

## Opinion

# Better education through innovation

America's educational system is falling behind. We must find innovative leaders with a vision who can prepare children for the future they deserve.

By Cory Booker, John Doerr and Ted Mitchell

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In the summer of 1918, as tuberculosis, bubonic plague and a flu pandemic threatened America's newly crowded cities, the chemist Charles Holmes Herty took a walk through New York City with his colleague J.R. Bailey. Herty posed a question: Suppose Bailey discovered an exceptionally powerful medicine. What institution would allow him to take his breakthrough from lab experiment to widespread cure?

Bailey replied, "I don't know."

That alarming answer moved Herty to propose a visionary solution -- an institution that would encourage research and development throughout the country. It would find its value, Herty said, "in the stimulus which it gives" to research, thought and discovery by practitioners in the field.

Nearly a century later, that vision stands as the National Institutes of Health. Its record, from deciphering and mapping the human genome to finding the source of AIDS, leaves no doubt about the NIH's ability to stimulate innovation.

Today, the shame of our cities isn't bubonic plague; it's ignorance. In our urban areas, only one child in five is proficient in reading. On international tests, we rank behind the Czech Republic and Latvia; our high school graduation rate barely makes the top 20 worldwide. As columnist David Brooks has noted, educational progress has been so slow that "America's lead over its economic rivals has been entirely forfeited." Under-education may not end lives the way infectious diseases do, but it just as surely wastes them. For all the hard work of our good teachers, our system is failing to keep pace with the demands of a new century.

As our next president confronts this reality, he should look to Herty's inspiration. We need a new, results-driven mind-set at the Department of Education that will drive pure educational innovation and "scale up" proven experiments and novel ideas that work. The federal government stands in a unique position to meet these needs.

The evidence for making a national commitment to innovation in education is compelling.

Today, many of the most promising solutions are emerging from entrepreneurial organizations that embrace freedom and accountability. Indeed, such social entrepreneurs represent a growing force. They have started nimble, typically nonprofit organizations that work in partnership with creative mayors and school superintendents.

Entrepreneurial charter schools such as KIPP, Uncommon Schools, Aspire, the Inner-City Education Foundation, the Alliance for College-Ready Public Schools and Green Dot demonstrate what a single-minded focus on excellence can achieve with low-income students. These public schools, open to all students, are dedicated to the idea that college success and wide career choices must be a reality regardless of the ZIP Code of a child's birth. And they are proving what's possible, sending students from the poorest neighborhoods to college at rates typical of far more affluent communities.

Other innovators also have taken a fresh look at the crucial question of how to attract, prepare and keep teachers and leaders in the toughest schools. Teach For America, for example, flips the conventional wisdom on teacher recruiting, making inner-city classrooms an object of hot competition for the nation's top college graduates. Likewise, New Leaders for New Schools has brought hundreds of new principals to the inner city. Organizations like these demonstrate how innovators can support improvement in our existing school systems -- an essential part of large-scale progress.

To call these solutions a drop in the bucket, as some critics do, is to miss the point. The federal government, through the NIH (and other programs such as the National Science Foundation, the Small Business Administration and the Defense Advanced Projects Research Agency), has proved that it can multiply innovations in many fields and spread the most successful ones. Yet, historically, the federal government has constrained its investment in education entrepreneurship to comparatively small, isolated programs, limited efforts in a bureaucracy that resists change. To fix this, there are key steps the next president should take.

The first is to expand innovation incentives and free them from the earmarks and conditions that have blunted past initiatives. Too many innovators spend too much time and energy raising money to stay afloat and expand. Adequate incentives, coupled with rigorous accountability, would remedy this. We should include two complementary programs, a "Grow What Works" fund and a fund to provide research and development money for promising early stage initiatives. Today, the federal government invests less than \$1 billion annually in education innovation -- a paltry 0.2% of our \$500 billion total national spending on education. Compare that to the \$28 billion we spend on biomedical innovation, a full 1% of our \$2.6 trillion on healthcare.

Beyond new funding, the federal government must use its influence over state and local policy to sweep away regulations that hamper innovative thinking, such as caps on the number of public charter schools allowed and excessive restrictions on how teachers are trained and credentialed. In addition, it can use the power of the purse to direct competitive funds to states that embrace urgent innovation. States control 70% of public education funding; a push for state support of entrepreneurial education efforts could

have a huge effect.

Finally, two efforts already underway must get a strong push from the next administration. One is the move toward a common set of standards for what students should be expected to know and be able to do: Every American child deserves to be educated to the same high standard, and innovators everywhere require a common target. Then, to make shared standards work, a national data infrastructure must be built to assess educational progress.

The enormously promising educational innovations sprouting across the country, from South L.A. to Newark, N.J., to New Orleans, cannot be allowed to remain exceptions -- pleasant human-interest stories about amazing but tiny programs. At a time of slipping national competitiveness, as whole communities are denied a chance at America's opportunities, results-driven, urgent change must be an ethos that pervades national education policy.

The starting point will be the choice of the next secretary of Education. He or she must be an entrepreneurial thinker, not necessarily someone who's run a business but someone who grasps the importance of combining the freedom to innovate with close attention to results, and will welcome the efforts of a new generation of educators.

The American national spirit embraces improvement, pragmatism and merit; we figure out what works, and we build on it. It's the spirit that moved Charles Herty to argue for an institute to stimulate breakthroughs in American health. If we are to maintain our standing in the world, and do right by our people, our next president must spark our education system with the same spirit of invention.

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