

A Tale of Two Charter Schools: Understanding Educational Innovation – And The Lack Thereof

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FLOW

A seven part series showing why charter schools do not have the freedom needed to create significant educational improvements by means of innovation.

Part 1: A Tale of Two Charter Schools

First, vignettes of two charter schools, both starting their fourth year of operation:

School A is in a precarious position. Started by an uncertified, incompetent administrator, it has received numerous audit findings and has received low performance ratings from the state department of education. State-mandated academic standards were not being taught. Many of the original faculty were unqualified, though that is finally being remedied. Building code violations were a problem throughout its first several years. The school was chronically late turning its data in to the state. Discipline problems were chronic at the school; on one occasion an unlicensed volunteer teacher tried to choke a student in the classroom. At one point the school had to be supervised by the local district because it lacked a qualified administrator; the second one had quit after only one semester. Although it is now led by an experienced, professional, properly licensed administrator, given the school's history of chronic problems it is not surprising that the school district questions the ongoing independence of the school and has filed a complaint against the school with the state department of education. The school may yet be shut down as the district believes it ought to be.

School B is arguably one of the greatest charter school success stories in the nation. Started by an experienced administrator whose innovative pedagogy had been recognized by leading national experts in learnable intelligence and brain-based learning as well as a McArthur Genius award-winning educator, the school has been dramatically successful at creating a culture of learning in one of the most academically backward regions of the country. In its second year of operation, the school had taken students who had never taken an AP test at their previous school (AP was almost non-existent in this part of the country) and become one of the top 200 public high schools in the country based on Newsweek's Challenge Index. In its third year of operation, it had moved into the top 100 in the nation. The state AP organization organized a week-long summer AP training so that the administrator and faculty could share their expertise with other teachers across the state. SAT scores increased at a rate double the national average. The federal department of education awarded the school a large grant to replicate its physical education program in charter schools across the state. Several foundations rewarded the school with hundreds of thousands of dollars of grants for its obvious successes. Most of the students love the school and love learning at the school. Teachers moved from across the country to teach at the school. Parents moved from across the country to send their children to this school. Students across a broad range of learning abilities, including highly gifted and autistic students, flourish at the school. Twenty percent of the students commute almost an hour each direction through a dangerous mountain canyon to get to this school.

Residents of nearby towns have expressed an interest in having this school replicate itself so that their children can benefit from this school's unique program.

The challenge facing those who would like to see charter schools lead innovation and thereby improve education for all students? School A and School B are the same school, the first seen through the eyes of the state and the second through the eyes of supporters of the school.

The facts listed in both accounts are accurate; but each perspective focuses on the set of facts that happen to support that perspective. In order to learn how we can improve education for all students, we need to understand how such dramatically different interpretations of one educational program can both be true and thereby learn how to solve the real problems involved in creating innovative educational models by means of school choice.

There is a wonderful book titled *Seeing Like a State* that describes the manner in which government entities view the world. It does not blame individual human beings who happen to work for the government for viewing the world in this manner. Instead, it systematically demonstrates how the incentives facing those who work in government tend to create a distorted view of reality. Moreover, the book makes a compelling case that it is unlikely for individual acts of courage or imagination to overcome the limitations of seeing like a state for any extended period of time. Individuals in government who do not "see like the state" are not likely to remain in government for long or, if they do, then their individual acts of "supra-state" vision are likely to be undermined by their colleagues who do "see like a state."

Part 2: Starting a Charter School is Like Launching a Business, Fighting an Uphill Political Campaign, and Running a Highly Regulated Social Services Agency All at Once

The school in question is Moreno Valley High School (MVHS) of Angel Fire, New Mexico. As in many states in which charter school legislation was passed, in order to get the legislation passed against the resistance of existing public school interests, it was necessary not to cede too much power. This is the first lesson in seeing like a state: Legislatures everywhere are beholden to existing interest groups. Although it is popular to rail against "corporate special interests," in a state like New Mexico the public school establishment – teachers' unions, administrators' unions, state school board associations, athletic associations, etc. – are collectively a formidable special interest. Any move that takes funding out of their control is not in their interest. And charter schools are funded through the principle of "let the money follow the child." In New Mexico, that means that the roughly \$7,000 per pupil that the state normally supplies to each district-run public school (New Mexico school funding is based on a complex state-wide equalization formula) goes instead to a charter school each time a student chooses to leave a district school in order to attend a charter school.

As a consequence, therefore, in most states charter school legislation is severely compromised in favor of districts. In New Mexico charter schools must be authorized by districts, a senseless conflict of interest which instantly puts every charter school under the supervision of an entity with a vested interest in its failure. In the case of MVHS, Cimarron School District was adamantly opposed to its existence at every step along the way.

Cimarron is a small town forty miles away from Angel Fire through a winding canyon road. The residents of Angel Fire, a growing resort community, had long been frustrated that their children had to ride the bus for an hour or more in order to attend school in Angel Fire. Meanwhile Cimarron was a shrinking, some say dying, community where the timber mill had just shut down and the school district was the largest employer remaining. The potential loss of half the students, and half the funding, of a small town high school was perceived as life or death issue in Cimarron.

After the Cimarron District had rejected the MHVS charter application it was appealed to the State Board of Education. Nearly fifty Angel Fire residents drove the two hours from Angel Fire to Santa Fe to testify on behalf of the need for a high school in Angel Fire. Although the Cimarron District had made the case that the budget and other aspects of the MVHS charter were simply unworkable, the State Board passed the charter with only a few minor changes.

It is sometimes said that starting a charter school is like starting a business, running an uphill political campaign, and running a highly regulated social services agency all at once. Most of those who have actually started a charter school would agree. Starting a charter school *is* starting a business; because of the hostility of local districts it also includes the equivalent of running an uphill political campaign; and because of the heavy requirements of state supervision it is a matter of running a highly regulated social services agency. The wonder is not that some charter schools fail; it is that any succeed at all.

The MVHS charter had specified that it was to be based on the Paideia educational program. One of the founders of MVHS had attended St. John's College in Santa Fe with Michael Strong twenty years before. She had read about Mr. Strong's work in education in an alumni publication and he had been consulting with her on the charter in an informal capacity. After the charter had been passed, she encouraged him to apply for the position of director. Among other evidences of his qualifications, Dennis Gray, an original member of the original Paideia Group, responsible for developing the Paideia program, had described Mr. Strong's book on Socratic methods as the best book written on implementing Paideia in the classroom. No other applicant had had even a superficial familiarity with the Paideia approach.

Strong had had fifteen years in K-12 education, starting off as a public school reformer and then founding several private schools and programs at private schools. Throughout that period he had never obtained an education credential. His strengths were as a classroom practitioner and a teacher trainer in Socratic pedagogy and as a visionary educational leader. Day-to-day management was not his strength. Thus there is a sense in which it was accurate, through the eyes of the state, in which he was "an uncertified, incompetent administrator" and another sense in which it was true from the perspective of those parents, students, and community members who supported the school, that he was "an experienced administrator whose innovative pedagogy had been recognized by leading national experts."

Part 3: Being Seen Through the Eyes of a State

The first few years of MVHS were rough, with discipline problems, controversy in a conservative community over the innovative (and liberal) atmosphere at the school, and various

failures to conform to state requirements. Charter schools have exactly the same reporting requirements to the state as do districts, but whereas districts have a full-time central office staff devoted to maintaining long-set reporting systems, charter schools often have volunteer or part-time personnel struggling to create new, unfamiliar systems while also engaged in other duties. There were mysterious bugs in the software that prevented the timely reporting of student data to the district. On one occasion Mr. Strong had placed state-required tests in a closet thinking that they were to be administered in February (as all previous state-required tests had been) when in fact they were to have been administered in November; this lapse resulted in a low rating on the state report card.

MVHS received citations in its audit for items such as providing a faculty member a three week travel advance rather than the legally-mandated two weeks (the staff had reasonably enough tried to save the school money by purchasing a ticket in advance) and not submitting a purchase order prior to ordering materials (this state requirement is often difficult for charter schools without systems in place who desperately need to purchase numerous items quickly merely in order to function). The most controversial audit mention from the perspective of the district, which the auditor did not note as a formal finding because she was not certain of its legal status, was that charter school board members had contracted with the school. In public school law, it is strictly illegal for school board members to contract with the district. In charter school law, many charters explicitly require that there be employee representation on the charter board. This appears to be a legitimately gray area; eighteen months after MVHS requested a formal ruling to clarify which law applies, the state legal counsel has still not ruled on this issue.

Mr. Strong had never intended to require that teachers teach to state-mandated standards. His strategy as a pedagogue had for some time been to focus primarily on developing a culture of learning and intellectuality. His chosen methods of measurement for results were SAT scores and Advanced Placement (AP) tests. Insofar as these are the most important objective measurements for admissions into elite colleges, these measures are highly respected in the private school world. Taking AP tests in high school is one of the best predictors of success in college. But preparing students to do well on the SAT and on AP tests is entirely different from preparing them to do well on state-mandated tests.

The safe strategy for preparing students to do well on state-mandated tests is to teach to the test, especially in the age of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). While preparing students to perform well on SAT and AP through the development of a culture of intellectuality might result in Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP, the technical phrase specified by NCLB), it might not. In the age of NCLB, focusing on SAT and AP performance is not prudent; that is not the way that the state “sees” academic performance. Indeed, the SAT and AP achievements of MVHS were and are perfectly invisible to the State of New Mexico.

In national rankings of education performance, New Mexico typically shows up somewhere between 47th and 50th depending on the measure used. One might hope and expect that the State of New Mexico would be highly interested in raising academic performance. And, indeed, the rhetoric of politicians is consistent with this expectation.

But NCLB has placed harsh consequences on states that do not measure academic performance against state standards. For several years there has been a national “standards movement” that has resulted in hundreds of committees (at least one per academic discipline in each state) meeting together to pound out “academic standards.” NCLB, based on research that concluded that teaching to explicit standards was a good thing, thus institutionalized this approach. At a cost of tens of millions of dollars, states contracted with testing companies to produce custom tests that measure progress against state standards. There is now a major national commitment to measuring academic progress against state standards by means of these custom tests.

But what if that is not the only way to measure academic progress? The Socratic Practice approach developed by Mr. Strong focuses on close reading of very sophisticated prose combined with a Socratic discussion of that prose. The close study of difficult texts has been a fundamental component of many educational traditions, including Jewish, Chinese, and some Christian sects for thousands of years. The discussion of ideas in texts has a similar hallowed lineage. Moreover, if one examines the SAT-verbal (especially the newer version in which the analogies section has been dropped), the ability to read and interpret sophisticated prose is largely what is being tested. The ability to read at a college level is a crucial pre-requisite for success in science courses as well as in humanities courses. If one cares about long-term educational success, progress on the SAT-verbal is arguably one of the best measures available. And, although SAT-math scores in the U.S. are increasing, SAT-verbal scores remain flat. One might expect that such an approach would be highly valued.

Part 4: Should Parents Be Allowed to Send Their Children to a School that Produces High SAT Scores, Teaches Them to Learn How to Learn, but Does Not Cover State-Mandated Standards?

The SAT has long been controversial. Originally conceived as an “aptitude test” which measured raw ability, in more recent years it has been conceded that it is possible to increase one’s scores on this test. Because the best known approach to improving SAT scores has been expensive SAT prep courses or personal coaching, and because some minorities, including Native American, African-American, and Hispanic students have average SAT scores lower than white and Asian students, the SAT has come to be regarded as an unfair and inequitable exam. This is ironic, given that the original purpose of the SAT was to open up the elite colleges to talented working class students. Nonetheless, one strand of the support for standards was a move away from the SAT, on the grounds that it is unfair to rank students against a test that doesn’t measure what is learned in the classroom, and towards subject-area standards, so that students would be measured against content that teachers actually teach to.

Mr. Strong’s primary objective as an educator is not progress on the SAT-verbal. It is intellectual autonomy (his book, *The Habit of Thought*, is dedicated to “Independent Thinkers Everywhere”). But realizing that objective measures of educational progress are essential, and realizing that the close textual analysis in which he preferred to practice Socratic dialogue was, in essence, a form of SAT-verbal prep, he chose the SAT-verbal as a test against which to evaluate his work that allowed him to focus primarily on the development of intellectual autonomy while also producing measurable results.

This approach appeals to those educators, parents, and students who realize that sophisticated reading skills and the ability to think for oneself are arguably among the most important of skills for both college and life. On the other hand, there are numerous educators, parents, and students who regard this approach to education as entirely illegitimate. For those who regard education as essentially content coverage, in which the primary responsibility of the teacher is to transmit information and the primary responsibility of the student is to assimilate information, the open-ended Socratic Practice advocated by Mr. Strong appears to be an abdication of educational responsibility.

This dramatic bifurcation in interpretations of the purpose of education explains why there are some individuals who are passionately enthusiastic about Mr. Strong's approach – and are willing to move across the country or drive two hours each day – and yet there are simultaneously individuals who regard Mr. Strong's approach as educational malpractice. Indeed, there have been observers of the same class at the same time, some of whom find these Socratic Practice discussions to be among the most fascinating pedagogical experiences they've ever observed while the observers sitting next to them consider allowing students to do most of the talking to be an unprofessional waste of class time.

NCLB forces conformity of measurement of results on charter schools nationwide. It also forces conformity of qualifications: One of the other requirements of NCLB is that all teaching staff be "highly qualified" which means that they must be professionally licensed in the subject areas in which they teach.

St. John's College, from which Mr. Strong's Socratic approach is explicitly derived, is usually described as a "Great Books College" because of its distinctive curriculum based on the classics of western civilization. Less well known is its deep commitment to Socratic education. Still less well-known is the fact that all faculty are required to teach all subjects: An incoming faculty member with a Ph.D. in Greek will not be required to teach quantum physics or music theory the first year, but eventually he or she is expected to master the entire curriculum by means of teaching it.

From the perspective of NCLB or indeed most educators, this commitment to amateurism is the height of unprofessionalism. Who would want to learn quantum theory or French language and literature from someone who doesn't know what they are talking about?

From another perspective, the advantage of such amateurism is that students are constantly exposed to adults who are learning (often in real-time, in the middle of class). If we believe that modeling is an important aspect of education then we might consider it important for at least a portion of a student's learning period to be under the tutelage of adults who are themselves actively learning alongside the student.

From this perspective, the St. John's approach is a superb means of teaching students to learn how to learn. Indeed, it has been suggested that the ideal St. John's foreign language exam is one in which the student does not know what language she will be tested on; perhaps it will be Swahili, perhaps Mandarin, perhaps Swedish. All she knows is that she will be given a passage to translate, a lexicon and a grammar, and she is expected to make sense of the passage on her

own. This vision of education could be extended to science: Students might be given an article on cosmology, or nanotechnology, or microbiology, provided with adequate reference works, and be expected to summarize the article accurately. It could also be extended to software: Students might be expected to install a complex new software program and use it to perform specified functions within a specified period of time.

For several decades now there has been a literature on “the New Economy” which claims that in the 21st century the ability to learn how to learn will be more important than learning knowledge because the rate of change is increasing at such a rapid rate. Workers may change jobs and careers many times in a lifetime, and even within a given position they will be expected to learn new material constantly. Mr. Strong’s Socratic Practice would appear to be a superb means of meeting this 21st century approach to education. Note, however, how profoundly different this interpretation of education is from the mainstream “content coverage” model on which the standards movement, and NCLB, is based.

Part 5: Why Innovative Pedagogy Cannot Be Implemented Successfully in Government-Managed Schools

After a century of failures in public school innovations (see Diane Ravitch’s *Left Back: A Hundred Years of Failed School Reform*), there is increasing pressure for education reforms to be “research-based.” Although education professors, most of whom have pedagogically progressive instincts, don’t like to admit it, “Direct Instruction” is the most robustly validated pedagogical approach. In some versions of Direct Instruction every aspect of the lesson is scripted: the teacher stands in front of the room and reads line-by-line through a manual, and students recite the correct answers in unison. This updated version of the very traditional recitation technique of teaching is easily replicated (almost anyone can do it) and the results are predictable: when students repeat answers over and over and over again they tend to remember them. This approach, while effective for preparing students to memorize material on tests, is unlikely to produce students who are exceptionally capable of learning how to learn.

Not surprisingly there are critics of NCLB and of direct instruction who complain that such approaches destroy creativity and independent thought. However, after One Hundred Years of Failed School Reform, public school accountability is here to stay.

The Socratic Practice approach used by Mr. Strong more closely resembles pedagogical approaches such as Whole Language reading and the New Math, both of which have been robustly rejected by parents and by research results alike. NCLB, a potent symbol of “seeing like a state” passed with widespread bipartisan support, will increasingly force progressive, open-ended pedagogies out of the public school classroom and increasingly force public school pedagogy to more closely approximate direct instruction.

MVHS was a highly unusual situation for the implementation of Socratic Practice: In addition to Mr. Strong, who had defined the practice, two of the teachers, Brad Kloeckl and Barb Browning, were experienced teachers who had each been trained by Mr. Strong for at least a full semester, four days per week in their classrooms, ten years earlier in Alaska. Thus both the English and the History departments were taught entirely by faculty with unusually deep training, both of

whom were sufficiently committed to Socratic Practice to move from Alaska to New Mexico specifically to teach at MVHS. The second year of operation Lea Brock taught additional English and History classes; Ms. Brock had both a B.A. and an M.A. from St. John's and had spent a year teaching in Alaska with Kevin Holthaus, from whom Mr. Strong had learned his practice. In a world in which one or two day in-service training is the norm, with two week-long summer trainings an unusual phenomenon, the MVHS humanities team had all had at least a full year's training in a very sophisticated pedagogy.

Mr. Strong is highly aware of the difficulties of quality control in applying his Socratic Practice approach. As a public school consultant he saw that it was impossible to ensure quality control by means of merely offering consulting services. In the business world, quality control is ensured either by means of distinctive certifications, by franchise arrangements with inspections, or by means of outright ownership (restaurant and retail store chains). Prior to Mr. Strong's departure, MVHS was writing grant proposals to create a Socratic Practice training center that would provide the full year training required to staff new schools with comparable pedagogical expertise. With the controversial track record of MVHS, for the time being Mr. Strong will not be able to continue developing teacher training programs or new schools with adequate quality control in place.

Both foundations and the government expect solid "research-based" results in education these days. Entrepreneurs are often individuals who don't require external validation in order to believe in their visions. And in the marketplace, as long as they can find customers who value their products, they don't need research. In his early days, simply based on his vision of the future of the oil industry John D. Rockefeller famously encouraged his people to buy oil regardless of what the data said. Politicians and bureaucrats (including those bureaucrats who work for private foundations) cannot afford to take such risks.

Ever since Milton Friedman wrote the first article advocating school choice in the 1950s, the primary argument for school choice has been that it will encourage innovation in education. By and large, the national experience with charter schools has been disappointing in this respect. Although there has been some innovation in charter schools, and although charter schools disproportionately serve at-risk students, the vast majority of charter schools are more notable for their conventionality rather than their innovative nature.

One of the arguments that Milton Friedman made was that school choice would support innovation by allowing those parents and students who preferred one style of pedagogy rather than another to attend those schools that specialized in that pedagogy. From this perspective, the bifurcation of opinion regarding MVHS is natural, good, and to be expected. Mac users typically ridicule Windows fans and vice-versa. Product differentiation and specialization occurs in a market precisely because consumers have different tastes and preferences.

Friedrich Hayek, whose views on "the creative powers of a free civilization" influenced Milton Friedman's understanding of the innovative powers of free markets, was known for his idea of a "spontaneous order." One aspect of the idea of a spontaneous order was that in a free market, entrepreneurs would arise who would find ways of giving customers what they wanted more effectively than could be done through government. This allowed for greater innovation as well,

because small, specialized niches could arise in markets whereas governments had to pass legislation that applied to everyone in the same way. Some of these small, specialized niches would grow and their products would become ever more sophisticated; indeed, this progression from small niche to dominant player in the marketplace was a fundamental dynamic of innovation. Thus a market that could allow for the possibility of an MVHS that strongly satisfied some consumers while appearing to be a poor product to other consumers was precisely the kind of niche that might lead to substantive innovations on a broader scale.

Part 6: The Product Adoption Cycle for Innovative Education and Its Invisibility to the State

Innovative products are rarely high quality when they are first produced. The literature on technological innovation speaks of “early adopters” as those customers who are eager to try new, unproven products. Not all products that succeed with their “early adopters” eventually obtain a larger customer base, but some of them do. But the period during which a product satisfies an early adopter niche is often a period in which the product quality develops considerably. In a sense, those early adopter customers are partners in the product development process – they provide feedback and a testing ground for new products for the formative years in a product life cycle.

In keeping with this common product development cycle, MVHS had a devoted following among early adopters. In the world of technology, this customer based would have allowed ongoing R&D leading to ever-improved performance and marketing, which in turn would have allowed the entrepreneurs involved to create a better product that would then reach more people (possibly at an ever-decreasing cost). But the charter school world is not the technology world.

The charter school movement came into being as a school choice compromise. An increasing number of former supporters of public schools had concluded that the public school system was incapable of innovating. These same supporters were reluctant to support school vouchers, fearing religious schools and for-profit schools alike, and liked the local community democratic approach of public charter schools. Many school choice supporters have supported the charter school movement as better than no choice at all.

And yet as so often happens with political compromises, as so often happens when policies are seen through the eyes of the state, the original rationale and justification for school choice has become lost in the charter school movement.

With school choice as originally envisioned, parental choices themselves constitute the accountability mechanism. As with all markets, producers must satisfy consumers in order to stay in business. “Quality” is defined as “that which consumers want.” An inferior education would not last in the educational marketplace because competing schools would strive to provide a better product at a lower price.

But just as in the Mac vs. Windows example, it might be the case that different customers might have different perceptions of what counts as “quality.” In the case of MVHS, those parents and students who prefer a school at which curriculum is covered didactically may choose other

schools (and have). Those parents who prefer a 21st century interpretation of a classical liberal arts curriculum, which is what MVHS amounts to, are free to choose it. And, again, one fifth of the MVHS student body travels two hours per day in order to attend and several parents have deliberately relocated to Angel Fire in order to enroll their children at MVHS. MVHS is meeting the needs of at least some customers in the marketplace and therefore was a success.

But it was not a success when seen through the eyes of the state. In addition to the various failures to conform to state requirements that occurred in the first few years, additional legislation has caused increased pressures to conform. When MVHS opened in 2002, charter school administrators were not required to be licensed by the state. Indeed the MVHS charter, as approved by the state board of education, explicitly stated that the MVHS board reserved the right to set administrator qualifications as it saw fit.

But in 2003, Democrat Bill Richardson, who had campaigned as an education reform candidate, replaced the libertarian-inclined Republican Governor Gary Johnson. Shortly after Richardson entered office he successfully backed an extensive education reform bill, which, among other things, required that all charter school personnel be licensed. Mr. Strong, although he had achieved all the things described in School B, was not a licensed administrator. In order even to enter an administrative licensure program in the state of New Mexico one had to have seven years' experience as a licensed public school teacher. Mr. Strong had never been a licensed teacher. There was no way for him to fulfill the required conditions and he was thus forced to resign as of June 30, 2004.

His immediate successor did indeed only last one semester and the district indeed then took over MVHS briefly while it searched for a suitably qualified administrator. Fortunately a highly experienced public school principal joined the school in the winter of 2005. For those who were uncomfortable with the various innovations and somewhat chaotic leadership of Mr. Strong, the new administrator is a welcome presence. For those teachers and families who joined the school specifically out of an attraction to Mr. Strong's pedagogy, it remains to be seen if the new administrator will be able to continue the school in the same direction.

Although the school did indeed win a grant to disseminate its physical education program to other charter schools, the Socratic Practice component of the program may succumb to pressures to conform. The most uncompromisingly Socratic teacher at MVHS chose not to return for the fall of 2005 due to concerns that the school was becoming more conventional. In the absence of Mr. Strong's aggressive advocacy and implementation expertise, it would be reasonable to expect the program to become more conventional, especially in light of the fact that Mr. Strong's predilections for hiring uncertified personnel and for encouraging faculty not to cover standards might be regarded as illegal, if not unprofessional. A responsible, professional, certified administrator leading a precarious and oft-attacked charter school with a history of failing to conform to state requirements in many respects would not continue emphasizing the non-conforming aspects of the program.

And yet insofar as charter schools were conceived as a means for educational innovators to improve education, the MVHS story is a case study in the failure of charter schools to fulfill their mission as innovators. Although there had been interest from Taos, Santa Fe, Silver City, and

elsewhere across New Mexico in replicating MVHS, once Mr. Strong left MVHS these efforts collapsed. MVHS had been actively seeking grants to support replication prior to his departure. An obvious benefit of replication from the perspective of the MVHS board itself was that replication would allow Mr. Strong to focus on vision and pedagogical leadership, his strengths, while funding a more hands-on administrator to focus on the day-to-day tasks that Mr. Strong did not particularly care to focus on.

Part 7: Can Political Leaders Have the Courage to Liberate Education?

Educational innovations leading to performance improvements had been the goal of introducing school choice in the first place. It is possible that if MVHS had replicated its program across the state, SAT scores and AP enrollment statewide might have increased as additional Socratic Practice charter schools opened, staffed by faculty trained at the proposed MVHS Socratic Practice teacher training center. Over the course of a decade or two, New Mexico might plausibly have moved from 50th in the nation educationally to the top ten in the nation. Socratic Practice programs have resulted in 120 point average annual gains on the SAT, compared to 40 point average annual gains for the U.S. as a whole. Cohorts of students currently incapable of college-level work, with SAT-verbal scores below 300, could become cohorts of students with SAT-verbal scores above 500, higher than the average entering college freshman. New Mexico could have the highest percentage of students taking AP courses of any state in the nation.

But why accept failure? If indeed MVHS has such a good program, why can't the state replicate it statewide and reap the benefits of its innovative program?

Note the obstacles to such an approach:

1. Exactly the same program is perceived to be excellent by some, educational malpractice by others.
2. Although there are some parents, students, and educators who love the program, the state, in particular, regards it as largely a failing program due to non-compliance with regulations.
3. The program, despite its solid measurable achievements, is similar to progressive pedagogies with a long history of failure and little documented success outside of MVHS and a limited track record even there. It is not a "research-based" reform.
4. In order for the program to be successful, it must be staffed and supervised by highly expert, highly intelligent Socratic educators, most of whom do not possess state licensure and who must be trained in a training institution that does not yet exist – but if it did exist, it would be completely outside the official university credentialing system and thereby be an affront and a threat to that system.

In short, though there are some individuals who are willing to stake their children (in the case of parents) and their livelihoods (in the case of educators) on this program, it is unlikely that bureaucrats and politicians, who must answer to majorities, media, and opponents, would stake their careers on such a program. It is just too controversial and too risky. In addition, insofar as MVHS is staffed by non-credentialed personnel and uses an approach that does not teach to state standards, the public education establishment has both the incentive and the ammunition to

undermine support for such a program. (And Cimarron School District has worked diligently to do precisely that).

Learning to “see like a state” means learning to see like the politicians and bureaucrats who constitute the state. It is crucial for political success to appear to be a leader, on the one hand, and to avoid appearing to be responsible for highly publicized disasters, on the other. Both President Bush, with NCLB, and Governor Richardson, with his reform program that required that all charter school personnel be licensed, were able to portray themselves as strong, assertive leaders in educational policy. In the hunter/gatherer communities in which we evolved, the decisive leader was the good leader. A politician who supports diverse experiments, especially in an area of such importance as an education, is apt to appear weak.

Worse yet, if some of those educational experiments fail due to “inadequate” regulatory oversight, the media and the politicians’ opponents will blame the politician for allowing the failure to happen. Therefore it is much safer to support tightly regulated programs in education than to support diverse experimentation.

We are all constantly impressed by the world of technological innovation. Read *Wired*, *Technology Review*, *Popular Science*, *Popular Mechanics*, or go visit *Sharper Image* or *Radio Shack* to be dazzled by the rate of technological change. Yet in order to achieve the dynamism of the world of technology, it was necessary that there be millions of individual failed experiments, millions of individual failed technicians, millions of failed entrepreneurs, and millions of failed companies.

Critics of school choice sometimes indignantly claim that the public task of educating children is too important to be allowed to a chaotic marketplace in which schools operated by un-credentialed amateurs might fail. And yet without experimentation, deep innovations will not come into being.

Because of the policies supported through the responsible leadership of President Bush, Governor Richardson, and the New Mexico Department of Education, MVHS is now on track to be a successful school through the eyes of the State of New Mexico.

And the same parties are also responsible for ensuring that New Mexico will likely remain among the poorest and educationally lowest achieving states in the nation for the forthcoming decades.

Freedom is a pre-requisite for innovation in every field of human endeavor. Silicon Valley, “the greatest legal creation of wealth in human history,” was created out of math, sand, and freedom. The Soviet Union had the best mathematicians on earth and plenty of sand, but in the absence of freedom they were unable to produce innovative information technology. By the mid-1980s, any decent university in the U.S. had more computing power than the entire Soviet Union.

If we want to create “the greatest development of human intellectual powers in human history,” we also need to allow for much greater educational freedom. As long as we are led by “responsible political leaders,” be they Democrats or Republicans, who protect the public from

educational malpractice, we will not have amazing schools. Until the public supports politicians in liberating education from state control, whether we have public schools, charter schools, vouchers, or tax credits, risk-averse politicians will be forced by the public to support “responsible” policies that prevent innovation – and thereby ensure mediocrity.