

EDUCATION MATTERS

A publication of the Association of American Educators Foundation

By Chester E. Finn, Jr.

The Innovation Infatuation

Every once in a while, American K–12 education is overwhelmed by the conviction that its basic design is obsolete and that it needs somehow to reinvent schooling. One hears statements such as “If Rip Van Winkle were to awaken today from a century-long slumber, the only institutions he’d recognize would be schools and cemeteries.” We hear of education being stuck in an industrial model. And we observe educators, policymakers, and philanthropists scurrying to replace the schools of their childhoods with something different for their children and grandchildren to attend. We always seem to be, in the memorable phrase of Larry Cuban and the late David Tyack, “tinkering toward utopia,” although those engaged in what generally ends up resembling tinkering actually fancy themselves to be bold revolutionaries.

We went through a phase of this a century ago when educators and policymakers sought to apply Frederick Taylor’s principles of scientific management to our disorderly collection of locally devised schools.

We went through a further round in the 1920s and 1930s as notions of child-centered education and social efficiency permeated the schools.



We went through another round in the 1960s and 1970s as open classrooms proliferated, schools were desegregated and detracked, and sundry curricular innovations (e.g., whole language reading and new math) kicked in.

We went through another round in the early 1990s with New American Schools, a purposeful effort by Bush 41, Secretary Lamar Alexander, and former Xerox head David Kearns to reinvent the school and a parallel effort led by Chris Whittle in the private sector (the Edison Project).

And we're going through another round today, with initiatives such as Reimagining Learning, led by Stacey Childress and her team at the NewSchools Venture Fund; the Emerson Collective's XQ Super-School project; Marc Zuckerberg's efforts to personalize learning; and any number of technology-centric undertakings like Summit Public Schools, Carpe Diem charter schools, and K12-operated virtual schools.

Unlike more traditional societies, Americans have always been fascinated by the new, and that's why, historically, a lot of inventing, discovering, and innovating has happened on U.S. shores. (That's why, for example, so many Nobel Prizes have been conferred on Americans, including people who immigrated to this country because it was more hospitable and generous with research and discovery.) Every sector of our lives shows the aftereffects of repeated cycles of innovation, many, but not all, of which have improved our lives. Some have been transformative. Some have simply been transitory, even frivolous.

In K-12 education, every reinvention effort gained some traction for a while and left a legacy behind. Indeed, one way to depict U.S. public schools circa 2016 is a vast archeological dig with layers of earlier civilizations visible as we excavate and with the pottery shards and tools that each used now heaped messily all over the place.

One may fairly ask whether the cumulative effect of all this innovating and reinventing has been profound and positive or superficial and confusing. How much good has it really done? To what extent are today's schools truly different from those my parents

attended ninety years back? And how much does that really matter? If they're not palpably better—more effective, more impactful—we may have wasted a great deal of time, effort, and money while attempting to make them over.

Each cycle of reinvention fancies that it's the "disruptive innovation" (in Clayton Christensen's term) that will squeeze out the old model and replace it with something different, something more efficient, effective, and appealing. In the end, however, the net effect seems more like tinkering with the old model. The schools just aren't all that different. Yes, they have whiteboards and tablets. They have different furniture, lighting, heating, and (sometimes) cooling. They have smaller classes and more ancillary staff. Many have added pre-K and afterschool programs. But fundamentally different? I think not.

Occurring in rough parallel have been all manner of external policy changes (standards, accountability, choice, teacher evaluation, funding shifts, categorical programs, etc.) that may have advanced, retarded, or simply ignored the innovators. Some were coordinated, such as the federal e-rate program intended to get schools online and thus make modern communications and IT tools functional within their walls. Mostly, though, I'm struck by how few fundamentals have been altered by a century of reinventing and innovating with the model itself. The school day and year aren't



“However, let us not bow before the trendy, the fashionable, the politically correct, or the assumption that different is always better.”

much different in many places, in most of which the educational sequence is still divided into twelve grades. The essential technology of instruction is still a solo teacher in a four-walled classroom with fifteen to thirty kids. The curricular core remains quite similar to what it was when I and my parents went to school. And school governance, administration, and professional preparation still resemble the arrangements devised by progressive-era reformers and cult of efficiency managers.

From where I sit, the biggest changes in U.S. K–12 education have been those forced by policy shifts outside the schoolhouse: the right of millions of families to choose their schools rather than being told where to go; the emergence of statewide standards and accountability regimes; and the appearance of more nondistrict public schools—charters mainly—even as the traditional private sector has shrunk. Yet the majority of those new schools, once you walk inside, are awfully similar to the schools to which they are alternatives.

Will the NewSchools Venture Fund catalyze a different outcome, a truly and fundamentally different sort of learning environment for children? Will the Gates or Walton Foundations? The Emerson super-school? Chan Zuckerberg’s efforts at personalization? They’ll surely introduce more technology, and more classrooms will be

blended and perhaps also flipped. They will strive to customize and individualize the learning experience and to help more students own their own learning experiences. All such efforts will, however, collide with the hoary structures, habits, and patterns that have led us to organize schools the way we have for so many decades. Real personalizing of education, for example, would disrupt just about everything: from school architecture to teacher preparation, from state academic standards and grade-level class assignments to the scheduling of the period, the day, the week, and the year. I think it makes sense to move in this direction, but I can’t see it happening at more than a snail’s pace. In the end, I suspect, it will end up looking awfully much like more tinkering. Utopia will remain the goal.

I’m all for it, for all the experimenting, innovating, and reinventing that anyone has the imagination and money to undertake. However, let’s do it in an experimental mode, evaluate the bejesus out of it, and not put all our eggs in any one utopian basket. Let’s recognize that some of the most appealing (to me, at least) and high-performing new schools in the land are innovating in a back-to-the-future sense, places like Great Hearts Academy with its focus on

character and classics, the Latin-centric schools that have arisen in Washington and Brooklyn, the Reno- (and now Internet-) based Davidson Academy for highly gifted youngsters, and career-tech programs that integrate the classroom with the world of modern work. Much of what’s good about today’s policy regimen of common standards but independently operated schools of choice is the enhanced capability of school innovators to strike out in potentially promising directions that may work well for different kids. I don’t want my grandchildren to go to schools that resemble the ones I attended, but neither do I want any given innovator, zillionaire funder, or snake-oil vendor to think he or she knows what’s best for them. Let’s encourage plenty of education flowers to bloom and welcome school diversity, loosely united by common standards and metrics. However, let us not bow before the trendy, the fashionable, the politically correct, or the assumption that different is always better. ■

Originally published on edexcellence.net.



Chester E. Finn, Jr., scholar, educator and public servant, has devoted his career to improving education in the United States. He is a Distinguished Senior Fellow and President

Emeritus of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute.



Making a Difference Matters

When I began my career I had a completely different view of teaching, especially regarding my role in the school as a physical education teacher. I work in a K-8 school and have had the privilege of teaching my students for nine years. My first few years were a constant struggle to keep my head above water, and simply survive to the next day. I began my career thinking my job was to teach sports skills, make kids stay active, and hopefully teach a few life lessons along the way. I often felt the vibe that other teachers thought physical education was created as a prep for the more important subjects. For a time, I started to believe that too.

“The character traits, team building, and cross-curricular lessons that I teach daily have a huge impact on my students and the culture of our school.”

My view and approach to teaching are so different now, 25 years later. I know I am making a difference in my students' lives every day. My goal has moved away from focusing on sports skills to focusing on the whole student, not just their physical abilities. I have learned how to make movement fun and developed a growth mindset atmosphere for our students. With professional growth and a strong passion, our school now offers a student-centered physical education program that truly “makes a difference” in our school and community.

How is my program different than most? It begins by having a well-developed curriculum that is guided by research-based instruction. Students know when they walk into the classroom/gym they are in a safe and fun learning environment. Students are given choices and use a variety of equipment that allows them to be successful in developing the skills necessary to lead active lifestyles. They remain active throughout the entire class with maximum engagement during every activity. The character traits, team building, and cross-curricular lessons that I teach daily have a huge impact on my students and the culture of our school. Together, my colleagues and I send similar messages about accountability, perseverance, and integrity.



“Research shows that students who are physically active during the day have more success learning in the classroom and achieve higher test scores.”

Research shows that students who are physically active during the day have more success learning in the classroom and achieve higher test scores. A quality physical education program, therefore, extends far beyond the gym. Supporting and encouraging active recess, providing movement activities on rainy days, and teaching, mentoring, and promoting active brain breaks/boosters in the classroom are all examples of intertwining physical education into all areas of a student’s life.

Developing a quality physical education program isn’t easy—it requires a growth mindset. I have continued to grow as a teacher through attending state and national SHAPE conventions. I also have used many outside resources for funding and planning, such as Fuel Up to Play 60 and Jump Rope for Heart. Most importantly, I have developed a team of supporters for my program. Other teachers, parents, community businesses, and our school’s administration have all come together to support physical education and the impact it has on learning at our school. I am very proud to be a physical

education teacher, and I look forward to each new day at school because I am making a difference in our students’ lives every day. ■



AAE Member **Tim Mueller** teaches kindergarten through eighth grade physical education. In 2011, Mr. Mueller was a recipient of the Herb Kohl Teacher Fellowship Award. This award recognized his enthusiasm and passion for fitness and especially for his students. He is also a Fuel Up to Play 60 MVP and State Ambassador.



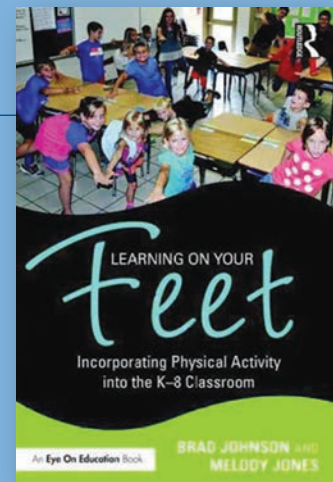
Are you or someone you know interested in joining the AAE family? Visit aaeteachers.org/membership to find out why more and more educators are making the nonunion choice with AAE membership.



Book Review:

Learning on Your Feet by Brad Johnson and Melody Jones

The trend is undeniable. More and more time at school is being spent behind desks as PE programs and recess periods are slashed. A new book is trying to buck that trend by helping teachers integrate physical activity into their classrooms. Johnson and Jones not only lay out the research that connects physical activity and learning, but they also provide scores of strategies and examples on how every-day classroom teachers can integrate movement and motion into their lessons. They provide activity ideas that can be adjusted to all grade levels and range from warm-ups to STEM integration ideas.



Finding the Right Parent-Teacher Communication App for Your Class

With a smartphone glued to 90 percent of the parent population's hands, how is it that schools still depend on old methods such as sending notes home, newsletters, and emails to communicate with parents? A recent study by Gallup found only one in five parents are fully engaged with their child's school, meaning 80 percent of parents are either indifferent to or actively disengaged from their kids' school. It's clear there is a disconnect between the way teachers are communicating and the way most of the world is getting its information.

As a trailblazer in classroom technology, I've tried every form of communication out there: printed newsletters, emails, texting, blog-

ging, a YouTube channel, even Facebook. But along with grading, lesson planning, and everything else a teacher is asked to balance, it all got to be too much.

I wanted the communication process to be easy and streamlined for my parents and me. Finally I asked my parents, "What's the best way for me to communicate with you?" Essentially, all of them said "email" or "texting," implying that their smartphone is their lifeline to the outside world. That's when my hunt for the perfect communication app began.

There's an app for that—but which one?

Just as social media apps such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat take you into the lives

of friends, celebrities, and idols, I wanted to find the perfect app to give parents a glimpse into their child's life at school. I started with a quick Google search to find the top parent-teacher communication apps in the market. As you can imagine, that search was a bit overwhelming. I used my personal Facebook page to ask fellow teachers what communication apps they were using, and I got dozens of responses. To narrow my scope of what exactly I wanted in a communication app, I created a list of non-negotiables. The right app would:

1. Allow me to share photos, links, and messages.
2. Allow parents to respond to messages.
3. Allow me to message/share with a few select or all parents.
4. Allow me to schedule events and notify parents of the events.
5. Sync scheduled events to my Google classroom calendar.
6. Allow me to schedule parent/teacher conferences.
7. Share volunteer and wish list opportunities.
8. Work on web-based and smart-phone platforms.
9. Cost nothing for parents and teachers.
10. Have a variety of comprehensive supports for teachers.



The enormous list of potential apps slimmed down to seven free communication apps that would potentially fit the bill: Remind, Class Messenger, Livingtree, SimplyCircle, Seesaw, Class Dojo, and Bloomz. I signed up for accounts, started playing with each app's interface, devoured the support/help resources I found on their websites, and contacted the app developers.

As an avid teacher/blogger, I created a working spreadsheet on Google Docs to break down the features of each app, including security and privacy, coordination tools, community-building tools, and more. My goal was to create a resource to help teachers who were also searching for communication apps. After I posted the spreadsheet on my blog, comments immediately started rolling in. Teachers offered their recommendations, shared their personal stories of success, and thanked me for all the time and effort I had put into my research.

At the start of the 2015 school year, I found Bloomz fit all the criteria I was looking for and decided to implement it in my classroom. Parents were all extremely excited to download the app to see what their child does at school all day.

Bloomz' functionality is similar to that of Facebook, with which most parents were already comfortable. As the year went on, I used the app to share daily photos and videos of the students, schedule conferences, find volunteers for class events, and message parents throughout the day. Parents are able to scroll through the app and see their student hard at work. Posting on Bloomz has become such a regular part of my day that students look forward to showing off their work—and parents get anxious when I don't post something for the day.

"I love seeing updates during the day and pictures of activities," said one parent in an end-of-year survey. "It's so much easier than keeping track of papers and asking my child what they're doing," said another parent.

I remember one specific example where I ran out of paper towels in my classroom. I posted on the app, asking if any parents could send some with their child. Within one minute (literally), I had responses from three parents—and plenty of paper towels the next school day. The app also comes in handy when communicating information to parents in an emergency situation if necessary.

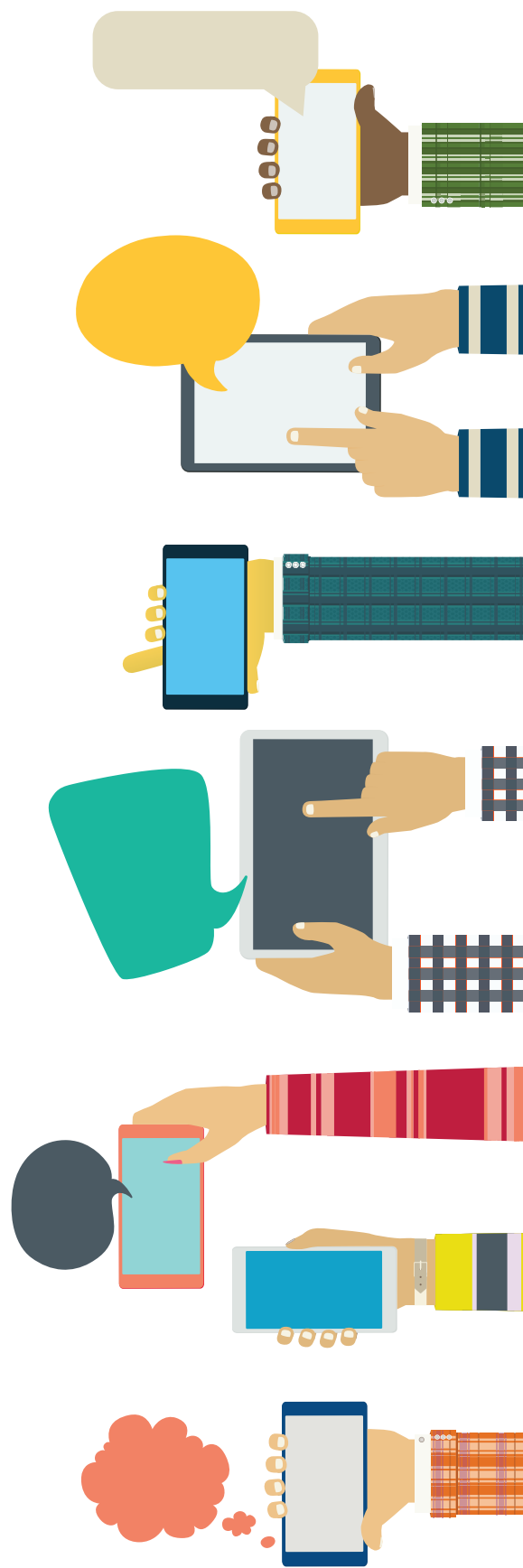
Nineteen years ago when I started teaching, parent-teacher communication was nearly taboo. Today, the communication tool has turned into a time- and sanity-saver, and I can't imagine running my classroom without total parent involvement.

In my search for the communication app that was right for me, I was able to help dozens of other teachers find the app that works for their classroom—whichever that may be—and help close the gap in our school-parent communication. I'm so grateful that digital communication has successfully connected me to parents and vice-versa, creating a team-like environment where everyone's goal is to ensure that each student has the best learning experience. ■

Originally published on eschoolnews.com.



Jessica Meacham is a first-grade teacher in the Southern Door County School District in Wisconsin. Visit her blog at jessicameacham.com.



My Day:

Career and Technical Education Teacher Karen Sheff

Similar to most teachers, my day varies drastically from one minute to the next, but here's a shot at sharing what my day as a Career and Technical Education teacher is like:

The radio alarm goes off at 3:45 a.m. most days so my husband and I have some time to wake up and greet the day. By the time we are showered, dressed, fed, and have fed and walked the dogs, it is 6:15 a.m. I leave around 6:20 a.m. and have a 14-mile city commute (about 25-40 minutes depending on the day).

When I arrive at school I usually have a few students waiting for me. The school has about 1,800 students, 100 percent free and reduced lunch; most students are bussed. The final bell rings at 7:10 a.m., with announcements and breakfast in class until 7:20 a.m. I traditionally have a bell ringer on the board.

I have three 90-minute block classes and one block for plan/lunch per day. We are on the alternating block, so I see my students every other day, which has its pros and cons. I teach accounting, computer applications, leadership, marketing, taxes, and wealth management. I have a total of 180 students, all in year-long classes. I receive a great deal of emails every day from administration, staff, parents, counselors, and fellow teachers about students who are sick, needing help, excused, or dealing with major issues at home and in school. They also pertain to posting grades, staff meetings, required staff activities, professional development homework due, required trainings and webinars, CACTE board meetings (I'm the President of the Colorado Business Educators), scholarship committee meetings, concurrent enrollment details, guest speaker scheduling, and the list goes on.

This is where the variations multiply. You never know what might come along on any given day. It might be an early release day, an assembly day, or you might have to cover for someone who is out and there are no substitutes available. There might be an in-service, deposits due for the school store, trainings, and lots of paperwork for field trips, DECA/FBLA competitions, etc.



WHAT IS YOUR DAY LIKE? PEOPLE NEED TO KNOW!

AAE wants to educate the public and policymakers about what it is really like to be a teacher. Walk us through your day: the highlights, the challenges, the typical moments, and the extraordinary ones. Keep a log of your day and what happened before, during, and after school. Will you participate? Email editor@aaeteacher.org today!

sure I have snacks for them and have readily communicated with them to keep them in the loop. I have to reserve the room, coordinate my students setting it up, greeting, preparing, etc.

Other days after school, I have webinars, meetings, and trainings that I have to sit in on or listen to that were on my calendar from the above emails.

Sometimes, like tonight, it's a touching experience. I'm being honored at the school board meeting for my totally unexpected Outstanding Business Education Service Award. The choir is singing a surprise song (the director tricked me into talking about some of my favorite songs and had the choir prepare one of them), and my department is joining me out to dinner at my favorite Mexican restaurant.

After a full day of teaching and focusing on making the lessons beneficial for the students, I try to arrive home by 5 p.m. but it doesn't always work. I don't do any work at home, period, so I will stay at school until I can get to a stopping point for the day. If I am lucky, I can get to yoga at 5:30 p.m. and home by 6:45 p.m. My husband heats up the prepared meal (we spend part of Sundays cooking all the meals for the week) we have planned; we feed and walk the dogs; and then collapse into bed hopefully by 7:45 p.m. but usually later. I read for a few minutes each night to calm my brain as most nights I wake up in the middle of the night worried about all I have to do at school the next day. ■



An AAE member **Karen J. Sheff** is a business/marketing/tax help teacher in Colorado.

AAE Legal Services Has You Covered

Are you an active professional member with a legal question? AAE employment rights assistance gives members access to legal counsel at the onset of workplace issues. Contact AAE member services today at **1-800-704-7799** to begin receiving the advice you need!



Bookmark the AAE blog

Have you read the latest AAE blog? Stay abreast of trending topics in education by navigating to aaeteachers.org/blog and select "CTRL + D" on your keyboard. When you're done, dive in and check out what's in store!



National School Choice Week 2017



Teachers celebrating National School Choice Week at:

- ▲ [far left & above] the Kennesaw Charter School in Kennesaw, GA
- ◀ [left] the Future Charter School in Fort Smith, AR
- ▼ [below] School choice resource rally at the Idaho Capitol in Boise, ID

The Association of American Educators Foundation
27405 Puerta Real, Suite 230 Mission Viejo, CA 92691-6388

Education Matters is an exclusive publication for members of AAE and its state chapters. This publication is brought to you by the Association of American Educators Foundation (AAEF).
aaeteachers.org • editor@aaeteachers.org • 800.704.7799



Gary Beckner, Executive Editor
Alexandra Freeze, Managing Editor

Debbie Brown, Editorial Assistant
Diane Meyer, Editorial Assistant

Assurance Insurance

In addition to \$2,000,000 of liability protection, professional members of the Association of American Educators get access to optional insurance policies at a discount, including:

For more information, visit aaeteachers.org/supplemental

ID Theft Assist Protection

AAE has arranged to provide ID theft assist through a partnership between a leading credit bureau and a respected 24/7 crisis response team, providing a comprehensive identity recovery system.

\$1 and \$3 Million Private Practice Professional Liability

This plan is designed to meet the needs of private practice educators who are not directly employed by a school district.

Free Long-term Care Insurance Evaluation Service

You and your loved ones can receive a personalized no-obligation benefit and price comparison of plans from several top-rated insurance companies (for members, parents, and grandparents).

Disability Income Protection

If you cannot work due to a covered disability, you can receive up to two-thirds of your salary to age 65.

Personal Auto

Mention your association and you may receive an additional 8 percent discount from GEICO (in most states) on your auto insurance.

Accidental Death or Dismemberment

Pays up to \$300,000 for death from any covered accident.

\$500,000 Cancer Plan

This plan pays you cash benefits in addition to any other insurance you may have. Your entire family can be covered with individual lifetime benefits of up to \$500,000.

Term Life

You can request up to \$750,000 of outstanding coverage at special rates for Association members.

Comprehensive Health Insurance

You may save hundreds or even thousands of dollars with several major medical options available to you today.

Pet Insurance

This plan reimburses 80 percent of usual and customary charges for covered procedures at any licensed vet in the United States. Association members receive an extra 5 percent discount on base plan premiums.

