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We don't need education revolution; just remodel using our new tools

Theodora J. Kalikow

Happy holidays! So, how do we move beyond schools for the last century to ones appropriate for the 21st?

Remodel! Remember all those trends I've been telling you about, magnet schools and iPads and experiential learning and all that? We don't need to have a revolution. Instead we use those initiatives to remodel. (Just like the banks and every other surviving business has done.) We keep trying new things and encouraging more of them.

Remodeling has several good Maine virtues. It doesn't waste anything. It builds on solid foundations. You can add more parts as you save up or scrounge the resources. You can do a lot of it yourself. And, you can see good results soon!

Sure, it is messy and inconvenient while the remodeling is going on, but mess is better than being stuck in the same old outmoded, cramped and unworkable place, and if you have a good plan, it's affordable.

We have all seen Maine remodeling projects that go on for generations. There still may be house wrap on the outside after 10 years, and you learn to avoid the splinters while waiting for your buddy to bring the flooring from the mill. Meanwhile, the mill closes, or the one who loses out in the divorce gets the house.

For schools, we can't afford that kind of remodeling. So here's the plan.

A few weeks ago, I heard a great lecture by Bea McGarvey, who's the co-author with Charles Schwahn of "Inevitable: Mass Customized Learning." I had no expectations about this event. I was just doing a presidential attending thing, but it was fascinating.

McGarvey's talk highlighted for me that we already have all the tools to make the experience of each student customized for them, so they can go at their own pace, master the basics, prove mastery, and then continue at their own pace further and faster, staying interested and excited and intrigued by learning.

How often do we see a kid who starts off bright-eyed and interested to learn, and by fourth grade they hate school and think they're dumb? How often do we have a kid who's indulging in creative boredom while waiting for the rest of the class to catch up?

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In true Maine fashion, mass customized learning is a way to refashion, remodel and build on stuff we already know how to do, so that all children can learn and be excited to come to school every day. They become empowered and self-aware learners and doers.

In case you think we could never manage all the information we'd collect about each student, you can find in McGarvey's book a whole list of tools that we use right now to manage complex tasks -- tools such as finding and ordering all kinds of information, getting books and music, organizing large amounts of data and anything else you'd need to do to actually "mass customize" learning for all the students in a school.

The nifty thing about this approach is that it uses established technology and builds on a close teacher-student relationship. Child-centered learning uses teachers as knowledge providers, guides and coaches and remodels school into an active learning community.

Maybe the niftiest thing is that this approach makes the Common Core Standards, a national set of standards now adopted by some 44 states including Maine, into guideposts for attainment of each student, without tying them to a specific grade level. Talk about re-purposing something that might look like punishment into goals for individual documented attainment!

And guess what? At least 25 school districts are experimenting with this approach in Maine right now! One is Williams Elementary School in Oakland, where 92 percent of students made a year's growth in fourth-grade math, where before it had been 50 percent or less, as reported by Shelly Moody, 2011 Maine Teacher of the Year, and Valerie Glueck, at Educate Maine's annual conference last week. Pretty impressive.

So how do we help? Whenever we have an adventurous principal or a school where the teachers want to experiment with child-centered learning, we cheer them on. We start small and prove the concept.

Remodeling must be data-driven and experimental, to fine-tune the results. The outcome can be empowered, confident and well-prepared students, knowledgeable parents, teachers who can demonstrate the results they are getting for every child, and supportive communities.

I can't wait for those children to come to college!

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