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Arthur Camins: Why are Education Innovations Always Slip Slidin' Away?

By [Anthony Cody](#) on February 28, 2012 10:20 AM

Guest post by Arthur Camins.

Slip slidin' away

Slip slidin' away

You know the nearer your destination

The more you're slip slidin' away

Paul Simon

The current narrative for improving education in the United States is based on two undeniable charges and several simple and compelling solutions.

The current charges: Despite decades of effort we have failed to substantially mediate the effects of race and class on educational outcomes. Compared to product innovations in the private sector, innovations in the education sector are infrequently dispersed or institutionalized... they don't stick. We've all been there. Just when we think we nearing our destination.... real sustainable learning gains for students... the innovation just seems to slip away.

The current solutions: Fire the worst teachers and hire the best, financially reward teachers who are most successful at improving student test scores, spur innovation and improvement through competition led by charter schools, and enact strict controls over schools that fail to demonstrate progress.

This solution narrative is powerful and has gained political momentum because it has resonance with many intuitive beliefs. Unfortunately, none of these market-driven strategies are supported by substantial evidence. In fact, many are contraindicated by research on motivation as summarized in Daniel Pinks' book *Drive*, the research on performance pay such as the Center for Performance Incentives' recent study on reward-for-results experiment in the Nashville public schools, by the variable performance of charter schools, by the inability to replicate even the most successful charter schools at scale, and by reports on the difficulty of replacing principals removed in response to federal "turn-around" models.

But if market-force strategies won't work, what will? How can we generate innovations that successfully address persistent achievement gaps? How do we get to depth, dispersal and institutionalization.... innovations that stick? I would like to propose a different, if a bit more complex, solutions narrative, but one that also springs from several concepts that most people intuitively accept. Some of these ideas are grounded in state and federal education policy, while others fall within the purview of local school districts. The latter are not just hypothetical brainstorms. Rather, they are widely accepted practices in many high- performing countries. None of these, done in isolation will make a significant difference. Rather, they represent what done in concert could must occur in order for our nation's schools to be on the smart side of the innovations that will lead to systemic and sustainable improvement.

1) Preparation: Teachers need to be better prepared before they assume full responsibility for classroom instruction. The only institutions capable of meeting demand at scale are universities. Such pre-service development must begin with a broad understanding of the role of education in preparing students for life, work and citizenship in the 21st century. It must lead to strong disciplinary content

knowledge, but also a deep understanding of how students learn and develop and the pedagogies that effectively support diverse students through learning struggles. Most important, as in other professions, we need a significant thoughtfully developed apprenticeship bridge between initial preparation and full practice under the tutelage of master teachers who are also talented mentors. This will require a massive rethinking and investment.

2) Respect and Job Satisfaction: We need to attract and retain the best possible teacher candidates and provide a means for teachers to continuously enhance their effectiveness. To do so we need to elevate the level of respect and esteem in which the general public holds the teaching profession. This cultural sea change would include ensuring that teachers, like other professionals, have opportunities to engage in continuous, on-the-job learning in collaboration with colleagues and experts in their particular field. As is already common in many high-performing countries, time for such learning should be incorporated into the normal workday, thereby increasing teachers' sense of control over their work and maximizing their creativity and investment in their own growth and development. Also essential are competitive salaries and opportunities for teachers to grow professionally by expanding their sphere of influence beyond their own students.

3) Comprehensive Student Support: For students to benefit from common high expectations and effective teaching, they need to be ready to learn. We all concur that poverty is not a valid reason for lowering expectations with regard to student achievement. However, in and of themselves, high expectations and effective teaching are only a partial solution. Substantial support systems must be in place and readily accessible to offset the limitations imposed on children by their family's poverty and unemployment. These support systems include prenatal and family health care, adequate infant care, and pre-school and after-school programs. The Harlem Children's Zone is an example of this approach, but its replicability is limited since it depends on private sector donations. We need deep and reliable public investment for a support net through which there is no escape. There is no excuse for doing less.

4) 21st Century Goals: For students to be successful in life, career and citizenship, we need to prepare them for a world they--and we--cannot totally visualize. To point them in the right direction, we must first insist upon curriculum and instruction that emphasize creative, divergent and critical thinking; problem solving; flexibility; communication; collaboration; and a strong work ethic. Therefore, we need to expand the learning environment through technology and through engagement in the world beyond the classroom. Second, we need to move away from the current obsession with academic improvement as reflected in low-level summative tests and instead focus on the two types of assessments that have the greatest potential for improving student learning: a) On-the-spot assessment and targeted feedback to students during daily instruction, and b) "short-cycle" assessment of daily written work that is used either for feedback to students on what they can do to improve and/or for making adjustments in instruction to address gaps in student learning. Everyone seems to agree that teachers and school leaders need accurate and timely information upon which to base instructional decision-making and improvement strategies. However, that information will be applied most productively when students and teachers believe that they are empowered to use it to their mutual benefit, rather than perceiving it as a judgment or threat from external forces.

5) Learning Environment: We may have forgotten Avogadro's number or the novels we read in senior English, but we recall with utmost clarity the teacher who gave us a special bit of attention or the classmate who humiliated us. Long after facts and figures fade, we retain how we were treated. We remember whether we felt confident or incapable. Common sense and research strongly support the inseparable connections among social-emotional wellbeing, cognitive development and academic

learning. Therefore, attention to conditions that enable learning is as essential as excellent teaching and challenging curriculum. Time must be allocated to intentionally develop the self- and social-awareness and management skills and dispositions needed to negotiate interactions with people of different backgrounds and philosophies, to collaborate, and to cope with set-backs and challenges.

Students need to be explicitly taught that "smartness" is not a quality tethered to the accident of biology or life circumstances, but is achieved through hard work, persistence, and critical thinking. We need to design learning experiences through which students develop a strong sense of control over their own learning and lives. This requires anticipating the needs of diverse learners on the front end of instructional planning so that all students have equal accesses to high-level curricula. Active, inquiry-based curriculum in which students are the prime movers in making conjectures, gathering evidence, developing explanations and revising their ideas, is another step in that direction. Equally important, however, is providing opportunities for students to have a voice in solving social problems in their own classrooms and schools and to begin to learn that they can have an impact in the world beyond the school. Our goal is to engender that inner sense of empowerment that erases students' feelings of vulnerability and convinces them they are capable of taking the steps necessary to achieve their dreams.

6) Organization, Leadership and Coherence: Our memories and educational research are strewn with stories of promising innovative ideas that were either implemented incompletely or failed to take root. The reasons for this phenomenon are complex, but three stand out: impatience, conflicting demands and bureaucracy. If innovation is a prerequisite for progress, we need to develop leaders who create organizational structures that don't just reward success, but rather prioritize learning from failure. Then, we need to give teachers and leaders time to try out and then refine innovations in practice. Bureaucracies that are typically characterized by narrow role-definition, top-down management and reward structures promote the self-protection and promotion behaviors that thwart innovation. Instead, we need learning organizations in which distributed leadership, collaboration and honest dialogue create the time and space for a cycle of innovation so that the most effective ideas gain traction and eventually stick.

Gaps in achievement related to race and class are persistent and unresponsive to simple solutions precisely because the causes are so complex. Because the solutions are not obvious or easily achieved, the facets of an effective strategy, as well as how best to structure their interaction, are ripe for innovation. To do so, we need to create a tolerance for failure and the patience to give innovations time and support stick. Therefore, we need to steer clear of prescriptive solutions imposed by external entities. We need to give up the "magic bullet" idea and recognize that only the synergy of multiple strategies enacted thoroughly over time will produce systemic and sustainable outcomes. We need to avoid measures and consequences that make people risk-averse, squelching the very creativity that is essential to make progress.

We need to pursue this comprehensive approach with all due urgency. Most important, we need to involve the folks doing the work ... administrators, teachers, students and researchers ... in the design, field-testing, revision, and refinement of their own teaching-learning-leading processes. It is the insights gleaned from these practitioners' everyday efforts and activities that we will lead to effective innovations that stick, rather than always seem to be "slip slidin' away."

What do you think of the innovations proposed here? Might they take hold?

*Arthur Camins is the director of the **Center for Innovation in Engineering and Science Education (CIESE)** at the Stevens Institute of Technology, in Hoboken, N.J. and the former executive director of the Gheens Institute for Innovation in the Jefferson County Public Schools in Louisville, KY.*

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