

Teacher Empowerment, Student Choice, and Equity in School Districts: A Non-Bureaucratic Alternative for School Organization and Accountability

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"It's time to admit that public education operates like a planned economy, a bureaucratic system in which ... there are few incentives for innovation and productivity. It's no surprise that our school system doesn't improve"

– Albert Shanker, former president of the American Federation of Teachers

Synopsis

We are at a critical juncture in the history of education in the United States. There are powerful forces that want to replace the public education system with a privatized one. While there are advantages and disadvantages with any system, many are concerned about the inequities that a privatized system would likely engender, while others are concerned that, because education is a public good – one that does not benefit just the individual who receives it, but also that individual's family, community, state, and country – community influence over the schools and what they teach is an important feature that a privatized system would lack.

Fortunately, it is not an either/or choice between public schools and private schools as we know them. We can design a system that combines the best aspects of public and private schools. We can design a system in which there is choice and competition, but at the same time greater equity, teacher professionalism, and community involvement and ownership.

This paper offers 12 principles that could guide the design of such a system. These principles are offered not as THE solution, but as a starting point for conversations about the design of alternative solutions. We expect and encourage different states to explore different solutions that can be compared with each other. The main point is that we need to move beyond the current adversarial positions that are polarizing education, toward a collaborative process of designing a system that addresses the best aspects of each position. To truly improve education, we need a design process, not a decision-making process. It is our hope that state legislatures across the country will rise to this challenge.

The Problem

There is a great deal of contention in public education around vouchers, choice, accountability systems, teacher quality, equity, and quality of education. Some of the concerns include:

- There is much disagreement between people who want more **competition** in education and those who want more **equity**.
- There is much disagreement between people who want more **accountability** and those who want more **autonomy** and **flexibility** for educators.
- Teachers are treated more like **assembly-line workers** than **professionals**.
- Teachers are given **responsibility without authority** – they are disempowered, having little control over resources and little control over who they work with.
- Teachers feel **undervalued and overworked** and often leave the profession early.
- There is a severe **shortage** of excellent teachers.
- Bureaucratic (top-down) **accountability** systems (e.g., high-stakes testing) are not delivering wide-ranging improvements in student learning and have negative side effects.
- Bureaucracy is rigid, not **responsive** to the needs of students, teachers, or parents.
- Bureaucracy is **expensive**.
- Bureaucracy impedes **innovation** and flexibility.
- Students and parents have little **choice** of school, let alone teacher.
- Many slower learners are being **left behind**, while many faster learners are being **held back** from learning up to their potential.

These contentious problems may seem overwhelming and insurmountable, yet we propose there is a very feasible and affordable solution – one that creates common ground between the warring factions.

The current paradigm of education is dominated by top-down, bureaucratic decision-making structures, a focus on compliance (i.e., disempowerment of both teachers and students), rigidity, seniority, political influence, and little-to-no choice for students or teachers.

In this report, we propose a fundamentally different organizational structure and decision-making system that bridge the divide between those who want more competition and those who want more equity, diversity, and professionalism in education. Key features of this system, described below, include small teacher-led schools, choice for students and teachers, greater equity, improved accountability to those who matter most, greater incentives for excellence and innovation, and stronger relationships between teachers and parents and other community members.

Toward the Solution

Building on work by Reigeluth and Karnopp (2013), we propose 12 principles for an educational system that addresses the problems listed above. These principles are organized into four themes: 1) schools as “firms”, 2) district administrative system as servant, not master, 3) district and state governance structures that serve rather than control, and 4) other possible structures. These principles are offered not as THE solution, but as a starting point for conversations about the design of alternative solutions.

1. Schools as “Firms”

Professionals in most walks of life organize into “firms,” such as those for architecture, accounting, and law. They run their firms, including all managerial decisions. Those firms tend to be small, avoiding the need for expensive bureaucracy. The professionals are not only responsible, but also empowered, to serve the best interests of their clients. Could such an organizational structure work in public education?

In fact, it is *already* working in public education. The Minnesota New Country School was established in Henderson, MN, in 1994 by about 10 teachers who wanted to collectively run their own school. They were able to do so as a public charter school, but such a school could become the norm *within* public school districts, with some restructuring of the district. The survival of the Minnesota New Country School depends on attracting enough students, just as an architectural firm depends on attracting enough clients. The teachers choose their leader (usually called a director or lead teacher rather than principal), who is also primarily a teacher, but most of the management is done by the teachers in various committees (personnel, finance, curriculum & standards, operations, public relations, and a few others), sometimes with the help of an administrator whom the teachers hire. (With educational firms located *within* a restructured school district, the central office could be contracted by the firm to carry out many of these functions.) This school (and many others in the EdVisions network - <http://edvisions.org>) is a **professional model** of teaching, rather than a **supervisory** (labor-management) **model**. This school was recognized as one of the top eight charter schools in the country by the US Department of Education, Office of Innovation and Improvement, in 2006.

This teacher-led-school approach was so successful that Ted Kolderie of Education | Evolving and Barnett Berry of the Center for Teaching Quality created the Teacher-Powered School Initiative in 2014 (see www.teacherpowered.org). This initiative helps schools to form or convert into ones that are collaboratively designed and run by teachers. As of 2016, there were more than 90 teacher-powered schools in 18 states, and another 30 were under development (Berry & Ferris-Berg, 2016). More than half of these schools are in school districts.

Some of the major features of this professional kind of organizational structure are:

- Teachers have the **authority** as well as responsibility to best meet each of their students’ individual needs. Their authority includes the power to set the mission of their school, build a structure that supports their mission, and allocate resources as needed to fulfill the mission.
- Teachers can decide which other **teachers to work with**.
- Teachers are accountable directly to their individual students and their parents (**choice-based accountability**), rather than indirectly to them through a bureaucracy and elected officials (bureaucracy-based accountability).
- **Flexibility** and **innovation** are not impeded by an expensive, slow bureaucracy.
- Students and parents **choose** not only a school, but also a **teacher**.
- They are public schools, so they cannot charge any tuition or decide who to admit, so all students have **equal access**.

But “the devil is in the details,” as they say. And teacher-led schools are relatively new. So how are they likely to evolve, or more importantly, how *should* they evolve, to best serve their students, parents, and community? We offer the following three principles for educators and all other educational stakeholders to consider.

Principle 1: Small Teacher-Led Schools

Teachers run their small schools, including hiring, firing, budgeting, and other managerial decisions.

In architecture and law, professionals run their own firms. In a similar way, teachers in this new organizational structure for education own and run their public schools – *within* a school district. Teachers band together at any time to create small schools, typically three to twelve teachers each, that are licensed (or chartered) by the school district and rent space from the district. Each such educational firm, or **edfirm** for short, functions like an independent contractor within the school district (with some requirements, to ensure much greater equity than is typical in public schools today) and is not controlled by the district office.

Facilities. In larger traditional school buildings, each edfirm rents a wing or floor of the building from the district and typically shares some facilities, such as the gym, library, and cafeteria. Anywhere from one to 20 edfirms are located in a single building, depending on its size. New educational buildings have a very different design that places shared facilities in a central area, like the hub of a wheel, surrounded by an edfirm on each spoke of the wheel.

Staff. An edfirm may have some teachers who are “partners” and others who are “earning their stripes,” so to speak, as in law firms. The teachers may also choose to hire teacher interns, teacher assistants, other staff, and volunteers of various kinds. The teachers have full responsibility for the success of their edfirm and a high level of authority for meeting that responsibility.

Teacher choice. A teacher can try to move to a different edfirm at any time, and teachers can choose their focus area and the developmental level of their students. (A developmental level typically spans three or four years in a child’s life.) The new system removes these decisions from the bureaucracy-based decision-making process. Also, the teachers in an edfirm may decide that each teacher’s pay will vary in part according to the number of students each has. Teachers who want a lighter load could be allowed to choose the number of their students, recognizing that opting for fewer students will reduce their salary.

Autonomy. The teachers in an edfirm have full authority to decide how they spend their revenue, including the amount of space they rent from the school district, the nature and amount of learning resources they buy or rent, and the number and types of staff they hire. In this regard, edfirms are much like a public charter school or private school, but are “owned” by the teachers (instead of a board of trustees) and are licensed by a school district.

Advisory board. Each edfirm has an advisory board made up primarily of their students’ parents but may also include community members who are committed to education. The board is made up of volunteers who are either appointed by the teachers or elected by the parents. The board provides advice and assistance to the edfirm.

Principle 2: Choice for Students and Parents – with Greater Equity

No school can turn students away or charge extra.

When a student is about to enter a new developmental level, the student or her parent(s) requests, in order of preference, their rank-ordered choice of three teachers, which could be in the same or different edfirms. Alternatively, the choice could be among edfirms (which are far more diverse than current schools), with the edfirm assigning the student to a teacher. An independent **Family Support Agency** (described under Principle 6, “Administrative Structures”) provides information and

assistance to parents to help them make the best decision for each child, or to make it for them if they don't care, thereby enhancing equity. Student choices are made with the understanding that different kinds of teachers (and edfirms) are better for different kinds of students. With several edfirms in a single school building, parents and students have choice without needing to leave their neighborhood school. Furthermore, teachers give students and their parents some choice about what to learn and how to learn it, to develop students' unique talents and interests, as well as their self-directed learning skills.

Quality vs. popularity. The Family Support Agency helps to keep this system of student choice and incentive bonuses (described under Principle 3) from being a popularity contest by providing *Consumer Reports* style ratings on all teachers and edfirms. Furthermore, it is well recognized that education is a public good, meaning it does not just benefit the student who receives it, but also benefits the whole community and state through lower crime rate, greater economic development, more taxes received, and much more. Therefore, there is a **rating mechanism** that allows other community beneficiaries of education, such as employers and senior citizens, to provide input to inform student/parent choices. This is done with a product rating system, similar to that used by Amazon,[®] for rating individual teachers and/or their edfirms, which influences students' or parents' selection of teachers.

Equal access and diversity. Each edfirm decides how many students to accept each year, but it does not decide which ones to accept. This policy ensures that students have equal access to the best schools for them. "Which ones" is decided by a stratified random lottery that maximizes the number of first choices filled district-wide, within the constraints of balance guidelines regarding race, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and whatever other diversity factors the community or state values.

Resource allocation. Public funds follow each student to whatever edfirm they attend. The revenue per child is equal across all edfirms for a given developmental level, except for supplements for special-needs children and disadvantaged socio-economic status. The revenue per child is higher at higher developmental levels. Interestingly, according to *Education Week* (Feb. 14, 2018):

The U.S. Department of Education is officially opening up the Weighted Student Funding Pilot in the Every Student Succeeds Act. ... Under the funding pilot, participating districts can combine federal, state, and local dollars into a single funding stream tied to individual students. English-language learners, poor children, and students in special education – who cost more to educate – would carry with them more money than other students. (p. 4)

Unlike that program, we advocate that those monies only follow students to *public schools* for the simple reason that private schools typically have admissions criteria and additional tuition that bar disadvantaged students from attending.*

Principle 3. Innovation and Incentives

Better edfirms receive resources to grow, while worse ones fade away.

The higher the demand for an edfirm's teachers (i.e., the weighted average number of first-, second-, and third-choice requests by students), the higher the **incentive bonus** an edfirm receives from

* If a private school were to give all applicants an equal chance of being admitted, regardless of ability, disability, race, ethnicity, religion, etc., and were to not charge anything beyond the public funds that follow each student, then such a school could, in our view, be included in the program.

the state (as a percentage of its per-student revenues). This provides an incentive for teachers in an edfirm to help each other improve, to innovate, and to adapt to the ever-evolving educational needs of their community.

Teachers lead. The incentive bonus is a pool of money the teachers collectively decide what to do with. For example, they could purchase **more learning resources** to improve the quality of education and/or leverage teacher time. Or they could choose to hire **more assistants** or other support staff, allowing high-demand edfirms to mentor assistant teachers to eventually become members of the district's pool of experienced teachers from which students can choose, and also providing a way for successful edfirms to take on more students. Or the teachers could choose to put a certain percentage of the incentive bonus to **pay its teachers more** (and reduce the rate of teacher turnover that hurts students), as happens in other professions where the more successful professionals get to charge their clients more. A teacher's income is no longer based on seniority but on performance as perceived collectively by one's colleagues in the edfirm. Teachers can also decide to move to a different edfirm, even in a different school district, without the current problem of losing seniority. This provides much greater choice for teachers.

Non-bureaucratic decision making. Conversely, low demand for an edfirm reduces its enrollment and revenue, thereby forcing it to reduce the number of teachers or their incomes, much like an architectural or law firm would do. Ineffective teachers, therefore, do not receive a full salary and might decide that teaching is not the best career for them. This decision is made by the teacher and his or her fellow teachers in the edfirm, precipitated by the choices of students/parents, rather than through a contentious process between the administration and the teachers' union. This non-bureaucratic decision-making system combines the benefits of **competition** among edfirms (providing incentives for excellence and responsiveness to the community's diverse and changing needs and wants) and **cooperation** within each edfirm (providing support and encouragement among teachers) to make better and quicker decisions at a significantly lower cost.

New edfirms. Incubation policies encourage the formation of new edfirms. If a group of teachers solicits enough parent signatures to support creation of a new edfirm, the district's Edfirm Support Agency supports its creation with a grant for start-up funds and expertise to plan and start operations. This agency is described in greater detail under Principle 5, "Administrative Structures."

Continuous renewal. Our current educational system is highly resistant to change, making a crisis necessary for significant change to occur. To prevent the new system from being equally resistant to change, it must be a self-adjusting learning organization in which crises are minimized because change is continuous. Teachers are in charge of adapting their practices to the changing educational needs of the community and students – for them to survive – rather than administrators and politicians controlling the changes. However, the school district can adopt certain policies to ensure that the edfirms live up to community (and state) values.

2. District Administrative System as Servant

The district-wide administrative system serves a dramatically different role than is typical today. Thus, it has a very different structure, as reflected in the following three principles.

Principle 4. The District Administrative System

This system serves the edfirms, rather than controlling them.

The district administrative system is designed to support rather than to control, so it receives most of its budget from the edfirms, rather than the other way around. The edfirms buy its services, though it typically must compete with outside vendors to offer those services, including government bodies such as county offices (e.g., for transportation, facilities, purchasing, etc.). There is still a superintendent, and the district office provides a variety of support services to the edfirms and to students, primarily through the Edfirm Support Agency and the Family Support Agency.

Principle 5. Support Services for Edfirms

The district's Edfirm Support Agency (ESA) serves three roles.

Landlord. First, the ESA serves as landlord for all edfirms and manages and maintains all common facilities in each building: cafeteria, library, gymnasium, etc. The budget for this role comes solely from fees paid by each edfirm.

Support services. Second, the ESA may be contracted by each edfirm to provide such support services as financial and accounting, purchasing, janitorial, transportation, special education, technology support, family services, and coordination with community organizations, such as health and sports. These services may be:

- Provided by ESA personnel
- Outsourced to private or nonprofit contractors by the ESA at a group-negotiated rate
- Outsourced to private or nonprofit contractors directly by an edfirm
- Some combination of these.

The budget for this role also comes solely from fees paid by each edfirm.

Incubation and enforcement. Third, the ESA supports the incubation of new edfirms and enforces the small number of district policies and regulations (adopted by the district school board) for all edfirms.

The **budget** for this role comes from either the state (based on student enrollment districtwide) or from local taxes, depending on the policy adopted by the state regarding this.

Principle 6. Support Services for Students

The district's Family Support Agency (FSA) serves two roles.

Student placement. First, the FSA is a placement counseling service for matching students with teachers (or edfirms). It provides diagnostic testing and interviews with students to help parents make the best decisions when choosing teachers and edfirms — and to actually make the choices for parents who don't want to participate in this process. This assistance helps to break the cycle of poverty by ensuring that all students are well-matched with a teacher.

Information collection and dissemination. Second, the FSA serves as a *Consumer Reports* type of service for collecting and disseminating information about the performance of all the district's edfirms, their teachers, buildings, and support service providers. Comprehensive measures of performance for each of these are prepared by the FSA (often with help from the state department of

education) and are available to parents and students. **User ratings** are also maintained to further help students and parents make good choices. Of course, teachers in the edfirms and learning centers also have access to this information, so they can make improvements.

The FSA's **budget** comes directly from the state and is based on the number of students it serves. This keeps it independent and unbiased.

3. Governance Structures

On both the local and state levels of governance, the new structure differs from the current, top-down, bureaucratic system, as indicated by the next three principles.

Principle 7. District Governance System

The district governance system supports the edfirms, rather than controlling them.

Standards, policies, and regulations. Unlike the current setup, the district board does not micro-manage and control the affairs of the educational system. The choice-driven decision-making system assumes that function. The district school board sets and monitors the attainment of community standards, and it establishes a small number of policies and regulations that ensure the choice-driven decision-making system promotes equity, diversity, excellence, and other community values. A non-profit charter school authorizer in Minnesota called Innovative Quality Schools (see <https://iqsmn.org>) provides a good example of how this kind of school district could operate.

Dispute adjudication. The district board also manages a Citizen Review Board that adjudicates disputes among stakeholders (teachers, parents, students, edfirms, and other service providers) and protects the rights of disadvantaged students. A state-level review board is in place for cases that the district boards cannot resolve.

Principle 8. State Governance System

The state governance system supports the local districts, rather than controlling them.

State standards and tests. The state board of education and department of education set statewide standards and monitor their attainment. Relatively few standards are required – that decision is left mostly to the choice-based decision-making system. And the department no longer dictates how or when the required standards are to be mastered. It also no longer requires state tests.

State policies and regulations. The state school board and department of education establish policies and regulations that ensure the choice-driven decision-making system promotes equity, diversity, excellence, and other state values, as a kind of check-and-balance on local values.

Support. The department of education provides consultants and manages networks to help school districts (ESAs and FSAs) to do a better job of supporting edfirms and families.

Research & development. Finally, the state department of education supports research and development to help edfirms, ESAs, and FSAs improve their practices and to provide them with better educational tools and resources.

Principle 9. Educational Finance System

The state provides an equitable revenue collection and distribution system.

Property taxes are the most *regressive* way to support public education. In the current systems, lower-income people end up paying a larger proportion of their income to school taxes, and communities with fewer businesses are at a disadvantage. However, state *income tax* revenues fluctuate considerably from economic expansion to recession, and the periodic huge budget cutbacks have a strongly negative effect on schools.

Income tax option. One solution is to fund education with a dedicated portion of the state income tax, but this approach would require creating a reserve representing a certain percent of the annual education budget during years of economic expansion, to be used to maintain the education budget during years of reduced tax revenues. Perhaps a 10-year budget could be projected for public schools that builds in an adjustment for student population and inflation. Then identify a metric for strength of the state economy to automatically determine when the state budget should allocate money to the reserve, and how much, so that the state budget can be planned accordingly.

Property tax option. An alternative solution is to use property taxes to fund education, but to set local school tax rates on a sliding scale, so less expensive single-family dwellings and less-expensive apartment buildings are charged a lower tax rate. However, this does not address the inequities inherent in some communities being poorer than others or having fewer businesses that pay school property taxes. State income tax could be used to even out such inequities.

Hybrid option. The new system must find a revenue stream that is both more stable throughout the economic cycle and more equitable across communities of differing means to support it. Perhaps some combination of the two options just described would be the optimal design. Minnesota has developed an interesting system that entails districts collecting a uniform percentage of their wealth (say, 1.25% of property market values) for education and, whatever that rate raised in dollars, for the state to pay the balance up to a per-pupil amount deemed appropriate. In addition, Minnesota adopted an innovative tax-base sharing program that “has narrowed significantly the disparity in commercial-industrial valuations per capita” (Kolderie, 2018, p. 89)

Revenue distribution. Another issue is how the revenues are distributed. Several mechanisms are needed. First is that money goes directly from the state **to each edfirm** (bypassing the district board) through a formula based on the number of its students, the age of each student, any special needs each student may have, and a supplement for socio-economically disadvantaged students. Second is money that goes directly **to the ESA** for its third role – incubating new edfirms and enforcing regulations on all edfirms – through a formula based on the number of students in the district. Third is money that goes directly **to the FSA** for its placement counseling service and *Consumer Reports* type service, again through a formula based on the number of students in the district. Fourth is money that goes directly **to the district school board** for the board, superintendent, and perhaps one or two staff members, depending on the size of the district.

4. Other Possible Structures

The above-described structures are foundational to improving teacher empowerment, student choice, equity, accountability, and innovation in an educational system. However, there are at least three additional structures that could further enhance this new kind of system: learning centers, collaboration with family service systems, and the concept of a learning cooperative.

Principle 10: Learning Centers

Some learning resources may be too expensive or used too infrequently for an edfirm to be able to afford. One solution is for students in all edfirms to have access to various learning centers. A learning center provides instruction in a *focus area*, which might be any of the following and more:

- A traditional discipline-oriented area such as biology
- A cross-disciplinary thematic area such as pollution or cities
- An intellectual area such as philosophy
- A technical area such as automobile maintenance and repair

In all cases, centers integrate instruction on basic skills and higher-order thinking skills into the focus-area instruction, and the edfirm teacher helps each student put together parts of their personal learning plan that represent a good progression for acquiring skills and meeting required or desired standards through activities in the learning center as well as in their own edfirm.

Differences by developmental level. At lower developmental levels, learning centers are seldom used, but a teacher's "homeroom" (which could be a defined area within a larger space) contains mini learning centers, as in Montessori Schools. At higher developmental levels in places where there are several edfirms, learning centers operate independently of edfirms.

Passes. Every few months students receive a certain number of passes that entitle them to use any learning centers of their choice; and students can earn additional passes. The number of passes varies with developmental level, and edfirms that issue fewer passes have more resource money to put into their own learning centers. Therefore, as a general rule, the older the child, the more the child uses the centers.

Choice and budgets. Budgets for learning centers are based on the number of students served (the number of passes tallied), giving learning centers considerable incentive to attract students and satisfy edfirm teachers' needs. This means that a combination of **competition** among learning centers and **cooperation** within a center exists to maximize performance.

Innovation and change. As in retail businesses, competition pressures learning centers to adjust their offerings to meet the changing needs of students and their edfirms. Learning centers spring up and die off on a regular basis, like stores in a mall. **Incubation policies** and resources encourage the formation of new learning centers to support a continuous renewal process.

Types of centers. We envision three types of learning centers:

- **"Shopping mall" centers** are centrally located facilities with many learning centers, like stores in a mall, ranging from a one-person "craft shop" operation to a regional or national chain. They offer powerful learning environments that incorporate a range of resources — from hands-on materials to web-based multimedia learning environments.
- **Community centers** are located in community settings, such as museums, zoos, and businesses. These centers bring in extra income and tax breaks for their sponsors to support the learning center activities, and they offer students important learning resources in real-world settings.
- **Mobile centers** travel from one school building to another and even from one community to another. They are found mostly in low population areas and for particularly expensive learning resources, such as an electron microscope or a mass spectrometer.

Cooperative arrangements are made so children may use learning centers located in other school

districts, like the Challenger Learning Center in the Indianapolis Metropolitan School District of Decatur Township.

Staffing. Learning centers are staffed by certified teachers and technical and creative experts as well as parents and community members as volunteers.

The Edfirm Support Agency could implement this concept.

Principle 11: Collaboration with Social Service Systems

Family services are more important than ever in modern society. Raising children is more difficult in this age of complexity. Everything from installing a child car seat correctly and monitoring your child's use of the Internet to avoiding child predators and promoting good nutrition and exercise weighs heavily on many parents who also are typically working full time, volunteering with their children's activities, and trying to carve out a little time for themselves, friends, and each other. Also, with so many conflicting opinions, expectations, and studies about raising children, parents increasingly need a reliable source of information, someone to turn to with questions about parenting, health services, and much more. To meet the real needs of students in this increasingly complex and dangerous world, school systems should be thought of more broadly as systems of learning and human development, so social service agencies and schools need to collaborate more than ever before.

Social services. The new system integrates social services on all levels. The first level is for newborns through five-year-old children and their families. The Independence (MO) School District has implemented such a collaboration for students and their families. The new system also integrates a full range of family services for older children and their families, including healthcare, parent education, counseling, childcare services for working parents, and family literacy efforts.

The school is the one place in a community with which a majority of families associate for an extended period of time. This new organizational structure maximizes the opportunities for leveraging that contact to shore up the family's resources and commitment to education and thus enhance equity and maximize the positive development of all children. Therefore, the FSA typically takes on a third role to help such social service agencies work with families in each building, in homes, and in community locations.

Principle 12: A Learning Cooperative

Many people over the age of 18 in a community still need the level of education that the public schools offer. To the extent that the edfirms and learning centers can offer them such education, the better off the community as a whole will be. Therefore, each edfirm and each learning center could serve as a community learning hub that functions as a learning destination for all members of its community. But how could edfirms afford to do this?

Volunteer for credits. Individuals over the age of 18 must earn credits to use an edfirm's or learning center's facilities by donating time to helping others learn, providing child care services, volunteering in the cafeteria, providing custodial or maintenance services, or contributing to the operation of the edfirm or learning center in some other way. With such volunteers, edfirms and learning centers could be open to students from early in the morning to late at night, seven days a week, and the community's adults would have flexible and affordable opportunities to advance their job skills, parenting skills, and other information needs, which strengthens the community. Furthermore,

community members could collaborate with edfirms or learning centers to support student learning out in the community to earn those credits. And students could occasionally work with adult community mentors on projects involving service learning.

Safety concerns. To ensure this functions in a safe and reliable manner, all adults who provide such volunteer services to the school must pass appropriate background checks, and related liability insurance and legal issues must be addressed. With those logistics handled appropriately, the learning cooperative concept goes far to lower the cost of public education and make it an effective educational system that truly serves the public.

The Family Support Agency might be the best structure for implementing the learning cooperative concept.

Conclusion

We are at a critical juncture in the history of education in the United States. There are powerful forces that want to replace the public education system with a privatized one. While there are advantages and disadvantages with any system, many are concerned about the inequities that a privatized system would likely engender, while others are concerned that, because education is a public good – one that does not benefit just the individual who receives it, but also that individual's family, community, state, and country – community influence over the schools and what they teach is an important feature that a privatized system would lack.

Fortunately, it is not an either/or choice between public schools and private schools as we know them. We can design a system that combines the best aspects of public and private schools. We can design a system in which there is choice and competition, but at the same time greater equity, teacher professionalism, and community involvement and ownership.

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