



## January 2007 Update

Here's a bit about 2006 in review. For the complete update, click on the links below. With belated best wishes for a terrific 2007.

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### 2006 In Review

2006 was a third strong year for our growing consulting practice. We officially shifted to the Practical Strategy LLC structure to accommodate a wider range of projects and clients. I scrambled to finish syllabi for my first semester teaching graduate students at the Georgetown University Public Policy Institute, where I joined the faculty as an adjunct professor and am teaching higher education policy and high school reform. We continued work with several organizations, including the Corporation for National and Community Service, the Sarasota Public Schools, and the Institute for Educational Leadership. We worked on some new endeavors as well, looking at high school alignment with college and work in Arizona, dual enrollment in Ohio, and school safety and climate in Philadelphia. And we are facilitating a group of national education associations under the auspices of the National High School Alliance to further the National Governors' Association and Achieve's high school reform efforts.

We were supported by a top notch team of consultants, and I am pleased that we continued our partnerships with Jobs for the Future, Cross & Joftus LLC, GMS Partners, Public Works LLC, the Institute for Educational Leadership and others.

**KUDOS:** Some of our clients wrote us.

... you've done a truly amazing job with this...

... WOW...

... you did an excellent job....please keep me informed...

... I am overjoyed with this report...

**Our team:** In 2006, key contributors to the Practical Strategy LLC team included Robin Chait, who continued her work with the National High School Alliance and other projects, bringing policy analysis, research and teaching expertise to help frame key issues in high school reform at the state level. Writer and researcher Alix Beatty helped with analysis about high school, higher education and workforce alignment. Dave Sheldon and Jennifer Tabola (with terrific experience in government reform, leadership development and program management) rounded out a several year effort at the



Corporation for National and Community Service. Our work culminated in a series of findings and recommendations for improving grants management practices and customer service. And our network of consultants expanded, including not only education experts, but also individuals with public affairs and advocacy, marketing, and other expertise.

### **Project Highlights**

**Grants Management:** Our work for the Corporation for National and Community Service, the culmination of a several year engagement helped us develop expertise transferable to many organizations in and out of government. We began working with Learn and Serve America by assessing grantee needs, developing a set of core competencies that guide effective grants management. The project expanded to include other Corporation programs, including AmeriCorps and Senior Corps. We held many listening sessions with federal, state and non-profit organization personnel about improving grants management, and led professional development sessions. We analyzed reporting requirements, identifying opportunities to streamline requirements and reduce burden, while maintaining a strong commitment to effective management and oversight. Our ability to look at things from the grantee and implementation perspective has driven significant changes in grants management processes, and to new thinking about relationships between grantor and grantee.

In addition to helping this federal agency reform its grants management policies and improve performance, we worked with school districts and non-profits to deepen their impact, develop new partners and seek additional sources of revenue.

**High School Reform:** We also learned from our ongoing affiliation with the National High School Alliance about the challenge (and importance) of engaging different stakeholder groups in supporting state level reform efforts. The Gates' Foundation-funded National Network of Constituent Organizations was created to support the National Governors Association and Achieve, Inc.'s high school reform efforts. Our work with these national associations – including the Council of Chief State School Officers, National Conference of State Legislatures, National Association of State Boards of Education, State Higher Education Executive Officers, National Association of Secondary School Principals -- has focused on building alliances across independent organizations and analysis of key issues that pose challenges in the high school improvement arena. Our analysis about increasing rigor in high school, which proposed a simple conceptual framework for talking about rigor, was distributed widely and well received. Other projects in education reform with states, non-profits and districts focused on K-16 alignment and creation of smaller learning communities.

If you'd like to join the happy folks who made the comments above, please call or email!

-Rob



## Interesting Tidbits

**Power of Myth:** I recently had a chance to revisit The Power of Myth, Bill Moyers' fascinating PBS interviews with Joseph Campbell in the late 1980s, about the role myth plays in shaping culture, identity and beliefs. And it struck me that we are stuck with a lot of mythology in contemporary education policy. Without care, myth can (has?) become fact and drive both public opinion and decision-making (or result in inaction.) Jay Greene's Education Myths (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005) makes just this point with a controversial series of essays about how different preconceptions frame much of the contemporary education debate. Washington Post writer Jay Matthews wrote Seven Ways Politicians are Dumb about Schools during last fall's election season – supporting the contention that much political rhetoric oversimplifies and further garbles our thinking. And scholars Marvin Lazerson and Norton Grubb, in The Education Gospel (Harvard University Press, 2004) challenge the American belief that more education is all that is needed to heal ills. What's wrong with teaching to the test? Is more money always the answer? Does choice undermine public schools? Does labeling schools as failing help? Who has access to higher education under what conditions? Is more education the answer to poverty? Together, whether one agrees with their arguments or not, these works challenge us to question our assumptions about some core issues and avoid simple short term prescriptions in favor of more nuanced, careful analysis and systematic efforts to lead change.

**Starfish and Spiders:** It is often said the education reform lurches from one fad to the next, without passing through the mid-point that balances between extremes. Centralization vs. decentralization is one example of that lurch. It has often struck me that in many organizations, functions that should be handled centrally are decentralized, while matters that could easily be devolved are controlled from the top. We flip and we flop, without systematically assessing where centralization works well, and where it doesn't. Management literature in other disciplines is replete with discussions about command and control, total quality management, empowerment and other approaches to leading minds and matter. We've even tapped quantum physics for chaos theory, and cellular biology for analogies about managing organizations in education and other sectors. Now along come Beckstrom and Brafman, in The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of the Leaderless Organization. They suggest that in a you-tubed, "you're not the boss of me" world, we need to think about leadership and management more like a starfish, where decentralized structures, aligned around common purpose perhaps, are flexible and have distributed responsibility, power and influence. The spider organization (think school and district) – where the head tries to call all the shots – may just not work no matter how effective the individual leader. This is a powerful image for the education enterprise, where we keep expecting the titular leader to have all the answers and whip things into shape. The sign of true leadership then – an organization that doesn't notice when the top gun leaves, because the enterprise has been transformed throughout, and fragmented and competing interests and constituents work together toward shared goals.

**Everyone Thinks Like Me:** Ever feel surrounded by people who think more or less like you do? According to a recent Post feature, sociologists call this homophily. Recent studies by David Knoke (University of Minnesota) and Lynn Smith Lovin (Duke University) explore the degree to which "birds



of a feather flock together” and our viewpoints may be skewed simply because we tend to hang with people and organizations who are aligned with our own hard wiring. Remember being amazed when your favorite candidate got trounced, and how everyone you knew supported him/her? Targeted political campaigning is one manifestation of taking advantage of this basic social behavior. The implication? Actively seek and structure projects and processes to include from the get go multiple and diverse viewpoints.

***More from Overheard in the Carpool (or Bloom’s taxonomy in action):***

Asked what they liked about their middle school English class (similar large class size, same standards, similar curriculum, different school):

**Student A:** they listen to what we have to say, we talk about what’s important, why the characters do what they do, what it has to do with us... [from a class with a remarkably heavy workload, lots of group work, seemingly constant writing assignments of varying lengths and approaches.]

**Student B:** It’s boring. It’s just multiple choice. No one asks what we think. We don’t really learn anything... [from a class where students were quizzed to see if they’d read the assigned chapter and the expectation regarding effort was much less demanding.]

***And Finally, Back Up Your Hard Drive:*** Being a careful computer user (no spilled coffee or pop-ups on my laptop), I figured I was relatively immune to major meltdowns. Wrong. Fortunately, I had totally backed up my laptop (external brain) ten prior to the big ugly event. Reconstructing the lost data wasn’t as big a crisis as it could have been, but starting from scratch rebuilding a hard drive was a major pain in the neck. So, back up that data, including outlook contacts and email, a lot!

***NCLB Commission Thoughts***

Attendance at a recent hearing of the Aspen Institute’s NCLB Commission about high school reform prompted the following reflections.

***Clarifying the federal role:*** From my vantage point, having served at the federal level and now working mostly with state and local entities, the federal role in the high school arena has two big parts that the Commission could opine on:

a) Use the platform of debate about federal legislation to articulate the goal -- consistently, and coherently -- again and again. The idea that high schools should prepare youth for success in college and career and citizenship may be shared at the rhetorical level, but we see frequently that it not operational in the minds and actions of many administrators, teachers, parents, communities. Reiterating the WHAT without prescribing the HOW is something the federal government could do much better. One caution, however, is that the Congress or the Executive Branch not jump to prescribing a specific curriculum or one size fits all approach (which seems to be a bad habit of government at all levels....)

b) The second aspect of the federal role is as broker of effective (I try not to use “best”, which is



impossible to define much less agree on or measure) practice, convener of networks, and provider of timely, easy- to- use tools and information. I'd suggest that the Department has not figured out how to really serve in this second role particularly well. Bottom line is that changing high schools is incredibly difficult, and many do not have the resources (in capacity and money) to lead lasting change. A big opportunity here for the Commission to help shape the future federal role.

Several of the Commission's panelists spoke about high school improvement writ large, in much broader terms than what's under the purview of a reauthorized NCLB. So perhaps the key question is what limited role NCLB could have in providing some good signals and positive incentives to states, districts and schools, and the many constituents of the American high school.

***Money is nice, but it doesn't necessarily change behavior:*** We keep hearing that we can't fix things without more money. Partially true. Clearly some federal commitment to high schools, in the form of a robust high school title (other than Perkins, which is the main source of federal funding to high schools) would be a helpful signal. However, the perennial calls for more money, absent substantially revisiting the entire enterprise and how resources are currently spent, will not achieve desired results. In my observations of many different institutions, one could do things very very differently without an additional nickel. Adding on without restructuring support systems doesn't result in sustainable change. How scarce resources are allocated – time and people, in particular – are very powerful levers.

***More doesn't necessarily mean better.*** This may not be under the purview of the Commission, but thinking about how to provide incentives for changing fundamental aspects of how schools are run, how people communicate, spend time, organize themselves, plan and implement, would be worthwhile. Our reform efforts spend proportionately more time on planning than implementation, to our chagrin as we lament the lack of lasting results. Jim Collins (Good to Great) has a recent monograph about change in the social sectors – one of his key points is that the idea is not to be more like a business, but more like an organization that is organized to get results. As a management consultant and student of organizational change, it often strikes me that one of the biggest problems in education is inattention to leading change and understanding how to motivate people in complex settings. More money may help, but focus on how existing and new resources are distributed and leveraged is more important.

***Teachers teachers teachers.*** While we all agree with the sentiments of the panelists about the importance of teachers and need to improve the image and attractiveness of teaching as a profession, there is a lot more to this than raising salaries. Studies of motivation recognize that things like affinity and purpose are powerful motivators in addition to money, so we need to make sure we aren't inadvertently driving people away from the profession for non-monetary reasons. In a recent focus group with teachers in a major metropolitan area, I heard a lot more about frustration, lack of voice, and conditions of work as a demotivator than I did about pay raises. I'd also note that districts and schools spend lots on teacher development, but coherent strategies and plans for using those resources in more than a scatter-shot way are difficult to put in place. Ensuring professional



development is both strategically driven and locally relevant is harder to find, as are effective ways of monitoring to inform real-time changes. As I heard from a teacher recently, “I would rather not have another session on how to use a planner, or being told to use a pacing guide. Help me know what to do when a student throws a chair, or to better understand how to reach kids with different learning needs and styles. I get the standards”.

Perhaps we need to start to reconceptualize parts of the teaching profession. While we recognize in economic and workforce circles that the social compact and conception of careers has changed (i.e., people will not only have multiple jobs but multiple careers), we don't seem to have extended that thinking to the teaching profession. We still expect people to make a decision to become teachers at a relatively young age, and stay there. Programs like Troops for Teachers and growing alternative certification processes are perhaps precursors of different thinking. However, my sense (and this applies to higher education too) is that our conception of the teaching profession has not kept pace with the very real changes in the world of work in the past decades. Equally important is ensuring teachers have the training and skills to be effective with students, and that they get the support they need to do the very big job we are asking of them.

***Silos don't go away without a push.*** During the days of School To Work, I was often struck by how difficult it was to have meaningful discussions across institutional sectors in education, much less among education and business. This issue of alignment is starting to be addressed in state level K-16 (P-20) councils, but the cross-sector conversation needs stronger advocates. Otherwise it is difficult to breakout of traditional institutional silos and barriers between, higher education and high schools, high schools and middle schools, schools and employers. There's fragmentation within each sector too - silos within the silos. It might be an appropriate federal role to provide better incentives (maybe there are some hard learned lessons from WIA) for this intermediary work and building capacity to deal with intersection issues. I use the term “white space issue” to refer to things that relate to the space between boxes on organizational charts – where we often find major challenges for which no one has direct responsibility. These are the places where real change can occur.

***Thinking about the federal role in a blog world:*** A critical issue that often gets short shrift is consideration of the appropriate federal role in the highly decentralized environment of US education, combined with changes in technology, demographics and behavior that may require new models of governance. Is the federal role in education a punitive, compliance-driven enforcer? Or it is equally important to develop ability to serve as a broker of knowledge and builder of capacity (sort of a carrot rather than a stick)? The latter requires different structures and mindsets. Perhaps the reauthorization of NCLB can be used to engage in serious discussion about how the federal government, given its limited constitutional role in education, can play a more effective role in ensuring high quality educational opportunity for all students of all ages.