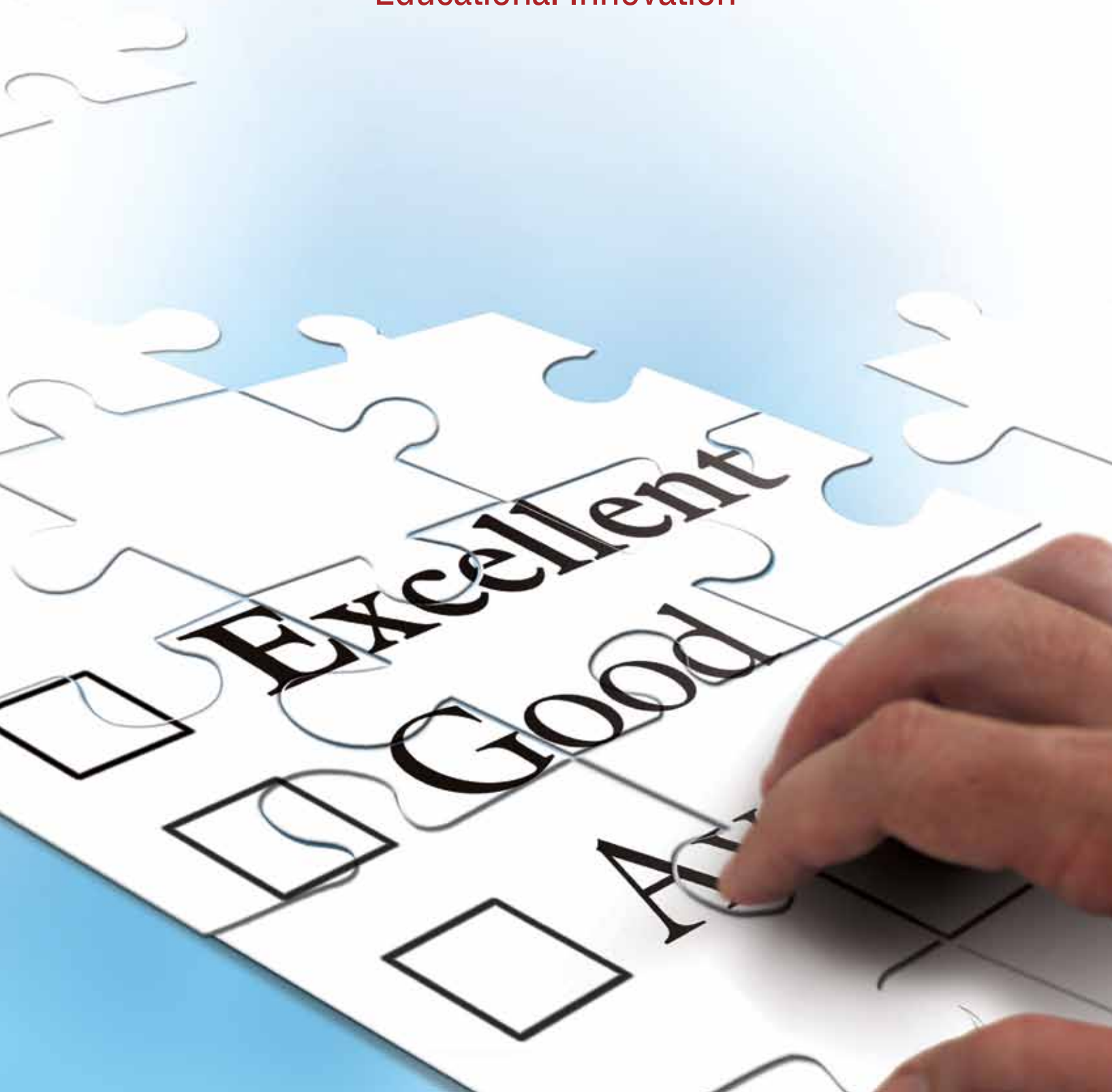


LEADERS and LAGGARDS

A State-by-State Report Card on
Educational Innovation



Overview

Two years ago, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Center for American Progress, and Frederick M. Hess of the American Enterprise Institute came together to grade the states on school performance. In that first *Leaders and Laggards* report, we found much to applaud but even more that requires urgent improvement. In this follow-up report, we turn our attention to the future, looking not at how states are performing today, but at what they are doing to prepare themselves for the challenges that lie ahead. Thus, some states with positive academic results receive poor grades on our measures of innovation, while others with lackluster scholarly achievement nevertheless earn high marks for policies that are creating an entrepreneurial culture in their schools. We chose this focus because, regardless of current academic accomplishment in each state, we believe innovative educational practices are vital to laying the groundwork for continuous and transformational change.

And change is essential. Put bluntly, we believe our education system needs to be reinvented. After decades of political inaction and ineffective reforms, our schools consistently produce students unready for the rigors of the modern workplace. The lack of preparedness is staggering. Roughly one in three eighth graders is proficient in reading. Most high schools graduate little more than two-thirds of their students on time. And even the students who do receive a high school diploma lack adequate skills: More than 33% of first-year college students require remediation in either math or English.

But we also believe that reinvention will never be accomplished with silver bullets. Our school system needs far-reaching innovation. It is archaic and broken, a relic of a time when high school graduates could expect to live prosperous lives, when steel and auto factories formed the backbone of the American economy, and when laptop computers and the Internet were the preserve of science fiction writers. And while the challenges are many—inflexible regulations, excessive bureaucracy, a dearth of fresh thinking—the bottom line is that most education institutions simply lack the tools, incentives, and opportunities to reinvent themselves in profoundly more effective ways.

By “innovation” we do *not* mean blindly celebrating every nifty-sounding reform. If anything, we have had too

much of such educational innovation over the years, as evidenced by the sequential embrace of fads and the hurried cycling from one new “best practice” to another that so often characterizes K–12 schooling. States and school systems, in other words, have too long confused the novel with the useful. Rather, we believe innovation to be the process of leveraging new tools, talent, and management strategies to craft solutions that were not possible or necessary in an earlier era.

Our aim is to encourage states to embrace policies that make it easier to design smart solutions that serve 21st century students and address 21st century challenges. The impulse to either dictate one-size-fits-all solutions from the top or simply to do something—anything—differently will not address our pressing needs. Instead, this report seeks to foster a flexible, performance-oriented culture that will help our schools meet educational challenges.

Today, various organizations are addressing stubborn challenges by pursuing familiar notions of good teaching and effective schooling in impressively coherent, disciplined, and strategic ways. Some are public school districts, such as Long Beach Unified School District in California and Aldine Independent School District in Texas. An array of charter school entrepreneurs are also working within the public school system and seeing encouraging results, such as the KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) Academies, YES Prep, Aspire Public Schools, Green Dot Public Schools, and Achievement First. Other independent ventures have also devised promising approaches to important challenges, including Citizen Schools, EdisonLearning, The New Teacher Project, K12 Inc., Blackboard Inc., Wireless Generation, Teach for America, and New Leaders for New Schools.

Even these marquee reformers, however, struggle to sidestep entrenched practices, raise funds, find talent, and secure support. Moreover, these highly successful ventures often pale when viewed beside the larger K–12 enterprise. The 80-odd KIPP schools, approximately 130 school leaders trained annually by New Leaders for New Schools, and 2,200 teachers trained each year by The New Teacher Project are dwarfed by the nation’s 14,000 school districts, 100,000 schools, and 3.2 million teachers. The challenge is to boost the chance that creative problem solvers will ultimately make a real, lasting difference for our nation and our children.

Fortunately, our report comes at a time when national attention to educational innovation is on the upswing. The new federal Race to the Top Fund has brought additional attention to the need to rethink our system, for instance, while numerous other efforts are under way at the state and local levels. It is far too early to endorse any particular plan or to say which ones will be effective. But now is the time for state leaders to show the political will to pursue reform.

Along the way, high standards, accountability, and sensible progress measures are essential. But care must be taken not to allow familiar modes of measurement to smother reform. Too often, reformers tend to embrace only those advances that we can conveniently measure with today's crude tools, such as grades three-to-eight reading and math scores. The principal virtue of the No Child Left Behind Act, for example—a much-needed focus on outcomes and transparency—has been coupled with a bureaucratic impulse and an inflexible, cookie-cutter approach to gauging teacher and school quality. We must not retreat from the promise of high standards and accountability. But we should also embrace what might be called smart quality control. That means measuring the value of various providers and solutions in terms of what they are intended to do—whether that is recruiting teachers or tutoring foreign languages—rather than merely on whether they affect the rate at which students improve their performance on middle school reading and math tests.

Improved accountability and flexibility, while vital, will not be enough to achieve the changes we seek: Capacity building is also crucial. We define this overused term to mean the need for a variety of new providers that deliver additional support to educators in answering classroom and schoolwide challenges. More broadly, however, this effort must be complemented by giving new providers the freedom and encouragement they need to promote high-quality research and development, and to develop innovative “green shoot” reform ventures that pioneer more effective tools and strategies.

Ultimately, though, the key to improving results will be to help schools not only to avoid mistakes, but to position themselves better to adopt imaginative solutions. In brief, for reform to take hold our states and schools must practice purposeful innovation.

To examine the degree to which states have developed such a culture, we focused on eight areas:

- **School Management** (including the strength of charter school laws and the percentage of teachers who like the way their schools are run)
- **Finance** (including the accessibility of state financial data)
- **Staffing: Hiring & Evaluation** (including alternative certification for teachers)
- **Staffing: Removing Ineffective Teachers** (including the percentage of principals who report barriers to the removal of poor-performing teachers)
- **Data** (including such measures as state-collected college student remediation data)
- **Technology** (including students per Internet-connected computer)
- **Pipeline to Postsecondary** (including the percentage of schools reporting dual-enrollment programs)
- **State Reform Environment** (an ungraded category that includes data on the presence of reform groups and participation in international assessments)

Our data come from a wide variety of sources, from federal education databases to our own 50-state surveys. We should note that the data limitations we encountered were a significant hindrance to our efforts, even more so than when we prepared our first *Leaders and Laggards* report.

We received invaluable assistance from an outside panel of academic experts. We shared our methodology with Jack Buckley, professor of applied statistics at New York University; Dan Goldhaber, research professor at the University of Washington; Paul Herdman, president of the Rodel Foundation of Delaware; Monica Higgins, professor of education at Harvard University; and Richard Ingersoll, professor of education and sociology at the University of Pennsylvania. The panel reviewed our approach and results, and provided helpful feedback. However, our research team takes full responsibility for the methodology and resulting grades.

In many respects the recent troubles of the auto and newspaper industries provide a cautionary tale for today's education policymakers. Analysts predicted structural challenges in both industries for decades. Outside consultants urged major change. Yet altering entrenched practices at businesses from General Motors to the

now-defunct *Rocky Mountain News* proved enormously difficult. And the results of inaction for both organizations were disastrous. The same must not happen to our nation's education system. The stakes are just too high.

The findings and recommendations detailed in the following section cover everything from the need for more thoughtful use of technology to the overarching importance of giving educators flexibility in meeting shared student-achievement goals. In particular, we believe that reform requires a nondoctrinaire emphasis on overhauling the status quo and replacing it, not with some imagined one best system, but with a new performance-oriented culture that may take many forms. In the end, we think of educational innovation not as a fad but as the prerequisite for deep, systematic change, the kind of change that is necessary—and long overdue.

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As we observed two years ago in our first *Leaders and Laggards* report, even as businesses have revolutionized their practices, “student achievement has remained stagnant and our K–12 schools have stayed remarkably unchanged—preserving, as if in amber, the routines, culture, and operations of a 1930s manufacturing plant.” Now, as we look forward, our aim is nothing less than to crush the amber. That is the challenge before us.



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