



FOLLOW-UP TO:

**THE CASE FOR
EDUCATION
TRANSFORMATION**

Part I. The Disappointing
Reality of American
Education

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THE CASE FOR EDUCATION TRANSFORMATION

Part II. Opportunity

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Introduction

U.S. schools are failing too many Americans. As outlined in *The Case for Education Transformation, Part I*, achievement gaps between low-income minority and higher-income white children remain intractable.

Recent upticks in high school completion and college entry don't translate to college persistence and graduation. Even more insidious: Many schools aren't helping students to read at even basic levels. There are more than 191 million functionally illiterate adults in the U.S. The vast majority of them have attended public school in the U.S.

Myriad reforms have tried to address these issues. The federal Title One program, which started in 1965, targets funding to disadvantaged students. Beginning in the 1990s, the states (and later the federal government) required standards for core content areas and held schools accountable for outcomes. In the last decade, philanthropic organizations have invested billions of dollars in understanding “what works” in educational practice and how to replicate good teaching.

Some reforms have effected isolated change. They have also helped policymakers better understand how the American system of education sets up some students—mostly poor students—for failure. But none of these initiatives has dramatically impacted student achievement or life outcomes.

Until now, education reform has been about finding new tools to tweak an outdated system. Standards expose all students to the same content, but they don't help teachers personalize how they deliver content. Accountability systems shine light on low-performing schools, but they don't prevent districts from assigning students to them. Federal and state resources can put schools on a more level financial playing field, but they don't guarantee the equitable deployment of resources in districts or schools.

The truth is, there are unacceptable disparities in educational outcomes in this country because there are unacceptable disparities in educational opportunity. We no longer have the luxury of reforming the current system. We have to rethink it entirely. The first step is understanding what equality of educational opportunity entails.

This report, the second in the CER series, *The Case for Education Transformation*,

provides a brief history of the movement to fundamentally shift educational opportunity in the U.S. It goes on to explain what a new opportunity agenda should look like, providing evidence of positive impacts where real opportunity currently exists. The report concludes with a set of recommendations for federal and state policy makers, opportunity advocates, teachers, parents, and students.

The Roots of the Opportunity Agenda

Since the 1960s the phrase “equality of educational opportunity” has referred to school resources and inputs. With the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, the federal government assumed that equalizing the monetary resources that flow into schools would impact the outcomes that students achieve. Student and schools affected by poverty, the reasoning went, would need more resources to succeed.

Over time, however, it became clear that additional resources did little to affect uneven student outcomes. Even attaching various strings to those resources—such as guidance on how schools should deploy them—had negligible impacts.

What does “educational opportunity” mean? It means having the freedom to tailor education to the needs of individual students who are permitted access to that education regardless of family background or geography.

In the 1980s, roughly twenty years after the passage of the ESEA, a bold and diverse group of activists shed light on what was missing from educational efforts to provide more opportunity for students. Acknowledging that resources matter, they pointed out that other things mattered more.

They argued that no amount of money concentrated on schools changes the fact that poor families have no choice or voice when it comes to the schools their children attend. They knew that no government program or system of accountability had made schools more innovative, more engaging, or more responsive to community needs. These activists knew that outcomes matter. They also believed that achieving strong outcomes takes more than money.

Because districts almost always assign students to schools based on zip code, the system is biased toward the wealthy. Those who want a “better” or “different” school for their children can pick up and move to a community with more local resources to devote to schools.

Educator Ray Budde was one of those activists. When he proposed the idea of “chartering schools” in 1988, he envisioned that teachers would have the autonomy to deliver curricula that students needed how they needed. *“No one—not the superintendent or the principal or any central office supervisors—would stand between the school board and the teachers when it came to matters of instruction,”* wrote Budde.¹

Other education innovators took hold of Budde’s vision, realizing its potential to push decision making down to the school level but also to break the exclusive franchise that districts have on education. This group believed that all parents deserve to choose where their children attend school. They also assumed that if all parents—not just the wealthy—could “vote with their feet,” schools would respond in kind, providing the options that families desire and becoming more innovative.

Budde’s idea would come to be known as charter schools. Charter schools quickly became a major component of the agenda for increasing educational opportunity.

Charter schools are public schools of choice that receive enhanced autonomy for increased accountability. Charter schools exist under an agreement with an authorizer, who is responsible for ensuring that the schools meet the terms of a pre-determined agreement, or charter. When charters do not meet the criteria in their charter, authorizers are responsible for closing them.

Charter schools are public schools that do not limit attendance by zip code. They are free from most rules and regulations that govern other public schools, and they are accountable for results. Authorizers—independent boards, universities, non-profit entities, and state departments of education, for example—have the legal authority to open, manage, and monitor charters. Authorizers ensure that charter schools under their charge meet the tenets of a contract (or charter). Charters outline expectations for academic performance, school mission, and public requirements for health and safety.

Ted Kolderie was one of the earliest champions of charter schools. Since the 1960s he has worked to bring innovation to the public sector. He helped bring Budde's vision to life by helping to bring the nation's first charter school law into existence. The Minnesota legislature passed that law in 1991.

The charter school movement gained great momentum shortly after, with states like California, Massachusetts, and New York following Minnesota's lead. Today, 44 states have charter school laws, with varying degrees of strength.²

States with strong charter school laws provide charters with real autonomy to operate differently than district schools. In these places, charters have fostered high student achievement and innovative school models. They have also created a new generation of fierce advocates for educational change.

After Massachusetts passed its charter school law in 1993,³ educator Linda Brown started an incubator to support prospective charter school leaders with innovative ideas. She taught social workers, business people, teachers, and creative thinkers fresh out of college what it would take to start a charter school and how to build exciting schools by leveraging the autonomy that charter schools have under law.

Today, Boston is home to some of the highest performing charter schools in the nation, and Linda Brown and the leaders she has trained have built distinctive charter schools across the nation.

Yet charter schools are but one part of the opportunity-based education reform movement. Even as the idea of charter schools was coming to fruition in the late 80s and into the 90s, another group of opportunity pioneers was hard at work on providing a different kind of educational opportunity for students. It started in Milwaukee.

These pioneers also saw the need for the least advantaged families, especially minority families, to access schools that were tailored to student needs outside of the district system. In the late 1980s, Howard Fuller—former superintendent of Milwaukee Public Schools, a civil rights activist, a professor at Marquette University, and later founder of the Black Alliance for Educational Options—joined forces with democratic legislator Annette “Polly” Williams. Together they designed the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, and with the help of Republican Governor Tommy Thompson it became the first full parental choice or voucher program in the country. Under the program, families are permitted to direct a portion of the public funds allocated for their education to attend private schools of choice.

Milwaukee students were first able to use vouchers to attend private schools in the 1990-91 school year. In 1996, the program expanded to include religious schools. The battle to allow faith-based schools as a part of the program was hard-won. Opponents claimed that allowing students to use vouchers to attend faith-based schools violated the separation of church and state. The Wisconsin Supreme Court disagreed and upheld the program.⁴

Vouchers allow families to use public money allocated for education to attend a private school of their choice. Voucher programs go by various names, including Opportunity Scholarships in Washington, D.C.

In 2017, 75 percent of families in the Milwaukee Public School System are eligible for a voucher that gives them public funds to attend a private school. Nearly 28,000 Milwaukee children currently take advantage of the program. Fuller, Williams and others created their own revolution in Milwaukee, and from the 1990s on, it spread.

Advocates like Fannie Lewis, a Cleveland city councilwoman, looked to Milwaukee and fought to bring vouchers to their cities and states. Lewis would ultimately turn Cleveland's fight into a national one. Facing the same detractors who argued that vouchers violated the establishment clause, Cleveland's voucher program went all the way to the Supreme Court of the United States in 2002 in the case *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*. The Court decided that Cleveland's program and others like it are constitutional.⁵

Because of advocates like Fuller, Williams, and Lewis, opportunity-based reforms such as vouchers and opportunity scholarships (such as programs in North Carolina and Washington D.C) serve more than 178,624 students in 14 states and Washington, D.C.⁶

Charter schools and other educational choice programs are unlike any other education reform in American history because they turn the system on its head: they break out of the school district status quo, employing and fostering innovative school models. Parents and families, especially those who have traditionally not had access to good schools, clamor for these opportunity-based reforms: Nationwide demand for charter and other choice programs outstrips supply.

While unmet demand is troubling, the good news is these reforms prove that empowered parents affect change. More opportunity-based reforms are inevitable, even if the shape of these reforms continues to evolve. Technology, in particular,

is beginning to drive how education change advocates and parents think about educational opportunity.

In a growing number of states, the opportunity to attend school virtually provides a diverse group of students—many of whom are disengaged from traditional schools—to encounter learning in new ways. Even in traditional brick and mortar schools, teachers can leverage technology to tailor learning to very specific student needs. Computers provide real-time data to teachers, helping them to quickly understand students' challenges so they can fill learning gaps. It also allows teachers to differentiate learning so that those who need an extra challenge can have it.

Online schooling leverages technology to allow students to attend school without going to a traditional school building. Many serve students with special needs who cannot attend traditional schools.

Blended learning combines face-to-face instruction with online learning. It can take place in a variety of environments, inside and outside of brick and mortar schools.

Charter schools have been at the forefront of leveraging technology in very distinctive ways, mainly because they have the ability to be nimble. Free from regulations that hinder district schools, some charters are able to easily experiment with options that produce dramatic results for students. The same flexibility gives many charters increased opportunities to forge partnerships that result in early college opportunities for high school students or vocational certifications targeted to student interests.

By focusing on providing new opportunities for students, charter schools, choice programs, and other personalized learning initiatives that leverage technology are paving the way for more individualized learning. Without the chance for families and students to actively choose the school experience that is right for them, true opportunity does not exist.

Opportunity-Based Reforms provide families and students with a “diverse variety of educational programs, learning experiences, instructional approaches, and academic-support strategies that are intended to address the distinct learning needs, interests, aspirations, or cultural backgrounds of individual students.”

Of course, not all opportunities will produce the outcomes that families and students desire. This is why accountability is a necessary complement to choice and autonomy. Families and students—the end users of schools—are poised to hold schools accountable. When a model doesn’t work, or when an educational opportunity doesn’t deliver on its promise, parents can and do leave.

A close second to this first line of accountability is outcomes data. Researchers now have more than a decade of evidence about how opportunity-based reforms help students achieve post-secondary and career success. Understanding what works supports the notion that less regulation, more flexibility, and the opportunity to innovate make a difference.

The research makes a compelling argument for pursuing the opportunity agenda more vigorously. As the first paper in this series suggested, there is no time to waste.

Increased Opportunity Leads to Increased Achievement

The first report in this series, *The Case for Education Transformation, Part I*, documented the disappointing reality of American education. Slight upticks in high school graduation and college enrollment are encouraging, until a deeper look reveals that college graduation rates are low overall and even more so for minority students.

Moreover, slight increases in high school graduation become questionable when stagnant student achievement and low literacy rates are taken into account. Sixty-three percent of 12th graders scored below proficient on the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading examination,⁷ but many of those students still received high school diplomas (the national graduation rate was 83 percent in 2016).⁸ These contradictory data beg the question: How high are standards for high school graduation?

But within this disappointing realization is a glimmer of hope. Research shows that pockets of schools in the U.S. are doing extremely well by students, and many of

them serve the most disadvantaged among us. A great number of these schools have one thing in common: they are the products of or participate in opportunity-based reforms.

Representatives of the status quo rarely discuss data about the impacts of opportunity-based reforms, and when they do they like to call the results on these reforms “mixed.” But this is misleading, at best. The most reliable studies, those that use a “gold standard” called the randomized control trial (RCT), find positive effects.

Randomized control trials (RCTs) are a gold standard. In studies of schools, they compare students who took advantage of a program to those who were motivated to do so but did not. For example, in the context of charter schools, RCTs consider students who applied for a charter school lottery but were not admitted to those who applied to the lottery and were admitted.

Educational Choice & Opportunity

In 2016, Greg Forster⁹ performed a meta-analysis of 18 studies of school choice programs that used a randomized approach. All of the studies sought to understand the impact of these programs on academic outcomes: 14 of the 18 studies found positive impacts.

Of the studies that Forster includes in his analysis, six were of the Milwaukee parental choice program—the oldest in the country. All of the studies find positive academic effects for the participants, and Forster suggests that the studies erred on the side of underreporting positive effects on students.

Another notable study concerns Ohio’s Ed Choice Scholarship program, which allows students in schools rated a D or F for three consecutive years to attend a private school of choice. In that study Matthew Carr found that schools eligible for private scholarships made greater year-to-year test score improvements even compared with low-performing schools labeled as failing by the state that were not eligible.”¹⁰

And the impacts of school choice programs aren’t on participant test scores alone. In 2013, Patrick Wolfe et. al¹¹ conducted an RCT analysis of Washington, D.C.’s Opportunity Scholarship Program. They found “suggestive evidence” of a positive impact on reading scores and “compelling evidence” that participants were more

likely to graduate from high school than their similarly motivated peers who did not participate in the study.

What about college? Do students who take advantage of vouchers or scholarships simply graduate high school at greater rates or do they benefit from college as well?

When Chingos and Peterson examined the long-term results of a privately funded scholarship program in New York City, they found that students who accepted vouchers were more likely to turn their high school diploma into a college experience. The effect was disproportionately positive for black students: “black students who were offered vouchers in elementary school were 20 percent more likely to go on to college, 25 percent more likely to attend college full time, and 130 percent more likely to attend a selective four-year college.”¹²

The most recent NAEP results also speak to the impact that vouchers can have on student achievement. In 2017, overall student results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress were disappointing, with most states showing little to know growth in fourth- and eighth-grade math and reading. Florida, however, was called a “bright spot,” boasting significant gains in both subject-areas and grades. Even the most disadvantaged students in Florida showed incredible growth.¹³

To what do policymakers attribute Florida’s growth? Florida has made great investments in its schools and has a strong accountability system. It is also impossible to ignore the investments that Florida has made in opportunity-based reforms. Florida has four private school choice programs, including vouchers for special education students and a tuition tax credit program that has some of the highest rates of participation of any tax credit program in the country.¹⁴

As policymakers begin to understand some of the positive impacts of private school choice, some are looking for additional ways to provide parents with more flexibility. Education savings accounts (ESAs) act like a voucher, and more.

Education savings accounts (ESAs) “allow parents to withdraw their children from public district or charter schools and receive a deposit of public funds into government-authorized savings accounts with restricted, but multiple uses.” In some places, these accounts allow families to access private schools, online learning programs, and private tutoring. They might also be used to offset the cost of community college and other higher education services and fees.¹⁵

They are a relatively new initiative, but education savings accounts are an increasingly popular way to enhance opportunity for families of all backgrounds.

Six states currently have ESA programs and several of those were authorized in the past three years.

Programs that facilitate private school choice may produce strong academic results, but other opportunity-based reforms impact more students. Charter schools have expanded to 44 states in the last 20 years. When they operate in the right policy environments—with operational autonomy, few regulations, and outcomes-based accountability—they produce excellent results.

Charter Schools & Opportunity

Researchers have conducted a number of RCT studies of charter schools in specific locales. A 2009 study of New York City charter schools found that “A student who attended New York City’s charters in all grades K-8 “would close about 86 percent of the ‘Scarsdale-Harlem achievement gap’ in math and 66 percent of the achievement gap in English.”¹⁶ A similar study of Boston’s charter schools in the same year found that Boston’s charter middle schools “increased student performance by .5 standard deviations, the same as moving from the 50th to the 69th percentile in student performance. This is roughly half the size of the black-white achievement gap.”¹⁷

And an increasingly wide swath of students is feeling the positive impact of charter schools, including students with an array of special educational needs. In Boston, Massachusetts, a 2015 study found not only that students with special needs are enrolling in charters at higher rates than ever before but also that charters produce “large positive effects for math and English state exam scores for special needs students.” Those effects exceed those found in district schools.¹⁸

The positive effects of charter schools persist after students have left high school. Studies show both private school choice programs and charter schools impact high school graduation and college-going rates. A 2013 study of charter schools in Boston found that “attendance at one of Boston’s charter high schools increases pass rates on the state graduation exam,” facilitates “sharp gains” in SAT math scores, and “doubles the likelihood that students will sit for Advanced Placement examinations.”

A 2016 study of Florida’s charter schools went even further, finding not only that “students attending charter schools are more likely to graduate high school and enroll in college,” but also that “students attending charter high schools are more likely to persist in college, and that in their mid-20s they experience higher earnings—about 12 percent higher than students who attended charter middle schools but not charter high schools.”¹⁹

The Disappointing Reality of the Status Quo

63 percent of 12th graders score below proficient in reading

BUT...

83 percent of students graduate high school, nationally

BUT...

19 percent of low-income students who enroll in college graduate

BUT...

Outcomes of Opportunity-Based Reforms

New York City's charter schools close 66 percent of the achievement gap in English language arts

14 out of 18 studies of private school choice find positive academic effects for voucher recipients

Attendance at one of Boston's charter high schools increases pass rates on the state graduation exam and "doubles the likelihood that students will sit for Advanced Placement examinations"

Participants in Washington, D.C.'s Opportunity Scholarship Program were more likely to graduate high school than their similarly motivated peers

Students attending charter high schools in Florida are more likely to graduate from college

Black students who were offered vouchers in elementary school were 20 percent more likely to go on to college, 25 percent more likely to attend college full time, and 130 percent more likely to attend a selective four-year college

Just as they affirmed the effectiveness of private school choice programs in Florida, the 2017 NAEP results also point to the positive impacts of sound charter school legislation. Washington, D.C. has one of the strongest charter school laws in the country and the number of students enrolled in district schools and charter schools is nearly the same. In a year where scores in most places were stagnant, students in D.C. saw great gains.

On all four NAEP exams, DCPS has improved since 2007. D.C. outpaces “all the other 26 districts that participate in the Trial Urban District Assessment, as well as the national average for cities with more than 250,000 residents.”²⁰

DC’s closest competitors on NAEP, New Orleans and Chicago, have also widely embraced charters as a tool for education reform, though both have recently allowed regulations that hamper charter school growth and autonomy to impact their respective charter sectors.

Other charter sectors, such as Arizona, continue to show great gains over their district counterparts on NAEP.²¹ NAEP is a powerful measure of the rigor and quality of education opportunities that students across the country receive. In recent years, it has shown that charter schools in states across the nation have been a mechanism for meaningful education reform.

Laws creating private and public school choices are opening up new, high quality education opportunities for all Americans, especially those who need them most. Moreover, there is evidence that these programs positively impact students who remain in district schools. 22 of 23 studies conducted since 2009 show that the presence of choice in a given locale positively impacts traditional public schools. The remaining study found no impact. According to Forster (2016), “no empirical study has ever found that choice negatively impacts public schools.”²²

Personalized Learning for Different Opportunities

Educational choice was the first wave the opportunity agenda created in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and they continue to be a mainstay of opportunity-based reforms. But by 2018 it became clear that many successful schools across all schooling sectors—charter, independent, or traditional district—are delivering educational content with a new lens: they are personalizing learning and putting the student at the center of that learning.

The term “personalized learning” can be difficult to understand because it is used broadly and often to describe tools for learning, rather than an approach. Personalized learning is a methodology—a way of conceiving and delivering a curriculum that puts the individual at the center.

In this approach, “learners are active participants in their learning as they gradually become owners of it and learning itself is seen as an engaging and exciting process. Each child’s interests, passions, dreams, skills, and needs shape his or her learning experience and drive the commitments and actions of the adults and communities supporting him or her.”²³

Adults that leverage a personalized learning method consider a student's strengths, weaknesses, needs, and motivations. They assume that not all students in a class will interact with the same curricula at the same time or in the same way.²⁴ They also acknowledge that different learners face different challenges to learning, whether in health, safety, economic situation, emotional wellbeing, social interactions, or competency development. They ensure that a student's current life situation does not constrain the breadth or depth of learning.²⁵

Personalized approaches to learning have become more common in schools as technology has become better, cheaper, and more accessible, but personalized learning is not dependent upon technology. In fact, the Montessori approach to education, which has been used for more than 100 years in some places, could be called personalized learning. When educators deploy technology well, it can greatly enhance personalized approaches to learning. This is especially true in traditional school settings, where adults group students according to age and put them together in classrooms.

At its core, personalized learning is an opportunity-based reform. This particular reform interacts well with other opportunity-based reforms, such as charter schools. When charter schools have the operational autonomy to set budgets, assemble staff, and conceive and deliver curricula as they see fit, they are well poised to embrace innovative approaches to personalizing learning.

Summit Public Schools in California has become well known for its personalized approach. Summit's schools create an individualized learning plan for every student and then leverage teachers, technology, and other resources to enable students to execute those plans with an "adult mentor" and coach.²⁶ Summit has also helped schools across the country (district, charter, and independent) implement its approach, through The Summit Learning Program. "In the 2017-18 school year, that program includes 330 schools; 2,450 teachers, and 54,230 students in 40 states."²⁷

Research on the effectiveness of personalized learning is scanty, in part because the term is so broad and the modern movement so young. Summit has issued its own white paper on its approach, which attributes the effectiveness of the model to its student-centered approach, empowering effective teachers, and an "evidence-based" curriculum, rooted in relevant research. In brief, the report suggests that the technology that Summit leverages is secondary to understanding the science of how people learn and providing evidence that learning is taking place.²⁸

Summit Public Schools leverages technology for a student-centered approach to learning; but Summit finds that the technology it employs to personalize learning is secondary to understanding the science of how people learn and providing evidence that learning is taking place.

Other researchers have looked at the effectiveness of personalized approaches to learning more broadly. A 2015 RAND study found “11,000 students at 62 schools trying out personalized-learning approaches made greater gains in math and reading than similar students at more traditional schools.” Though informative about the potential impact of personalized approaches, this study suggests little about why it works or how to ensure that personalization work well.²⁹

Various case studies funded by the U.S. Department of Education under Race to the Top have produced some descriptions of what does and does not facilitate effective personalized learning. The largely anecdotal evidence the case studies have produced suggests that personalized learning approaches have the potential to help students achieve excellent outcomes, but that potential depends upon implementation.

A specific platform or technology might be very effective in one setting but less effective in another. Rigorous curricula, a student-centered approach, and highly skilled teachers and mentors make all the difference to high quality learning experiences.

Personalized learning bucks the status quo by focusing on new opportunities for individuals to learn as opposed to expecting individuals to conform to existing opportunities.

The greatest promise of personalized learning could be the opportunity it presents to re-conceive the classroom, especially for those who have disengaged from traditional schools. Personalization means support for learners who struggle with content, learners who require an additional challenge, and every learner in-between. It also means that adults can prioritize teaching to the individual instead of “teaching to the middle,” especially when technology can free them from some of the constraints of the traditional classroom.

Online Learning & Skills-Based Reforms

Some, though not all, technology-based reforms fall under the umbrella of personalized learning. A number of education reforms that leverage technology have stemmed from a need to rethink post-secondary education. In a time when the cost of traditional higher education is increasingly prohibitive, online learning is among the most popular of those reforms.

The concept of online learning began in higher education and has been continuously refined over the years. Online learning can encompass everything from one-off courses, entire degrees earned online, or some version of a “bootcamp.” Bootcamps come in various forms (fully online, blended, and face-to-face) but have two things in common: 1) they provide a compressed curricula that shortens the time it takes a participant to enter the job market and 2) they focus on the development of specific job-related skills in a variety of domains.³⁰

The higher education community has heavily scrutinized online learning, particularly in recent years. An emerging group of for-profit and non-profit institutions offer traditional degrees fully online, and many traditional universities incorporate some online offerings. In general, however, established institutions of higher education have been reluctant to adopt robust online offerings because of a general skepticism about their effectiveness. Recent research out of MIT suggests that skepticism may not be warranted.

MIT researchers found that the “improvements” that students in online classes make is equal to or better than that of their peers in traditional, face-to-face classes. Additionally, the idea that those who benefit from online courses will disproportionately be those who are already educated or have had superior educational opportunities may not have merit. The MIT study, which compared students of diverse backgrounds in face-to-face and online math and physics classes, found that “all cohorts learned equally . . . whether compared on the basis of level of education, degree of preparation in math and physics, or other measures.”³¹

The MIT study specifically looked at Massive Open Online Courses, or MOOCs. MOOCs are one part of a new crop of opportunity-based reforms that leverage technology. They equalize access to higher education by making content that was once available only to enrolled students available to all.

Not all studies of online learning in higher education demonstrate the positive outcomes that MIT found. A recent study of online learning at DeVry University showed negative effects for students in online, compared to face-to-face courses, and some of those effects were concentrated on students who entered the courses

with low GPAs.³²

However, the authors of the study caution that the results of their study should “not necessarily lead to the conclusion that on-line course taking should be discouraged.” On the contrary, they note: “online courses provide access to students who would never have had the opportunity or inclination to take a class in person.”

In short, online learning is new and innovators, entrepreneurs, and teachers will continue to refine methods that maximize learning outcomes. In the meantime, the opportunity for all students to access education without attending a brick and mortar school or, in many cases, having prior degrees or qualifications is an equalizing force. Policy makers are also beginning to see the power of online learning as an equalizing force in K-12 education.

K-12 institutions are using online learning in many ways, but the most common are to help students who perform on two different ends of the outcomes spectrum. On one end, students in small schools with few course offerings can use online learning platforms to access Advanced Placement Courses and other challenging options. On the other end, district and non-district schools are leveraging technology to help students who have been disengaged from school to complete coursework and recover missed credits. In both cases, technology is allowing students access to opportunities they wouldn't otherwise have.³³

Full-time virtual schools often cater to the most disenfranchised: students who experience illness that prevents them from attending school, students who have disengaged from the traditional school system for some reason, or students who prefer to forge their own learning paths. These options are growing throughout the U.S., and many states are leveraging other opportunity-based reforms to execute them. Online charter schools, for example, are becoming increasingly popular in many states.

Regional educational laboratories in the U.S. recently conducted three major studies of online learning in K-12 settings. The data generally show that teacher training and the quality of materials available to online learners make a difference in student outcomes.³⁴

As full-time online learning options gain in popularity, looking to blended learning options in some K-12 settings will enhance success. The blended learning model combines face-to-face with online learning to differentiate and (in some cases) personalize learning. With guidance from teachers, students can leverage technology to move through a curriculum at their own pace. Teachers can also

leverage technology to receive more immediate feedback about student progress and learning needs.

A recent meta-analysis shows that thirteen of fifteen high-quality studies of blended learning in the K-12 setting find statistically significant and positive impacts on student outcomes. Those outcomes include (among others) academic motivation, attendance, course completion, course grades, and end-of-course assessments.³⁵

And successful K-12 schools are using blended learning for teacher professional development (PD) as well. Harnessing the power of the Internet, schools can go beyond traditional PD, helping teachers to learn from their colleagues nationally and even worldwide.

It is no coincidence that organizations garnering the most attention for high-quality blended learning tend to be charter networks like Rocketship and Carpe Diem. These organizations have used their autonomies to transform entire school models with blended learning approaches. They also help students to achieve stellar outcomes.³⁶

Thus, one opportunity-based reform has produced innovations that have fostered another. This snowball effect is the main reason why forging ahead with a new opportunity agenda is so important.

Forging Ahead with the New Opportunity Agenda

The first paper in this series documented painfully low literacy rates among Americans. It also revealed how increasingly low expectations for what Americans know and should be able to do masquerade as increased high school graduation and college-going rates.

The status quo education establishment not only sets a very low bar for receiving a high school diploma, it fails to provide too many Americans—especially the most disenfranchised—with the tools they need to meet that bar. Many of those who do have the tools still struggle to succeed because the tools that they have are rarely customized to individual needs.

Opportunity-based reforms are a bright spot in an otherwise bleak educational landscape. Gold standard data show that opportunity-based reforms that lead to the creation of charter schools, private school choice programs or opportunity scholarships, and personalized learning help students achieve better outcomes. It's all about customization. New or reimagined schooling facilitates access to rigorous

BY THE NUMBERS: Demand for Choice Programs

1M**students on charter school waiting lists nationwide****141K****students on charter school waiting lists in Texas****158K****students on charter school waiting lists in California****28,702****students using vouchers in Milwaukee, Wisconsin****35,458****students using choice scholarships in Indiana**

21st-century content for more students—especially the least privileged. Access not only makes education more equitable, it gives students who benefit a hope of competing in a rapidly changing economy.

There is clear and growing demand for more innovations and opportunities, and growing need. All choice programs have long waiting lists. As online and blended learning programs become more popular, they also become more refined. So that all communities can participate in their benefits, we must ensure that the 44 percent of schools in this country (mostly in rural areas) that do not currently have access to broadband get it.³⁷

Despite increased demand, stakeholders who pioneered new opportunities for students are experiencing challenges to growth: while school choice scholarship programs have expanded, poorly designed laws and charter school caps that appease anti-charter interest groups have stalled the expansion and quality of the movement.

In part, the education reform community is itself to blame. Concessions to anti-opportunity interest groups (like teachers' unions) have taken the teeth out of too many opportunity-based policies. Likewise, attempts to overregulate opportunity-based reforms, heavily monitoring them for an increased number of inputs and outputs, have discouraged entrepreneurial thinkers from entering the education sector. They have also forced existing schools to look more and more like the traditional schools and districts they were meant to replace.

Finally, a healthy skepticism of how to apply technology in the K-12 setting has spiraled into a denouncement of much-needed online learning options in too many places. Organizations that have had the freedom to innovate are setting the standard in the fields of online or blended learning. But in other areas where opportunity-based reforms are limited, policies prevent students—especially the most vulnerable—from accessing effective, technology-based alternatives.

Opportunity based reforms must be about innovation, experimentation, autonomy, and accountability. None of these things should outweigh or unduly influence any other. It is time to establish a New Opportunity Agenda, one that is laser-focused on addressing the current, disappointing reality of American education. The following recommendations aim to do that.

Recommendations for the New Opportunity Agenda

Break down the structural and regulatory barriers that inhibit access to existing and future opportunity-based reforms.

For a quarter-century, reformers have struggled to provide a critical mass of students access to opportunity-based reforms. In too many places, the status quo educational establishment has successfully painted charter schools, private school choice programs, and other opportunity-based reforms as detrimental to public education. But the data prove this claim false: when these reforms directly benefit students, outcomes are better. Moreover, many of these reforms have positively influenced outcomes in traditional schools.

Yet too many states and localities erect structural and regulatory barriers, in the form of weak laws and outdated measures of accountability, that prevent students from accessing and benefiting from high-quality opportunity-based options. These localities need to take a long hard look at the disappointing reality of education in this country and the reality of what opportunity-based reforms can do to address the gaping educational gaps that persist in the U.S.

Locate existing innovative models, invest in them, and leverage them to create new opportunities for reform.

Technology provides exciting new possibilities for educational innovation, especially with regard to personalized learning. This potential is unlike many of the opportunity-based reforms that have come before. Whereas reforms like charter schools and vouchers helped to re-envision publicly-funded education, technology has the potential to completely upend traditional conceptions of school.

Policymakers and reformers should capture information about innovative models and intelligently invest in them to provide access to as many students as possible. Furthermore, they should widely disseminate information about new models of learning with the aim of helping new innovators to improve upon existing models and ideas.

No longer should we think of “best practices” as the only practices worthy of sharing. Instead, we should carefully evaluate the impacts of new models and ideas and look to one another to constantly improve upon those that show promise. Standard approaches to schooling and the government regulations that often bind them should not stand in the way of innovation. Instead, policymakers should be willing to let educational entrepreneurs experiment in settings where they are highly accountable to families and students. What works for one student or community may not work in another. Knowing what works for each learner should be the focus.

Focus on customizing learning for individuals instead of less-than-rigorous blanket standards for all.

As education becomes increasingly personalized, so much our methods for measuring success. The standards and accountability mechanisms of the 1990s served the important purpose of shining a light on the inequities that have always been inherent in the American system of education. But blanket standards and standardized tests are no longer the best way to understand what students know and can do. In fact, in search of equal access for all, they have set a very low bar for too many students.

When education is customized to individual needs, policymakers and educators have to have flexibility to prove that education is occurring and occurring at a meaningful pace. Standards for what students should be able to do may have a place, but they may no longer be delineated by grade levels, or even content areas. Furthermore, standardized tests may be one of many appropriate measures for holding schools, educators, and learners accountable. A greater focus on allowing learners to display skills (as opposed to knowledge) may be appropriate in many cases. As we reconceive approaches to learning we should also be open to reconsidering new ways for proving that learning is occurring.

Never lose sight of the real education gaps that need to be filled.

Too many Americans suffer from a lack of very basic education and skills. 191 million Americans are functionally illiterate. Most American students don't reach math or reading proficiency on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The New Opportunity Agenda is about all Americans, not just those in the K-12 system or those who have access to the opportunity-based reforms of the last 25 years.

To expand opportunity to all Americans will take political will and resources. Rural communities suffer from a lack of broadband access. They also disproportionately suffer from low literacy rates and low high-school graduation rates. Poor and minority communities (the main beneficiaries of the opportunity-based reforms of the 1990s and 2000s) still suffer from inadequate access to innovative school options that might be right down the street.

Educational innovations, such as technology-based approaches to personalized learning could open up new opportunities and skills for those who have been shut out of traditional education and for those who have failed to thrive in the traditional establishment. It is time to put the structures and resources in place to bring new knowledge and skills to a national workforce that is currently ill-equipped for a changing economy.

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