IMPLICATIONS

These results highlight a persistent frustration among educational entrepreneurs: City and district environments make a difference. In the end, it doesn't much matter why or how changes in them occur—just that they do. So what is it that state and local leaders, including but not limited to those in school systems, need to do to make their communities more receptive to reform entrepreneurs? Here are five ideas.

1. Knock down barriers. These include formal legal and regulatory obstacles, such as licensure provisions that make it difficult or costly to operate nontraditional teacher training programs, contract provisions that prize tenure over talent, and procurement arrangements that effectively prevent entrepreneurs from doing business with the district. Or they can be informal impediments such as longstanding routines and district cultures. Simply removing contract provisions or state policies that stifle new providers will not ensure their emergence, but it is a necessary first step. Remember the first rule of entrepreneurship: It won't happen if it's prohibited.

2. Build supports. If traditional schools need support with technology, hiring, transportation, assessment, data analysis, and so forth, then entrepreneurs, who face those same challenges, in addition to breaking into new markets and building to scale, need all that help and more. New charter schools, for example, face the additional challenges of arranging for facilities and financing, marketing themselves, and negotiating local politics and the authorizing process. By designating offices or individuals charged with facilitating the work of nontraditional problem-solvers and identifying points of contact to help them negotiate challenges and access resources, district and municipal leaders can provide invaluable aid.

Meanwhile, locally grown independent entities like New Schools for New Orleans and Indianapolis's The Mind Trust provide essential material support, relationships, local expertise, and smart quality control. These outfits help identify and recruit promising school leaders and/or providers, assist them in securing funding, help clear away political and local obstacles, connect them to savvy advisors, and otherwise make immense challenges more manageable. Other communities would benefit by creating organizations that resemble them.

3. Gather, use, and leverage data. Without robust metrics by which policy makers, parents, and practitioners can compare their performance and cost-effectiveness to the status quo, nontraditional providers will struggle to prove their mettle. An entrepreneur may have a terrific solution for engaging parents, recruiting teachers, or tutoring English language learners, but be unable to get traction without tangible evidence of that solution's impact. Measures of performance and cost-effectiveness also provide a powerful safeguard against snake-oil peddlers. As coauthor Hess and Harvard University's Jon Fullerton have noted in *The Numbers We Need*, metrics that accurately reflect the good or service in question are crucial, whether it's improved principal selection, more useful data tools, or enhanced foreign language instruction.[11] Test scores and graduation rates alone won't cut it.

11. Frederick M. Hess and Jon Fullerton, "The Numbers We Need: Bringing Balanced Scorecards to Education Data," *Phi Delta Kappan* 90, no. 9 (May 2009): 665-69, http://www.kappanmagazine.org/content/90/9/665.abstract.

4. Think outside one's own backyard. School improvement suffers from the expectation that school and district personnel will hand-craft solutions to all of their instructional, staffing, and operational challenges, as if everything is sui generis. Part of what's valuable about nontraditional providers is their ability to think beyond the individual school or district. In fact, many specialize in pyramiding expertise across multiple locations. That's what New Leaders for New Schools and The New Teacher Project, for example, have done in staffing, and what Wireless Generation and Schoolnet have done in the area of data and technological tools. Districts could do vastly more to identify experienced specialists at work in other places to help solve thorny problems, leverage such assistance, and integrate such relationships into district and school routines.

5. Flex your political muscles. Doing any of this hinges on political support. Public education is a public enterprise. The lion's share of the funding is public. The rules—and accountability systems—are made by public officials. Yet the nature of public bureaucracies is that inertia tends to prevail. State and local policies that may have made sense at one point may now do more harm than good. Yet these laws, regulations, and contract provisions have no expiration date and will not fade of their own accord. Remaking them, however, along with the norms and expectations that have grown up around them, is hard, messy, political work. It requires advocacy, the cultivation of community support, philanthropic backing, and efforts to win over media and opinion makers. More than anything else, it needs a voice for reform that can counter the agenda of the teachers' union.

Final Thoughts

In recent years, reformers seeking to remake urban schooling have gained some traction—and can show some results. But the modest reading and math gains visible so far, laudable as they are, don't come close to being sufficient. Cities that are serious about renewing their K-12 education systems must be prepared to act boldly. This means making room for new problem-solvers, and their tools, talent, and technologies.

America's leading reform cities have begun that transformation. Schooling in locales like New Orleans, Washington, D.C., and New York City already bears a visibly more dynamic and entrepreneurial cast than it did a decade ago. And while even these cities still have a long way to go, many other locales have not even gotten started. Which leaves them hoping against experience that another in a series of superintendents will turn out to be the miracle worker.

The challenge is to do profoundly better. Whatever the merits of steady efforts to improve professional development and tweak curricula, they are unlikely to deliver dramatic gains in performance or major new efficiencies. In education, as in so many other walks of life, that work will fall upon the shoulders of problem-solvers with the flexibility to tap new tools and talent, to approach stubborn challenges in fresh ways, and who are free to paint on a blank canvas. America's most educationally successful cities, in 2020 and beyond, are going to be those that embrace and foster these efforts.