Education Outlook

From School Choice to Educational Choice

By Frederick M. Hess and Olivia Meeks

In recent decades, many calls for transformative change in American schooling have advocated school choice. Yet these calls themselves have too often accepted the orthodoxies of the nineteenth-century schoolhouse. In the new book Customized Schooling: Beyond Whole-School Reform *(Harvard Education Press, 2011), we worked with the Walton Family Foundation's Bruno Manno to offer a more promising vision for twenty-first-century, choice-centered reform. This* Outlook *highlights six key aspects of systemic reform.*

Most of the country's families are content with their schools and are not concerned about having the choice to attend another school—but that does not mean they are satisfied with all that transpires in their schools. They may welcome the opportunity to access new options for foreign language instruction, richer math instruction, or a more serious commitment to music and the arts. The substantial amount of money that families spend on tutoring and enrichment programs shows us just how real this appetite is. By supporting reforms to increase choice only among schools, choice advocates are appealing only to a minority of parents who want to relocate their child to another institution and are thus missing the opportunity to boost choice among nearly all parents who would want some educational choice.

Similarly, even those for whom school choice is most relevant often encounter difficulties in taking full advantage of their options. They lack the support and information to help them make savvy choices. And those educators eager to differentiate their services and offer meaningful

choices enjoy remarkably little guidance as to how they might identify distinctive needs or segment their services accordingly.

In an era when technology and cultural norms have made radical customization the rule in everything from cell phones to retirement plans to web

Key points in this *Outlook*:

- The "whole school" approach to education reform has made it difficult for specialty education providers to get past bureaucratic rules and offer their services to parents, students, and teachers.

- "Unbundling" education means offering students an assortment of services instead of an indivisible package of "education." Such services could be packaged and customized to fit specific student needs and abilities.

- Virtual schooling and customized educational tools are breaking the whole-school model. Consumers need information on their choices as well as funding options that allow them to choose customized services.

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browsers, it is notable that the vast majority of school reforms are "systemwide" measures that do little to bend schools into a shape more suitable for serving students with diverse needs. Indeed, most talk of accountability, merit pay, and school choice has emphasized "whole school" assumptions that simply take traditional schools and classrooms as givens. Such a mindset is ultimately crippling because the twenty-first-century schoolhouse is less likely to be the product of some big-brained reformer devising the one best model than the accretion of advances relating to diagnosing needs, researching interventions, employing online instruction, and permitting greater individuation.

The Problem with the Whole-School Assumption

Twenty-first-century school reformers have inherited a model of K–12 public education that dates from the early-twentieth-century progressive movement and was borne of an era marked by lurching, bureaucratic, black-box provisions. This creaking model is antithetical to specialization and an awkward fit for a world where technology and other tools have made it possible for new providers to deliver high-quality, customizable services to targeted children or educators. The expectation that schools and school districts can serve many different students in a variety of ways has led to overburdened educators and institutions that have trouble doing anything very well. This expectation has proceeded hand in hand with limited attention to identifying the needs or desires of students and families, all the while stifling the ability of specialized problem solvers to relieve some of the burdens placed on the conventional school.

Reliance on this traditional whole-school approach has impeded opportunities for decentralized specialty education providers to satisfy the demands of their consumers—including parents, students, teachers, and communities. Yet successful examples in other sectors abound; indeed, from health care to oil changes to our morning cup of coffee, most of the goods and services we consume every day are tailored to our individual preferences and offered by a range of innovative providers that eschew the traditional one-stop-shop model. If new providers want to sell books online but not in stores or play live music without selling recordings, they are free to proceed as they see fit.

In education, outside of those providers who sell directly to affluent families, ventures offering online tutoring, language instruction, arts classes, and much else depend on their ability to convince district or school administrators that their service is useful—and that it is worth finding ways around accumulated policies, practices, and guidelines that make new arrangements difficult and politically fraught. This is why many of the most dynamic providers of online education, like SMARTHINKING and Tutor.com, are in higher education, selling directly to families or libraries and the US Department of Education; only rarely do they sell to K–12 schools. The result is perverse, trapping educators and students in a ghetto where powerful new tools and services are curiosities rather than routine parts of the school day.

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Despite the shifts in other sectors, the notion of harnessing new technologies or modes of coordination in schooling has too often morphed from a question of finding smarter solutions to emotionally charged denunciations of school choice, for-profit providers, or computer-aided instruction. In *Customized Schooling: Beyond Whole-School Reform*, we endeavor to sidestep these contentious debates and instead delve into some of the possibilities and complications presented by efforts to "unbundle" schooling.

What Does Unbundling Mean?

Becoming comfortable with customized schooling options requires first unbundling familiar notions of what is meant by education, shifting the conversation from "school" to "schooling," from "teacher" to "teaching." If we reimagine schools as mechanisms that provide students with an assortment of services instead of delivering an indivisible package of "education," we can start to disentangle the components of that package and customize them to fit specific student needs and abilities. Harnessing new technologies and crafting policies that support such customization are vital steps to successfully upending our familiar approaches to delivering education, all for the benefit of families and the educators, schools, and systems of schools that serve them.

There are two dimensions along which we can think about K–12 unbundling. The first is *structural unbundling*,

in which we loosen our grip on the regularities about what it means to be a "teacher," a "school," or a "school system" and rethink how schooling is delivered.

The second dimension is *content unbundling*, or the unbundling of the "stuff" of learning, in which we revisit assumptions about the scope and sequence of what students are taught and what they are expected to learn, thereby enabling the emergence of new, more varied approaches to curriculum and coursework.

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Consider a couple of examples. A virtual classroom in which a distinguished math instructor in Boston is teaching students in Birmingham online is a clear example of structural unbundling. However, there is no reason to expect that the math lessons will be sequenced or organized any differently than in a traditional classroom setting.

Conversely, efforts to adapt curriculum content and schedules to better suit individual student and teacher needs in real time, like those in New York City's School of One, are examples of content unbundling. Allowing for customized learning objectives and sequences, though, does not necessarily require redesigning the structure and delivery of schooling.

The goal for customized, unbundled school reform is not to develop a new model of what a good school "should" look like in 2030 but to cultivate a flexible system that emphasizes performance, rewards success, addresses failure, and enables schools and more specialized providers to meet a variety of needs in increasingly effective and targeted ways.

Key Takeaways

Six ideas emerged most clearly from the volume's contributors. Together, they offer a framework for thinking about schooling in a very different way. Below we highlight the roles of data, technology, choice, teachers and administrators, new tools, and finance.

The Critical Role of Data. A successful customized schooling model requires collecting and monitoring data in ways that reflect individual needs and performance, not merely those aggregated across large swaths of students.

For individualized services to be feasible and useful, end users—whether students, parents, teachers, or district leaders—must be able to obtain reliable and comparable information on their options. Meanwhile, providers must have reliable information on the needs and characteristics of those they will be serving. In the absence of such information, one-size-fits-all provision will remain the inevitable norm.

How are we to overcome the challenges posed by insufficiently sensitive data in an unbundled education system? First, longitudinal data on student achievement and school completion must be augmented with information on teacher effects, student and parent learning preferences, student demographics, and outside-the-classroom work such as academic interventions or after-school programming. Second, it is vital that states nurture and employ third-party assessors to provide evaluative data on approved providers. Third, consumer-review websites should be bolstered to create a better forum for service users to engage with suppliers and their fellow customers.

Attacking these data needs is not without precedent. The New York City Department of Education's ARIS data warehouse, Harvard University's Jon Fullerton points out, aggregates and links a number of different data sources to better track student achievement over time, while the city's pioneering School of One model tracks and models student progress across multiple modalities in real time, allowing for constant updates on personalized lesson plans and early interventions. Such efforts show that states and districts can do more to collect and disseminate information on student learning to better facilitate a robust and demand-driven educational marketplace.

Not Just Choice, but Informed Choice. A customized schooling model is based on the assumption that parents, when given a choice of outside providers and services, will exert their consumer muscle and thereby foster greater demand for high-quality providers outside the traditional schoolhouse. However, such efforts will likely fall flat if parents are unable to research and compare options.

Much like the importance of information in structuring a well-functioning policy environment, the parental need for granular, comparable, and accessible data on schools must be taken into account when modeling a customized education system. Comparing the market of schools and other providers to a shopping mall, Thomas Stewart and Patrick Wolf assert that most parents will tire of the search and settle for a convenient choice after visiting only a few stores and gathering some information.

Those parents willing to complete the entire "mall crawl" and check every provider before settling on the best choice will be in the minority.

Instead of hoping that families bereft of crucial information will make good choices, policymakers and educators can learn from this mall-crawl analogy and figure out how to better collect and communicate information on schooling options. The consumer-review website GreatSchools.org meets this need. Much like other consumer-review sites such as AngiesList.com, GreatSchools.org and similar websites provide searching parents with quick school data that make it easy to compare a number of options. Whether this takes place in the form of reviewer sites like these or more detailed school scorecards, third-party market-research reports, and any number of other information platforms, the forces that could create a high-functioning, individualized schooling system for every student will never come to fruition if reformers rely on choice alone.

Technology and the Rise of Virtual Schooling. To rethink the one-teacher-to-twenty-five-students classroom that has persisted so stubbornly for centuries, we must learn to strategically exploit the power of new technologies. As noted by authors like Clayton Christensen, Michael Horn, and Curtis Johnson in the influential *Disrupting Class*,[1] and Terry Moe and John Chubb in *Liberating Learning*,[2] adopting new technologies allows for a greater customization of coursework driven by real-time, sophisticated assessments; a freeing of education from the constraints of geography; a deeper engagement of parents and teachers in student progress; and a more efficient means for educating more children with lower costs.

One of the most celebrated technologies to emerge in education has been virtual schooling, in which students participate in schooling via online forums, video chats, and other computer-based means. The Florida Virtual School, as Chester E. Finn Jr. and Eric Osberg note, now enrolls eighty-four thousand students, and supplemental providers, such as those supplied by Tutor.com and SMARTHINKING, have also had success in serving students outside the bounds of the traditional classroom.

If the aim is to ensure that technology helps promote customization, and that today's new technologies do not become merely one more innovation layered atop the familiar school model, it is necessary to update our notions of policy and accountability to better fit the new era of schooling. Technological advancements now make it possible for schooling to move past the one-size-fits-all model, but doing this at scale requires high-quality assessments that allow families to make good choices and that provide convincing public accountability.

Customized Education for Teachers and Administrators. Much of the discussion around customization focuses on students, but the intuitions apply equally to educators and administrators. Teachers in need of specialized lesson plans or wishing to import specialized support for a handful of advanced students could use new resources to become more effective. As the New Teacher Project's influential report *The Widget Effect* thoroughly recounted in 2009, the current system's tendency to treat all teachers as indistinguishable cogs neglects their individual needs.[3]

Districts—much like students, parents, and teachers—have specialized needs that are largely neglected by the traditional one-size-fits-all model. However, several organizations and education schools are tackling this blind spot, tailoring their offerings to the specific human-capital needs of districts and teachers. For example, as Democrats for Education Reform's Joe Williams points out, the New Teacher Project has pioneered a new method to fill the teacher pipeline by looking outside typical talent pools and recruiting excellent teachers from across the country, while also gently pushing districts to make teacher-staffing processes more sensitive to quality. On the education school front, institutions like Teacher U are targeting aspiring educators who are interested in teaching at high-performance charters like KIPP or Achieve First. For district leaders frustrated by their inability to find quality staff and for teachers who want a more personalized approach to training and licensure, such help fulfills their needs more effectively and efficiently than the traditional one-size-fits-all human-capital model.

Tools for Customization. The efficiencies that customized learning promises are often incumbent on the power of specialization, which often comes from outside the traditional education sector. Allowing outside providers to augment classroom offerings means that schools can take advantage of their expertise and leverage those skills to provide services at a much lower cost than developing such expertise on their own. For tool providers such as Wireless Generation and SchoolNet to succeed, they must identify and gauge demand for their products among their consumers, including the schools that choose to use their products and the parents who choose a school based on the tools it offers.

The current state of brand awareness makes this challenge all the more pressing. Doug Lynch and Michael

Gottfried conducted new survey work for this volume, testing respondents' brand-identification knowledge of common education software. Their work revealed some disheartening truths: while 98 percent of all the respondents who identified as educators could tell surveyors if they had an Intel processor, only 23 percent of that group had heard of either Wireless Generation or SchoolNet, two of the largest education software companies in the country. Such findings illustrate how successful efforts to brand specialized products—in this case, Intel's processors—raise awareness and bolster market competition, while the lack of efforts to brand similar education tools continues to hinder demand.

For education tools to successfully signal quality and stimulate demand among consumers, parents must know about them, know that they have a reputation for high quality, and be able to choose providers who use them. By creating a brand identity, tool makers can better communicate their benefits to choosy families and thus bolster the market with a greater awareness of quality providers.

Breaking the Whole-School Funding Assumption. Finally, breaking the stranglehold of the whole-school model ultimately requires that states and districts shift away from a vision of choice in which students merely choose between schools and toward a model more akin to that of the health savings account in health care. Rather than just paying for students to go to approved school A or B, the state would deposit money in an account in the name of each student and then allow parents to use that money to procure services from an array of state-approved providers.

Take the case of foreign language learning. Providers like Rosetta Stone or its various competitors might apply for education savings account eligibility. Just as if they were bidding on a state contract, each outside provider would, once approved, specify unit prices. Parents would then be free to use education savings account funds at their child's school or at any state-approved provider. Sufficiently wealthy parents can already afford these kinds of services on the side. But for other families, this option is currently off the table. It need not be.

Such a system, as Finn and Osberg point out, would cause families to start paying attention to the cost of services, enable families to continue to attend a local school even if they disliked its math program or wanted richer arts instruction, and permit approved providers to serve

families directly without necessarily having to negotiate school-district bureaucracies. It would also create new incentives and opportunities for school systems and alternate providers to accurately determine the cost of services down to the student and course level, identifying opportunities for new efficiencies and permitting educators and parents to more effectively make apples-to-apples comparisons of programs and their cost-effectiveness.

Conclusion

The one-size-fits-all school system has passed its expiration date. There is nothing innately wrong with the "one best system" or the conventional schoolhouse. Indeed, they represented the best practices of an earlier, more bureaucratic era. Today, however, heightened aspirations, the press of student needs, and the opportunities presented by new tools and technologies mean that old arrangements are no longer a good fit. Likewise, school-choice advocates have missed an opportunity to appeal to the vast majority of parents who are not willing to relocate schools, but would be interested in greater choice among tutors, lesson plans, or instructional approaches. In these categories, the charge is for schooling to make the same shift from the centralized, industrial model to the more nimble, customized model seen recently in so many other areas of life—and to do so by leveraging greater educational, not school, choice.

Today's schools severely hinder educators from addressing the multiplicity of student needs. Developing a system in which an array of providers plays a more robust role requires a dramatic reconfiguration of K–12 schooling and fresh thinking about how states and systems go about their business.

Notes

1. Clayton Christensen, Michael Horn, and Curtis Johnson, *Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2008).

2. Terry Moe and John Chubb, *Liberating Learning: Technology, Politics, and the Future of American Education* (New York: Jossey-Bass, 2009).

3. Daniel Weisberg, Susan Sexton, Jennifer Mulhern, and David Keeling, *The Widget Effect: Our National Failure to Acknowledge and Act on Differences in Teacher Effectiveness* (Washington, DC: The New Teacher Project, 2009).