

# Going to Scale: The Challenge of Replicating Innovative and Proven School Designs

Nicholas Torres 10 February 2014

Today, as a result of financial and political limitations, most proven innovative education models have little likelihood of scaling. However, the two dominant models by proven innovative model leaders that have shown some early success are: 1) subcontracting with districts to deliver their educational models and 2) seeking an independent authorization (charter schools) through which the finances follow the student. The first option, although much quicker than seeking a charter school, is not necessarily driven by consumer demand or input but is more about an entity's ability to leverage relationships with school district officials or governing body. It can also be filled with risk because when dollars become tight, districts frequently have to terminate contracts and provide the educational services internally. The second option requires seeking multiple charters, district by district or state by state, which is extremely slow and not very successful given the political landscape of each local authorizer.

I'm proposing an alternative to the current options that, at the core, is driven by quality education and academic results for students and has increased opportunities to reach scale.

Jeffery L. Bradach (2003) outlines the challenges of replicating social programs. He indicates that replication programs requires answers to three critical questions: (1) where and how to grow/scale; (2) what kind of network to build; and (3) what the role of the central office needs to be.

- To grow and scale, you have to leverage existing networks by identifying partners and finding local champions who will provide essential resources and ultimately allow you to leverage or tap into existing networks, thereby establishing an immediate market.
- To ensure quality, while you grow and scale, you need to understand what parts of your model can be standardized, including the model culture. The more standardized your model, the more likely you can scale with quality and fidelity through a variety of network types, from loose networks of organizational partners to legally formalized groups.
- To determine the role of the "center" or the brand of the program, Bradach indicates that the focus needs to be on ensuring quality and protecting the brand, facilitating learning throughout the network and providing centralized services.

When applying the above framework to innovative and proven school models, one must first consider the political and financial landscape that drives our United States education system.

When entering the education market, promoters of innovative and proven models have to realize that the financial landscape is controlled by local school district boards and departments of education that receive the tax dollars to provide a quality education to each child. Outside of legislation reform, these entities have the authority to provide a sustainable financial model for new school designs. Private schools, although driven by a free market, are limited because only a small percentage of Americans can afford them without significant sacrifice. Thus, any scaling of innovative school models outside of significant state by state legislation reform can currently only be done within the existing structure or in a financial partnership (contracting out services to a nonprofit or for-profit entity).

As with any service, the education sector is made up of multiple interests. The political landscape is dominated by pressures from parents who are seeking safety, quality education and models that adapt to their children's uniqueness; school districts, staffed by certified professionals who attempt to innovate but are hampered because of the major internal culture change required before any new model can be adopted; and special interest groups (e.g., unions) protecting their respective

interests. The result is a mixture of small wins across the different groups, but as a whole, starting and scaling new innovative proven models is close to impossible within the existing political framework. In addition, legislators are increasingly being pressured to create new legislation that finds compromises between the interests of parents, school districts, and special interest groups.

I'm proposing that in order to scale innovative proven educational models, districts and charter networks, who receive the public dollars, simply have to embrace the fact that another group, somewhere, has developed a better education model that is more effective for certain populations. Behind this proposal is the simple understanding that a one-size-fits-all education delivery model no longer works, if it ever did. Scaling new models requires that school districts and charter networks drive their education delivery from a research and development unit similar to those of for-profit companies that allows for multiple delivery options based on students' abilities and respective needs. If they don't operate from this basis, districts and networks will always be faced with parents who want something different because they know that other education organizations have created better products that demonstrate the concept of disruptive innovation (<http://www.claytonchristensen.com/key-concepts/>). This idea requires districts and charter networks to either buy-out existing models by hiring the innovators and allowing them to deliver and scale within

their existing structures or to seek out and contract innovative and proven education delivery models to independent groups. In business practices, this simply asks districts to identify their core education competencies and deliver them with quality while internally outsourcing innovative education delivery models (still within the control and oversight of districts and charter networks) that work for different populations (dropouts, special education students, students with disciplinary problems). Rather than "fighting" parents or forcing them to choose other options (private, charter, cyber charter), district administrators could create and deliver quality options within their existing districts. Important within this model is the understanding is that it is extremely difficult to close any school, despite poor outcomes, and much easier to adapt innovative education models based on the needs and demands of parents. A key difference from existing practices, in this proposal, is that school districts and charter networks are proactively seeking, with the intention of buying them out, the best models to educate their alternative student populations and they are seeking partnerships.

An example of this model could be the Education Plus Academy, a cyber school that I cofounded and run that specializes in students with disabilities in written, language or math expression. In developing and operating the model, with great academic and social results, our larger vision is NOT simply to be the educational option

for all children. Rather, we would prefer to help institutionalize the model within existing school districts and charter school networks. Key to our scaling success, as defined by Bradach, will be the standardization of the model and its culture and facilitating learning throughout the network.

Below represents a sample standardization of a schedule that could be replicated in any school environment and that would allow for the educational institution to hire and maintain most of the teachers while contracting out training and oversight.

## **Elementary School Learning Center Student (Current Model)**

- 12:01 am – 11:59 pm Virtual curricula available
- 8:00 am – 3:00 pm Cyber teachers instruct via a flipped classroom model supported by parents and tutors. Student work is monitored virtually by Lanschool.
- 8:00 am - 3:00 pm Special education teachers adopt lessons and make accommodations in a face-to-face environment.
- 8:00 am - 3:00 pm Evaluations, speech, OT & PT services provided in a face-to-face environment
- 8:00 am – 3:00 pm Face-to-face Orton-Gillingham/Wilson tutors at learning center sites
- 12:00 pm – 3:00 pm Supplemental (arts/music/drama) services at learning center sites

# Elementary School District/Charter Network Partnership (School-within-a-School Model)

- 12:01 am – 11:59 pm Virtual curricula available (flip classroom). Student work monitored via Lanschool.
- 8:00 am – 3:00 pm Education Plus cyber teachers Available to instruct virtually and provide students within the district access to the curricula. Student work monitored via Lanschool.
- 8:00 am - 3:00 pm Special education teacher, employed by the district but trained by Education Plus, makes appropriate accommodations.
- 8:00 am - 3:00 pm Evaluations, speech, OT & PT services provided at local school.
- 8:00 am – 6:00 pm Face-to-face Orton-Gillingham/Wilson tutoring services provided within local school setting or after school.
- 8:00 pm – 3:00 pm Supplemental (arts/music/drama) services provided by local school.

The above is a very simplified version of how a standardized approach could be used to replicate an effective model within existing districts or charter school networks. It requires a district or charter school network to embrace different approaches that are effective for unique populations and to contract out a portion of the public dollars for parts of a child's education.

In conclusion, innovative and proven educational models,

simply can not scale without public funds. At the current time, parents are generally seeking options within charter and cyber charter schools, because they are looking for schools that offer good outcomes and adapt to the needs of their students. The only way to reach scale is for districts, self-initiated, to understand the needs and demands of parents and figure out how to adapt and operate quality alternative models. Rather than fight parents, give them what they want within the structure of proven models. Rather than fight charter schools who continue to adapt and innovate, districts and networks should invite them to be part of the structure to operate their models and invite non-charter-school operators into the system as a research and development arm.

Based on Bradach's recommendations, school districts should leverage existing networks by identifying partners and finding local champions who can supply essential resources, including expertise, as an important way to facilitate rapid growth. Districts should identify proven standardized models and invite in partners to maintain a school culture. Districts should partner with the understanding that the partner needs to maintain the brand of the model, facilitate learning throughout their extended network and provide centralized training and technical assistance services.

## **References**

Bradach, J. (2003). Going to scale: The challenge of

replicating social programs. Stanford Social Innovation Review, Spring. Retrieved from [http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/going\\_to\\_scale/](http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/going_to_scale/)

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