerPoint. (Gamerman, 2008). According to the Education System of Finland, "the key words in Finnish education policy are quality, efficiency, equity and internationalization," ("Education", 2009). In summary, in Finland, the quality of the teachers seems to set education apart. This aspect is so robust that it could account for little need of any other type of standards or reform. As well, there is a freedom from worry over test scores and technological gadgetry or other ostensible markings of "quality" education.

The various thriving situations of these different schools in the US, Canada and

Finland seem to have captured the much sought-after element of educational excellence; they have the qualities of engaging education as well as the test-scores to prove it. Their respective models of schooling: public or charter did not seem to factor in on their excellence. In addition, they have excelled beyond comparison to free-market models and private schools in their districts. It is in the dedication of the community involved at the school, the extra time put into schools, the love for learning fostered by a creative curriculum, the sound budgetary management of the principals and the extremely well-trained teachers. Each of these schools proved to be nationally or globally competitive, yet none of them were intrinsically motivated by an inferiority complex vis-à-vis a competing world power in order to be successful; they did not seem to be feverishly racing to be the top in technological prowess, yet they were extremely competitive by state, provincial or world standards, simply by practicing to perfection their own definition of quality education. Perhaps, the best type of education has nothing to do with focusing on global-competition, advancing technologies or training for the free-market-driven world economy. Perhaps the best type of education is education, for education's sake. Shaker and Heilman attest to this indefinable characterization of what a good school should be or should do:

No single paradigm of research is capable of presenting a whole truth or offering silver bullets for school improvement... There is a need for symbolic, arts-based action by coalitions of educators, as well as rational discourse. There is a need for analysis that transcends the boundaries of the current debate and helps restore education to a position of civic and moral leadership in our society. (Shaker and Heilman, 2008, p.).

In each of the successful schools, the adults involved showed the students top exemplars of civic and moral leadership, especially regarding the importance of education. When the students learn from such a community, they are surely ready to face whatever challenges this new century will bring them. Thus, there is a set of successful schools along the continuum of school models that are not defined by being publicly or free-market controlled, nor by being worried about their position in the bi-polar top or bottom rankings of global competition. Their success by international standards is defined solely by their dedication to education.

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