



Stanford eCorner

Fixing problems in K-12 education

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School finance is inequitable between low- and high-income communities, says Smith. Is it better to try to fix the system or provide alternatives? New Schools funds projects for both options. Most reform efforts to date have focused on only small improvements inside the system. Though most people think of charter schools as competition, says Smith, New Schools describes them as 'co-opitition,' providing an alternative but also helping to encourage improvement in public schools.



Transcript

So there are pieces of the question. One is around school finance being so inequitable between low-income communities and welfare communities, and the second is around sort of theory of change. Do you fix the given system or do you try to create some alternatives? On the school finance issue, it's a very deeply vexing problem because we have state authority over public schools and about 94% of the dollars spent on public education are state controlled. And most people who are winning in that equation do not want to see it changed so it is very, very difficult to dramatically alter the underlying school finance equation. We are working in our network efforts with a number of organizations that are tackling that question. How they're approaching it is a new way of talking about adequacy. What is an adequate education and where are we not delivering it? As a civil right issue through the courts, what will be done to change that? There's a whole history of school finance suits. What's different is this isn't about equity. It's about adequacy. What minimum must be met in terms of the quality delivered? So there's a whole series of things around that that I'd be happy to talk about.

We do both fixing the existing system through our performance fund and creating an alternative public system through charter schools. So we're not against the public system. All our investments focus on the public system so we're not for instance making investments in vouchers or private schools. Having said that, we believe very strongly that most reform efforts to date have focused just on improvements from the inside and absent this kind of looming competitive threat of a great system right alongside that haven't moved very far. What we found is most people think about charter schools as purely competition. We think of it as co-opetition which is Andy Grove has talked a lot about co-opetition and it's been applied in other spaces, not public education. But we think of co-opetition with our charter systems and what's happened is what began as competitive relationships in some cities have become collaborative now because the cities know they need more great schools to get up off the ground and they're turning to the charter operators to start some of them. It's a murky space that's kind of awkward but it's not pure competition. So we're pretty clear that to us, you have a public school child who deserves an excellent public school education and it should be publicly financed. Those are nonnegotiables.

Whether you invest through a system with a current finance equation or through a charter system with a slightly different finance equation, we're agnostic on as long as the child gets a great education. So I can have an offline kind of geeky conversation about public school finance around something called the weighted student formula. Give me one little geeky moment. Most people don't realize that in an intercity, you have two schools. One is great and one is bad. All the teachers in the bad school are getting a low salary typically because they don't have the advance degrees, they don't blah, blah, blah. And all the folks who went to the good school are getting higher salaries because they do have the advance degrees and they have

the national board certification and so forth. So the district talks about an average teacher cost per school but in fact this school is getting a great deal more money per child than this school. So though those kids are in the exact same district so this doesn't even get to the like cross state diversity or suburb versus intercity. This is the same city.

These kids are getting a lot more spend than these kids. So there are all sorts of financial problems in the K-12 system that we're trying to tackle through a number of different fronts and I should probably move on before I put everybody else to sleep.