recycling

The U.S. Department of Education has created an office in charge of recycling.
In November 2002, with President Bush’s signing of the Education Sciences Reform Act, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Educational Research and Improvement, or OERI, was dissolved. Out of the reorganization arose two new offices within the department, the Institute of Education Sciences and the Office of Innovation and Improvement, signaling the Bush administration’s commitment to both scientifically based research and continuous innovation within education. What no one really bothered to ask was whether the nation’s schools need more innovation and, if so, is the federal government proficient at nurturing it?

In this regard, my experiences as assistant secretary of OERI in the early 1990s seem instructive. OERI had a varied portfolio of programs, including some that supported experimentation in the schools. We were always on the lookout for the latest thing, the newest innovation that would set the world of education on fire. Yet, in retrospect, it is hard to think of a single program that the department funded during that time that actually made a lasting contribution to the advancement of education.

Because OERI administered a pot of discretionary funds for the department, we were often burdened with earmarks—that is, an appropriation set aside by Congress, usually at the behest of influential legislators, for specific school districts or institutions in their home states or congressional districts. Or, in more familiar terms, old-fashioned pork-barreling. I vividly remember getting an urgent telephone call from the Department of Education’s office of legislative affairs letting me know that a ranking member of the Senate Appropriations Committee had added a $1 million earmark to create a Center for Education Innovation at his state university. I thought it was a terrible idea, and so did the secretary of education and his deputy. There was absolutely no evidence that the people involved had any qualifications to run such a center, yet the earmark survived. I doubt that anything was ever again heard from this center on innovation.

One hopes that this new age of scientifically based research will enable the Department of Education to construct reviews of grant proposals based on well-established canons of science or social science as a safeguard against political demands by powerful legislators on behalf of their pork-hungry constituents. And yet, the last time I saw an analysis of the education budget, it seemed that the number of earmarks had grown, not diminished, over the past decade. So beware: earmarks are a keen way of evading peer reviews and making it unnecessary for a proposal to demonstrate its prospective value or validity.

OERI was responsible for a network of federal research labs and centers (there are ten federal R&D labs scattered across the country) where innovation was a watchword but where federal money went disproportionately for administration and dissemination rather than fresh ideas that made a mark. The labs, in particular, were supposed to disseminate innovative ideas, but I can’t think of any influential innovation in education that came from them, unless it was expertise in lobbying for permanent federal funding.

Among my fondest memories of innovations was a grant awarded by the Women’s Educational Equity Program. This program had been enacted in the early 1970s...
to design gender-fair materials and textbooks—and continued to exist long after every commercial publisher had adopted strict rules of gender fairness. The basic idea in the grant proposal was that teachers had to overcome their squeamishness in talking about sex; indeed, they needed to learn how to stand in front of the classroom and describe intimate body parts using their students’ vernacular, rather than the technical terms found in biology textbooks. I can’t recall why this innovative approach was supposed to advance gender equity, but it did get funded.

The most prominent effort to promote innovation during my brief stint in the Department of Education was the creation of the New American Schools Development Corporation, now known as New American Schools (see Jeffrey Mirel, “Unrequited Promise,” in the Summer 2002 issue of Education Next, telling how New American Schools grew from a feisty start-up to a consummate Washington insider). This project was supposed to jump-start a new generation of American schools. Millions of dollars in private funding were raised to underwrite a search for “break-the-mold” ideas about education. New American Schools eventually funded about a dozen proposals. Most consisted of alliances among well-known school reformers, none of whom was lacking for funding or for a platform. To my knowledge, few of these proposals have had a lasting impact on American education or created a model that was widely adopted.

The Dust Heap of History

Many failed and forgotten innovations continue to live in schools where they were introduced with great fanfare and subsequently forgotten. I have often heard it said that some schools are like archeological sites; digging would reveal layer after layer of fossilized school reforms and obsolete programs. I have visited schools where the principal pointed proudly to the long list of programs in the building, as if their sheer number were evidence of real reform activity, whether they bore any relation to one another or had any demonstrated value.

Education in America tends to be like religion, with cycles of stability and change, periodic crusades, and occasional bouts of zealotry and apostasy. Any student of 19th-century American history learns about the Great Awakenings, the eras when evangelists brought revival movements to the cities and the hinterlands, and thousands of Americans found a new faith. A region of upstate New York came to be known as the “burned-over district” because so many movements, cults, evangelists, and enthusiasts had worked the area or emerged from it.

Something similar happens periodically in American education. Just when classroom methods and protocols seem to have grown stale, or when society is experiencing an unusual degree of upheaval, along comes an education movement to cast out the old and mobilize true believers. Each movement has its prophets, its sacred texts, its peculiar solutions to knotty problems. Each movement claims to have discovered the Royal Road to Learning or the policy innovation that will cure all the schools’ ills at no extra cost.

In Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms (2000), I chronicled the rise and fall of one education movement after another during the 20th century. At one point, I decided to go back and count the movements. I wasn’t sure that my count was accurate, but I did identify at least 20 distinct education movements, each with leaders and followers, slogans and mantras. Each claimed to be the latest, the best, the most innovative, and the final word in the reform of education. As each period of innovation waned, it was usually replaced by a movement called “back to basics” or “essentialism”—or something else that suggested a backlash against failed fads.

Each of these innovations, in turn, was seen by its adherents as the pinnacle of pedagogical science. Reformers have always called on science to validate their innovations, because they, like the American public, believe that science brings progress. In retrospect, however, the frequent appeals to science and social science over the past century were usually not much more than rhetorical gambits meant to persuade the public and to disable the opposition. Since education has had a very meager research basis, almost anything could be touted as scientific, and the public had no means of evaluating whose claims were stronger.

Unintelligent Testing

In the years immediately following World War I, school reformers eagerly embraced the promise of pedagogical science. In schools of education across the nation, psychology became the dominant department. Psychologists at Teachers College, Stanford, Harvard, Chicago, and elsewhere believed that their scientific methods made it possible to identify what should be studied and which program was right for which children. Meanwhile, sociologists believed that their scientific studies would show the
best way to organize and administer schools. These experts insisted that science would settle the debates of the past.

This trend lent intellectual heft to an earlier movement, the vocational education movement of the 20th century’s first decades. Prominent reformers, state officials, social workers—even President Theodore Roosevelt—declared that it was wasteful to expect all students to study history, literature, and foreign languages. Such an education, they insisted, was not socially efficient. Relying on current tenets of social science, they advocated steering a majority of students into vocational and industrial education. Reformers thus embraced the junior high school movement, knowing that the purpose of these institutions was to encourage students to make vocational choices as early as age 12 or 13. At the time, any educator who was modern, progressive, and scientific, or so it seemed, supported vocational and industrial education and the spread of junior high schools.

This type of tracking of students was bolstered by the single most important innovation in educational science during that era: intelligence testing. The majority of educational psychologists joined the movement to develop intelligence tests. They thought that tests and scales would allow them to peer into the human mind, assess its capacities, and catalog people according to their potential for future learning.

Psychologists like Edward Thorndike of Teachers College, Robert Yerkes of Harvard, and Carl Brigham of Princeton insisted that educational science was ushering in a new millennium of social progress and that IQ scores would enable educators to plan each child’s education and future with certainty. Educators in public and private schools became persuaded that IQ tests revealed the child’s “natural mental ability” and “inborn capacity” for learning. Using records from the Army’s IQ testing of soldiers during World War I, Brigham ranked ethnic groups by their intelligence, with a fairly high degree of specificity. The psychologists knew that what they found caused discomfort and challenged old-fashioned ideas about democracy, but scientists—they said—could not be held responsible for their findings. Given their analysis, the job of the schools was to sort children into the right program, not to raise them up to higher levels of thinking and learning.

We now know that much of what the IQ testers measured was not innate intelligence, but children’s access to educational and cultural opportunities. We now know that the tests reflected not native intelligence but years of residence in the United States and years of education, among other things. Today’s psychologists look on the high-water mark of IQ testing in the 1920s with embarrassment. Yet at the time the IQ testers represented the apex of modern scientific thinking. They were the leading edge of innovation and science. And their prescriptions were disastrously wrong for American education.

The study of reading methods provides another cautionary tale of faddish innovations dressed up with claims of scientific backing. The history of reading instruction reveals many attempts in the 19th century to simplify it, to make it easier for children. Teachers were familiar with the alphabetic method, in which learning to read was synonymous with learning the letters of the alphabet; the word method, in which children learned short whole words (as in the Dick and Jane readers); and the phonetic method, in which children learned to read by sounding out the letters and combinations of letters that form words. Many contemporary accounts of schools in the late 19th century describe teachers who combined these methods, especially the word method and the phonetic method. It never occurred to them that there was supposed to be a war between disciples of the phon-
College, entered the field of educational psychology in the late 19th century with the hope and expectation that one day there would be a genuine science of education. Over time he concluded that this was a false hope, that education included too many unmeasurable dimensions to compare it with the biological or physical sciences. Over the years, he made himself a pest to his fellow psychologists. Whenever they became invested in a grand idea, he punctured their pretensions with close analysis of their data and arguments. Most misguided enthu-
siasm, Bagley recognized, stemmed not from foolishness or fraudulent motives, but from a failure to recognize the uncertainties of fact and theory associated with schooling. Educations as a field, he pointed out, had a slender inventory of well-established principles. As one drew closer to psychologists, he said, the “clash of arms and the shoutings of the rival schools” grew louder, because the competing viewpoints did not even agree on basic facts and principles.

In one of his memorable essays, “Teaching as a Fine Art,” published in 1930, Bagley argued that instruction was unlikely ever to become an applied science. Teaching was not, he said, a kind of technology that could be reproduced in exacting ways. He maintained that the closest analogy to teaching would be found in the fine arts, such as music, painting, sculpture, literature, and drama. Each of these arts requires knowledge, skill, and mastery of one’s materials; to succeed is difficult, not easy. It was the misguided advocates of a science of pedagogy, he said, who had insisted on separating methods of teaching from mastery of subject matter; it was they who taught courses in education theory detached from the learning of academic content. Teacher artists, by contrast, understood that they must simultaneously master pedagogical methods and the subjects they will teach.

Bagley sharpened his argument by offering the following contrast:

If I were seriously ill and in desperate need of a physician, and if by some miracle I could secure either Hippocrates, the father of medicine, or a young doctor fresh from the Johns Hopkins school of medicine, with his equipment comprising the latest developments in the technologies and techniques of medicine, I should, of course, take the young doctor. On the other hand, if I were commissioned to find a teacher for a group of adolescent boys and if, by some miracle, I could secure either Socrates or the latest Ph.D. from Teachers College, with his equipment of the latest technologies and techniques of teaching, with all due respect to the college that employs me and to my students, I am fairly certain that I would jump at the chance to get Socrates.

What did Bagley mean? Just that he had a great deal of faith in the innovations of medical science, but virtually none at all in the latest techniques put forward by educational experts.

Recycled Innovations
How far have we advanced since Bagley’s era? Do we now have a well-established set of principles and theories in education? Is “scientifically based research” broadly accepted by professors of education and the research community? Surely we now know far more than the psychologists of Bagley’s day, yet rival schools of thought continue to disagree about theory, policy, and practice. Some ideas in education now carry greater consensus than others—one thinks of reading, where the conclusions of a wide spectrum of researchers have converged in recent years (yet, even here, loud dissenters remain). Research on education policy may even have yielded some well-grounded ideas, yet I doubt anyone is prepared to say that economic or political analysis has given us an uncontested, scientific basis for policymaking. Certainly our policymakers are not willing to concede the point, not at the federal, state, or local levels, where arguments continue to rage over assessments, charter schools, vouchers, class-size reduction, and many other strategies for school reform.

So does education really need more innovation? The answer seems obvious. Of course it does. Any field of endeavor that rejects innovation will wither intellectually. Any field that is impervious to change and evolution becomes inert. Innovation is a necessity, not only because it creates possibilities for improvement, but because experimentation attracts alert and inquisitive minds. Only those who have achieved perfection can afford to reject the value of innovation.

Necessary as it is, innovation has its pitfalls. For one thing, many proposals that claim to be innovative are merely a revival of some failed idea from the past. If one is in the business of funding novelties, it is important to know the history of education reform in order to avoid funding anew that which was deemed “innovative” a century ago. I recently received a call from an experienced journalist in Boston asking whether I had heard about an exciting new program where the students had no curriculum, no tests, and no
textbooks, and they learned everything through personal experience. I had to smile, not because of her enthusiasm, but because I had indeed heard of similar programs—at Marietta Pierce Johnson’s Organic School in Fairhope, Alabama, founded in 1907; at Junius Merriam’s laboratory school at the University of Missouri, which opened its doors in 1905; and at the famous Summerhill School in England, started in 1901 and introduced to the American public during the 1960s in a best-selling book.

Friendly Advice
When I first heard that the Department of Education had created an Office of Innovation and Improvement, I was less than enthusiastic. It is not because I oppose innovation, but because I have strong doubts about whether the federal government has the capacity to nurture effective practices. My impression, based on the past 30 years, is that the federal government is likely to be hoodwinked, to be taken in by fads, to fund the status quo with a new name, or to impose a heavy regulatory burden on those who seek its largesse.

Most genuine innovators in education are likely to be too busy running their schools to seek federal funding. Most will be wary of the strings that come with the federal purse and fearful of being strangled by red tape and paperwork. Some of those who seek federal funding for their new ideas will be entrepreneurs with a scheme—not necessarily an illegal or altogether badly motivated scheme, but one fashioned in such a way as to get federal funding, regardless of its proven value or potential.

There are surely ways that the federal government can help support innovation, but only if those who are in charge are especially cautious and exceedingly humble. One of the office’s most important tasks is to establish the criteria by which it judges contenders for federal largesse. For those who have assumed this role, here are a few things to think about:

◆ Bear in mind that most educators in the trenches do not know that you exist. Those who know about your requests for proposals are those who have a lobbyist who reads the Federal Register or a legislative office that watches for funding opportunities. This means that your applicants will be a self-selected group of savvy operators who do not necessarily represent the acme of innovative thinking in education. The department will need to reach out energetically to find educators who may be terrific at running schools but are not well connected politically.

◆ Be wary of anything that calls itself a “movement.” Almost by nature, innovators tend to have a missionary spirit. This is their job. Their zeal gives them energy and purpose. It is the job of federal officials to soberly evaluate claims for federal funding, without regard to the passion of the claimants.

◆ Check your ideology at the door. Be prepared to fund innovations that come from perspectives that differ from your own, as long as they can persuade you and peer reviewers that their plans might produce workable and effective programs.

◆ Make sure that the members of peer review panels are not part of an old-boy network of professional innovators who are likely to take care of their friends and share their biases and their penchant for rhetorical flights of pedagogical fancy.

The great thing about America is that there is no shortage of risk-takers and innovators. Education, like other sectors, is blessed with people who are ready to blaze new trails, try new ideas, depart from established routines. These innovators are working in cities and school districts across the nation. They are innovating because they believe in it.

Important new experiments are constantly coming to the fore, as educators seek ways to improve achievement, to restructure the delivery of educational services, and to make education more effective for all children. Charter schools, for example, are one of the most significant innovations of the past 15 years. The revival of small schools in big cities, not technically an innovation but certainly a departure from the recent past, is another important change. New technologies hold major promise for meeting the needs of children with disabilities. The KIPP academies, with their cohesive and replicable program, are another promising innovation.

So, yes, we need more innovation, because we cannot be satisfied with the present functioning of our education system, neither in urban centers nor even in affluent suburbs, where scores may be high but academic engagement is not. Innovation allows us to take a stand against complacency and stagnation and to seek ever higher levels of success.

Still, those who fund innovation must address a troubling dilemma. Put simply, if evidence of effectiveness is a prerequisite for funding, are we truly supporting innovation or an already established program? Then again, unless we insist on some evidence of effectiveness, can we be sure that we aren’t funding a series of harebrained schemes? The challenge for the Department of Education is to support well-designed, promising improvements in American educational practice without frittering away federal funds on one-shot hot ideas and hucksters. I hope the skeptics, myself included, are proved wrong.

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