Stanford eCorner

Create Exemplar Customers

Sal Khan, *Khan Academy*

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Khan Academy Founder and Executive Director Sal Khan responds to a question about how his organization's free online lessons can overcome barriers to being used at a systemic level in school districts. He describes a strategy of identifying outstanding users and highlighting their achievements to other customers as a way to encourage widespread adoption.

Transcript

Yes, so the question is the idea of self-paced learning or personalized learning and using the classroom for more interactive things, these are - it makes sense and these are maybe good ideas, but how do we actually get them into the system, into the public school system especially you read about all of the barriers and all of the resistance to change and whatnot. I don't know the answer for sure. I think there are some reasons for optimism and then maybe some smaller reasons for a little bit of pessimism, but I think there is ways to get around it. The optimism, Los Altos, which was the very first district to reach out frankly before we even thought about seriously that a district would even want to do this. They're a public school district. Obviously they're in kind of a special place in Silicon Valley and they are driven to large degree by the parents who really want to see innovation happen for their students. But you know they have a very forward thinking school board and superintendent and teachers and at least showed us that a lot of these - but a lot of the people that they - people often point the finger at oh unions if you have unions you're not going to be able to do anything whatever. They have all of those things, but they were able to move fast and they were able to experiment. So to me the big lesson was where there was a genuine will and a genuine desire at least in a school district like Los Altos which is smaller and doesn't have all of the issues as some of the larger school districts have, they were able to move. Now with that said, there was definitely a difference between when we started with four classrooms and five classrooms and you had your four or five teachers who are just early adopters, they got it before we even showed up and kind of like Peter McIntosh at Oakland Unity and they - and it was like it was a great experience but then when we went district wide, we started to see a little bit more of the reality that - and once again this isn't about good teacher, bad teacher, it's just about what - if you're a teacher how - what do you imagine the role of a teacher to be.

And I think a lot of educators view their job as to cover the material to at least if I've covered it maybe I've done my job, I can go home and I can sleep properly. It takes a huge leap of faith if you're a ninth grade algebra teacher and little Jimmy is really - you know that he doesn't even know how to divide decimals, but you kind of it takes a huge leap of faith to let him work on that knowing that if he builds that strong foundation, later on algebra is going to be that much more intuitive for him, instead your impulse well let me just at least cover the algebra and let him learn to pattern match it a little bit, so he can kind of pretend to answer the questions, so I've done my job. So our takeaway is a lot of the classroom - optimistic, the classroom penetration has been far faster than we would have expected. At the same time the full implementation is not as much as we would have expected and so what we are trying to do now instead of trying to go into district A or district B, or school A or school B and say hey lets see if we can change together. We're now going the other way where we're looking at the universe of people using us. For our first passage just looking at the data like who is using us in a substantive way, then when we see that we keep filtering it down to like these people are interesting, let's visit them, let's see how they're using it and we start to identify this handful of people who are getting it. Frankly, they're getting it better than I would have gotten it. They're really pushing the envelope, let's understand how they did it and some of these people are in public school systems, some of them are in charter schools, some of them are in private schools, what did the teacher have to do to kind of let the system let them do it, but then what are their

practices and so we are in the midst of that that that part of it where we are trying to understand what they are doing document it, and then share it with other teachers and then also helping them to push where - push their boundaries further where they have been able to do that much, but maybe if we help them and we recognize them, their school or their district will let them go even further. So it's an open question. My general sense, very few people view education this way.

But education is actually - it's fundamentally aspirational. It's all about everyone is always looking like okay who is, what's the institution that's better? What's the neighborhood that's incrementally better than mine, what are they doing? And I want to emulate them. And you see that throughout your AP test. AP test is actually an example of a systemic change that happened without government intervention. It happened because in the '60s I think or maybe '70s Phillips Andover decided that hey, our students in calculus or chemistry or physics, this is a university level course, we should get - our institution should get credit for this. And so they started working with the Association of Colleges and they started to get credit for it. And then you can imagine someone else said our students are just as good, we are just as good of a school, we are also going to do this. And then over the next 30 or 40 years we are now at the point where know - there is very few high schools in the country that kind of - even aspire to be half decent don't offer AP courses. And so in our mind is if we can either highlight or help catalyse even a handful of exemplar look at what they're doing and it isn't just good to watch, but look at their data, look at the outcomes both objective and subjective, look at their students, they are healthier and they are able to do things that you wouldn't have expected, the students to be able to do. I think you're going to have kind of an aspirational effect.

Now once again, it's not going to happen overnight, but I think it will happen over time. I think we got lucky where we fell into Los Altos. Most school reform people go where it's most broken where there is 20 variables that are really hard to fix. And even when they do fix it, they do these Herculean efforts, then the next district says well if this is such a good system, how come they're not doing it in Palo Alto? How come they are not doing it in Atherton? And what was interesting about this Los Altos experiment is as soon as we did it in Los Altos, all of a sudden Palo Alto wanted to talk to us, all of a sudden Atherton wanted to talk to us, all of a sudden the private schools wanted to talk to us and the schools that were facing much more difficult hurdles in the inner city wanted to talk to us. So it kind of helped us understand this dynamic of yes, if we can create some exemplars I think we can start to have cracks form and people start moving in the right direction.