Saving public education by creating space for innovation

by Joe Graba

Somewhere in the last quarter of the century, knowledge became the key strategic resource in our society, in the way that land was when we were an agricultural society, and that natural resources and manufacturing capability were when we were an industrial society.

Without many of us in education paying attention, our business leaders began to understand that the future of their organizations was directly tied to the knowledge base of their employees, and they began to express concerns about the knowledge development or knowledge transfer system in our society. Political leaders and business leaders began to escalate the expectations for our educational system. Those expectations generated pressure on the existing system to improve its ability to develop knowledge in our young people.

Over the last 20 years or so our education system has improved. I'm not one who thinks it has deteriorated. But the expectations and the importance of knowledge have escalated faster than the system has been able to respond. The reality is that the gap has probably widened from what it was 20 or 25 years ago.

I often think that while almost everyone in this country wants our schools to be better, almost nobody wants them to be different. I really don't believe we can have the kind of schools we need in the 21st century if we aren't willing to make them significantly different from the schools that we had in the 20th century. But I don't believe we can get the kind of schools we need by changing the ones we have.

We have known for some time that public education has a problem with replication of innovation. We operated a Council on Quality Education in Minnesota during the 1970s which funded many creative innovations in our schools, but we had very little success in replicating these innovations. Many, if not most, of the innovations could not be sustained in the district where they were started once the grant funds ran out. This same pattern has been observed across the country with other efforts to stimulate innovation in public education.

Recent research on the processes of change in the private sector provides the best explanation for this inability to spread or even sustain innovation in education. Clayton Christensen at the Harvard Business School recently published some research on the inability of private companies to change themselves. He says that most organizations have the ability to improve themselves incrementally through what he calls "sustaining innovations." But there is another kind of innovation, which he calls "disruptive innovation," that requires fundamental changes in the core business plan, the core products, the core services, the core functions of the company. Christensen says that almost no company is able to make those kinds of changes. Almost all of the fundamental changes in an industry sector are the result of the creation of new organizations.

For years I thought that the resistance to change in organizations was the result of an inability to envision a radically different approach to doing business. But Christensen says that it is deeper than that, that the problem is more fundamental.

There is a more recent book out, by Richard Foster, which reinforces Christensen's findings. Both Christensen and Foster say that within every organization a culture gets created of processes and assumptions and habits and atti-
Biodiesel makes good sense in the long run. According to the Star Tribune (4/15/01), "The potential is there to start a new movement, a self-sufficiency movement."

"We've long held that taxpayers shouldn't be called upon to foot the bill for new sports stadiums, and we still believe that" the Rochester Post Bulletin (5/1/01) wrote. "But the latest Twins stadium proposal which involves a no-interest state loan to the Twins brings a howl louder than the howl for a new ballpark..." (4/4/01) "Venturi's budget proposal is a step down a slippery slope."

"We have a bill that would provide $94 million for schools in Minnesota's 1899's ran on petrodiesel, self-sufficiency, while clearing quite a few hurdles about that."

The legislature must focus on this issue and come up with an equitable dollar amount for education."

"Attracting and keeping good teachers has become difficult enough without the added pressure of a shrinking budget," notes the South Washington Co. Bulletin (4/4/01). "Venturi's budget proposal is a step down a slippery slope."

"The proposal he sets forth will force young teachers out of the profession. They are the ones without seniority. New teachers are the ones who lose their job when layoffs are necessary."

According to the Fergus Falls Journal (4/27/01) "While far from perfect, the House and Senate plates are both vast improvements on Governor Ventura's backwards ideas on education."

"No government priority has been more poorly served during the past four years than public education in Minnesota. Kat-12 education has suffered through relatively lean funding. Perhaps only higher education has fared worse. Meanwhile, revenue continues to sit in the state's schools lower and lower on the quality scale."

Marijuana use for medical purposes under discussion..." the Rochester Post Bulletin (4/11) reported on a public forum conducted by the state departments of Health and Public Safety. "Between departments and the forum's participants, it appears there is no consensus on what constitutes marijuana use for anything except medical purposes." Minnesota has a law which authorizes such medical research. "Critics of such laws believe they are intended as a first step toward legalizing marijuana for recreation-..."

"...or the sale, use, or possession of marijuana for a personal use other than for medical reasons."

"...and not to exceed the amount of marijuana that a person is authorized to possess under the state's laws."

The Minneapolis Journal published an article by Lyle Wray (4/20/01) which stated, "As the shoots poke through, the latest Citizens League study committee is nearing completion of its work on how to dramatically increase the rate of school completion for students in our two core city school districts."

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"...the state Department of Children, Families and Learning. Getting that information to the schools and teachers to use might be another thing, expect that many teachers do not have a telephone, never mind a computer."

"Rapid Deployment of Resources in a Strategic Fashion. Acting on what works is a core element of the approach. If we are dealing largely with children who are not the responsibility of their birth family, what are the most effective strategies for school success for many or all of these children? What is the best use of limited resources to achieve the outcomes!"

"For example, if there are programs that can provide a high level of reading at grade level by the end of the third grade..."

"...or seen as a powerful predictor of later school success..."

"...are programs fully deployed for all children and not just those who need them?"

"Effective Tactics at the Face-to-Face Level. Highly capable teachers are especially important for improving learning for students at risk of dropping out. Are the skills for teaching students at risk present in all teachers serving these students?"

"...in particular are important. As the mayor of Baltimore, Martin O'Malley, has made comments about "Citizen" for the whole city that is used for every city agency. At meetings every two weeks in a computer filled room, city agency heads meet with the mayor to analyze trends in public services. Off the shelf software was said to limit the start up costs to $20,000 (for further information, see www.ci.baltimore.md.us/news/citistat.html)."

"For schools where about half of the ninth graders finish successfully four years later, using data to zero-in on high performing schools is a core element of the approach. If we are dealing largely with children who are not the responsibility of their birth family, what are the most effective strategies for school success for many or all of these children? What is the best use of limited resources to achieve the outcomes!"

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Most of us were a mainline customer of the education system in the last half of the century as the main player.

I believe that we need radically different schools. I say this as someone who has spent his whole life in public education in one way or another. As a close of my career, I have arrived at the conclusion that the system needs to be radically changed and that the best way to do that is to create new entities. This is really difficult, because most of us are terribly loyal to the systems we’ve spent careers in. All of our organizations and assumptions are created around it. We are attached to the athletic, the extracurricular, the performing arts. I did not get here easily, and I do not expect that anyone else will either. This was an agonizing journey for me after 40 years in the current system. But we know that the system that we’ve got is not serving a significant proportion of our students. We’re turning out thousands of students, or they are dropping out, every year whose lives are negatively impacted by the inability of our system to help them acquire the knowledge they need to be successful participants in our society.

We need to be careful that we don’t love the system more than we love the kids it was designed to serve. That requires that some of us have the courage to make that migration over to creating new entities. I believe that we should not try to make this change as a frontal attack, but instead we should create the options alongside the current system and, over time, let the people decide which of the options ought to thrive.

There is a charter school in Hennepin, Minnesota, with about 100 students in grades 7-12, that has no class-

s and it has no courses. Now that’s a fundamental change in the operation of a school. I taught science for 43 years, and I don’t think I ever would have created that school.

The other aspect of this school that is really fundamentally different is that there are no employees. The teachers have formed a cooperative, which negoti-

ates with the school board for a lump sum payment every year and the expectations for student outcomes for that sum. Then the teachers’ cooperative goes off and runs the school. They set the budget, hire their colleagues, evaluate their colleagues, and terminate their colleagues. They set the salaries, determine how much they’re going to spend on technology, and so forth. They don’t have a superintendent. They don’t have a prin-

cipal, a counselor, or a janitor. The teachers do these things themselves.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has contributed $4.3 million to improve this school. Incidentally, before the Gates Foundation donated this money, six other charter schools had contracted with this cooperative to provide services to their schools. So I use this as an example of the kind of fundamental changes that I’m talking about, occurring through the creation of new entities.

Most of us are not very com-

fortable with that kind of approach. That is the courage of having a system that lets peo-

tle, other than old teachers or politicians, create new schools, other than old teachers or politicians, create new schools.

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The church
Bus rapid transit (BRT) is increasingly being recognized as a preferred mode of public transportation. It offers a "third way" between traditional bus and light rail solutions. Electronically-guided, rubber-tired vehicles can operate on exclusive tranways with the same quality of ride, safety, and reliability as rail-guided vehicles.

The ingredients of a successful BRT system include:

- **Modern, rail-like vehicles.** The vehicles must offer an attractive exterior and modern interior styling with large windows.
- **Exclusive rights-of-way.** Signal priority helps, but it is usually not sufficient to achieve the speed needed to attract riders. The exclusive rights-of-way can be underground, elevated, or grade-separated.
- **Attractive infrastructure.** To a large extent, the aesthetic quality of the surrounding area, such as landscaping, public art, and uniquely appropriate features, is what distinguishes BRT from traditional busways.

Streamlined fare collection. Fare collection can be via free-fare zones or self-serve media at stations or even at the door, but pay-as-you-go fare collection inhibits the rapid throughput that is to gain acceptance as an attractive option and create economic investment in a manner that currently lacks one or more of the significant attributes. A total systems approach is much harder, technically, institutionally, and politically, to put together along with the bus mode. It can be accomplished, however, with good planning, an informed community, and progressive decision makers who want to maximize the payoff from available transit resources.

The public often perceives anything associated with buses as being cheap and inexpensive, so a second-rate choice to be used only when none other is feasible.

The second lesson learned from previous experience is that, because high-quality, high-performance BRT can be provided in a number of ways, there needs to be a rigorous planning process that weighs all the cost and benefit criteria prior to making a decision on investing in rapid transit. There are critical linkages between rapid transit and the rest of the transportation system and between rapid transit and the full range of quality-of-life issues affecting a community, such as land use and the environment. Rapid transit planning must be holistic, regardless of mode, and involve all stakeholders — local and state officials, the private sector, and the public.

Yet another lesson is that although BRT needs to have a comprehensive set of features consistent with its specific implementation environment, it can be constructed in logical increments. The systems can be built in successive phases, adding scope and features such as additional stations, grade separation, and communication systems when conditions warrant. The objective is to end up with a system containing a complete package of performance and quality characteristics consistent with its market and the physical environment in which it operates.

**Greater Cleveland BRT**

One of the most sophisticated BRT systems in the United States is being designed for Cleveland, Ohio. Designated the Euclid Corridor Transportation project, the BRT will feature an exclusive center median busway connecting the region’s largest employment center (the central business district) with the University Circle area, the second largest employment center, which is also the area’s major medical, cultural, and educational district. The BRT is part of a broad redevelopment program for the Euclid Avenue corridor, one of Cleveland’s oldest areas. It includes a building-to-building reconstruction of Euclid Avenue, with enhanced pedestrian zones, significant sidewalk and center median landscape, new street and sidewalk lighting, new center median platforms with distinctive shelter architecture, and exclusive bus and auto lanes.

The downtown transit zone will increase the flow of bus service during peak periods and allow better distribution of bus rides to work destinations within the central business district.

A new intermodal transfer facility at Public Square will integrate bus service and other suburban bus routes with the rapid transit line which connects to the central business district and, from there, to the airport. A significant percentage of the expected new ridership in the corridor will come from the bus/rail transfers at this facility.

The system will consist of an exclusive center median busway on Euclid Avenue and median lanes and center platform stations along most of the length of Euclid Avenue. The fleet of vehicles will include 52 hybrid-electric buses with six spares. The electric trolley buses will be low-floor, 60-foot-long articulated, rubber-tired vehicles with both left- and right-side doors to allow passengers to board from both the center and curbside stops. New traffic control signals will be installed to conform to the busway design, and a new traffic signal system will be installed to give priority to buses operating on Euclid Avenue. A reconstructed center median will conform to the new busway alignment with landscaped median, bus stop platforms, a rumble strip to separate the bus and auto lanes and an upgraded sidewalk.

Construction of the Cleveland BRT is expected to start in 2003, with completion scheduled for 2005-2006. Once in operation, travel time and quality of service will be improved by the use of hybrid-electric buses in an exclusive busway with signal priority and the connection provided by the new intermodal transfer facility. Also, the transit-restricting nature of the existing downtown street network will be eliminated with the introduction of the downtown transit zone, and congestion in the central business district will be reduced.

**Impediments to Implementation**

Despite its advantages as a low-cost solution to upgrading existing service, changing the image of bus transit to one that lures people out of their cars, the way light-rail transit has over the past 20 years, has not been easy. The public often perceives anything associated with buses as being cheap rather than inexpensive, a second-rate choice to be used only when none other is feasible. As a result, municipal officials may discourage consideration of bus options for fear of losing public support for a rail transit investment.

From a technical perspective, planners don't know the capabilities of BRT and incorrectly attribute the high performance and customer acceptance of rail rapid transit to uniquely rail characteristics, such as tracks, rather than to the exclusive guideway, stations, and service quality that are also offered by bus rapid transit. Nevertheless, numerous BRT systems are in the works or already in operation in municipalities around the country. The likelihood is that as BRT systems increase in number and sophistication, they will continue to gain wider acceptance as a new and effective mode of public transportation.

Craig A. Amundsen, AICP, is a principal in urban design for the URS Corporation (formerly BW2) in Minneapolis, MN. This article is adapted from a longer article that will appear in the June issue of American City and County Magazine.
A Minnesota charter school sponsored by the LeSueur-Henderson district is one of the semifinalists this year in the search by the Ford Foundation and Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government for important innovations in American government. Minnesota's charter law was a winner in that competition, as an institutional innovation, a year ago.

This underscores the whole point of chartering. 'Charter' is not a kind of school. It's a continuing search for new and different and better kinds of school. Some aren't innovative. Some fail. But some really do discover new forms of schooling. If even one school does, that's major: How many people had to invent the light bulb?

The charter school in the competition this year - the New Country School - has no courses, no classes and no employees. A professional organization of teachers and others runs the program for the board of the nonprofit corporation that is the school. With the freedom (and the incentives) the charter law provides and the accountability it imposes, the teachers created a program in which students work on individual and group projects geared to the state's graduation requirements. Expenditure-patterns, the use of time, student roles, teacher roles all are radically different. Teachers are advisers; coaches. The internet is an integral resource.

Finalists will be announced in the summer; the 10 winners in the fall.
— Ted Kolderie

The media releases put the best possible spin on student test scores from Minneapolis and Saint Paul: something about previous gains now "leveling off." Privately as word was leaked ahead to others who might be asked for comment — around city hall, for example — the sense was different. Results this year were "much worse than expected," the Minneapolis city council president, Jackie Cherryhomes, told an audience the night before the news stories appeared.
—T.K.

Contrary to our self-image, the U.S. now ranks 7th in car ownership at 394 cars per 1,000 people. According to the April 21 Economist magazine, the top six begins with tiny Luxemburg at 576 followed by Italy, Iceland, Germany, Austria and Australia.

The U.S. ranking is expected to drop even further in the next two years as car sales in the U.S. are forecast to decline by about 20 percent, double the decline expected in the rest of the world. To hear some talk, all Europeans are using trains and mass transit exclusively. The picture must be more complex.
—Lyle Whry

From Ken Orski's Washington newsletter on urban transportation issues:

"In nearly every city there are highway locations that experience traffic backups on a daily basis. These are usually caused by inadequate roadway design; as, when three lanes merge into two or when entering vehicles must merge into lanes already crowded with other vehicles. Removal of the 167 worst such bottlenecks (ranked by hours of delay) would, it is estimated, result in a 71 percent decline in rush hour delays, saving each affected commuter an average of 40 minutes each day. A program of traffic-bottleneck elimination might be the most effective single medium-term initiative the federal government could undertake to reduce metropolitan congestion."
—T.K.

Researchers at the Kansas State University are developing plastic from soybeans and grains. It is part of a program at KSU to find new uses for Kansas agricultural products to give them added value for farmers. Another project involves making adhesives from bio-materials that are environmentally friendly and use no petroleum. Also in development are wheat straw fiberboard products which offer improved insect resistance over wood products, soy oil inks, diesel fuels and lubricants. The U.S. imports nearly 60 percent of its petroleum and 3% of that goes into petro-chemicals. "Our economy is hydrocarbon based," according to Robert Madl, director of the research center. "We need to learn how to convert to carbohydrate-based resources, which is crops." For more information see www.oznet.ksu.edu
—Phil Jenni

MIT has announced a plan to put almost all of their coursework on the internet with 500 courses over the next two years and 2000 by the end of the decade. The target includes academics in developing countries with limited resources. The cost is estimated to be $100 million to start. Whether other institutions will follow or whether this move will attract more students to MIT remains to be seen.
—L.W.

John Borchert, who died March 30, taught more than just the students in his geography classes at the University of Minnesota. He was a principal "teacher" for almost everyone involved in the big thinking-through of metropolitan problems in the Twin Cities area through the 1960s.

The urban study he got attached to the Upper Midwest Economic Study in the late '50s was a major shaping influence, certain for business leadership. The planning program that appeared in the Humphrey Institute came more under the influence of geographers' thinking than under the influence of architects. More than one Citizens League study committee, as on transportation, came usefully to think in terms of the way urban regions actually grow, and work.
—T.K.

"Take Note" contributors include Minnesota Journal and Citizens League staff members.

The Minnesota Journal
Citizens League
708 S. Third Street, Suite 500
Minneapolis, MN 55415

PERIODICALS
POSTAGE PAID
AT MINNEAPOLIS
MINNESOTA
Welcome
New and returning members
Roxanna Foster
Marc Hugunin
Patricia Ross
Patrick Tatareka
Karen Woodward
Thanks to recruiter J. Jerome Boxleitner

League Board election scheduled for June 30
Citizens League members have an opportunity to elect eight directors to the League Board. League by-laws require that a Nominating Committee, chaired by the immediate past president, recommend a slate of more than eight candidates to run for a three-year term.

Voting is open to all Citizens League members. An election ballot, with a brief profile of each nominee and instructions for voting, will be mailed to all members on May 25.

The Citizens League Board of Directors is responsible for setting broad policy direction for the League. Perhaps the most important role of the Board is selecting topics for League study committees and approving the policy reports produced by those committees.

The Board is also responsible for assuring that the League has sufficient resources to carry out its mission, a task that has become more challenging as the League’s traditional support from corporations and foundations has eroded. Board members are expected to help raise money, make individual contributions and help connect League work to their community connections.

Citizens League Board members whose elected terms expire this year:
Marcia Avner, Jean Harris, Susan Heegaard, Steve Keefe, George Latimer and Robert Vanasek.

League by-laws stipulate that no Board member may serve more than six consecutive years.

Avner, Heegaard and Latimer are eligible for re-election and are on this year’s ballot. Harris, Keefe and Vanasek have all served at least three consecutive years and are ineligible for election. Keefe and Harris are eligible for a one-year appointed term, however.

The elected Board members will begin their term at the annual transitional Board meeting already scheduled for Friday, August 10. Officers and additional directors will be

Durenberger elected VP
Former US Senator Dave Durenberger was elected Citizens League vice president at the April Board meeting. League President Matthew Ramadan announced to the Board that he intends to step down as President at the end of his term in August. Durenberger will serve as League vice president for the remainder of this Board year and will succeed Ramadan as President in August.
Kris Lyndon Wilson moves on

After almost three years on the job, Research Associate Kris Lyndon Wilson resigned her position with the Citizens League at the end of April. Since joining the staff in the summer of 1998, Kris staffed the public agenda project and study committees on seniors with disabilities, residential property taxes and mental health. She also programmed many Mind-Openers, wrote for the Minnesota Journal and maintained the League’s website. “We’re really going to miss Kris,” said Executive Director Lyle Wray. “In a short time here she mastered a lot of the arcane detail on things like property taxes that takes others years to know.”

League members and friends will still run into Kris in Minnesota’s public policy circles, though. She is now working as a government relations specialist with the Association of Metropolitan Municipalities; an organization that represents the collective interests of metro-area cities before the state legislature and the Met Council.

Scott H. McMahon moves in

Scott McMahon has become the newest Program Associate at the League, replacing Kris Wilson. Scott graduates from Saint John’s University this spring with a BA degree in Political Science. While at Saint John’s, Scott was a very active member of the school community and with the Student Senate. He also studied in Ireland last fall and spent last summer as an intern with the Council of State Governments in Washington, D.C. A native of Algona, Iowa, Scott enjoys outdoor recreation, especially golf and water sports. Scott’s first assignment at the League will be the lead staff person for the energy study. Welcome to the League, Scott.

Stadium backers urged to prepare ... for the 1977 Legislature

Yes, you read the headline right. Twenty-five years ago this month the CL News reported that Rep. John Tomlinson of St. Paul had told a League breakfast meeting that Governor Wendell Anderson would probably not call a special session to deal with a stadium proposal that Tomlinson had co-authored and that had died in the 1976 session. He was concerned that “a very quiet, ominous silence” from the Vikings and Twins had him worried that they might be considering moving to other cities. Tomlinson urged the Twins and the Vikings to delay such a decision and called for an “unofficial conference committee” to work out the bugs in his proposal and return with a plan for the 1977 Legislature. Of particular concern were issues such as, the location of the stadium and the mix of public and private funding. In the immortal words of Yogi Berra, “it’s déjà vu all over again.”

League study committee

Member application forms for the League’s new study looking at energy policy in Minnesota will be in the mail shortly, although the committee will probably not begin actually meeting until sometime in June. Co-chairs for the committee will be Board members Andy Brown, a partner at the law firm of Dorsey & Whitney and Ken Keller, professor of Science, Technology and Public Policy at the Humphrey Institute. Meeting day, time and place have not yet been decided. Staff is currently doing background research on the topic, but we don’t expect to get up to full speed until new staff member Scott McMahon starts on June 11.

After more than six months of work, the Committee on School Completion Rates is nearing the finish of its report on improving graduation rates in the cities of Minneapolis and Saint Paul. The committee, chaired by George Latimer and Gary Cunningham, has heard a great deal of information about the steps that schools can take to motivate students and keep them from dropping out. Some effective practices include early intervention, smaller schools, stronger bonds between teachers and students, and the development of more engaging subject matter. The challenge that remains is securing the systemic adoption of these practices.

Clearly, both Minneapolis and Saint Paul urgently need to do something about the high numbers of students who do not make it to graduation. According to data from the state Department of Children, Families, and Learning, each year’s graduating class is missing about 1500 students who dropped out somewhere between ninth and twelfth grade.

For more information about this project, visit the League’s web page at http://www.citizensleague.net.

School completion committee studies for finals