

Innovation in Schools after *A Nation at Risk*

by Eric Bettinger

Overview

A Nation at Risk applauded the notion of schools and districts as local laboratories, where innovative practices could be developed, scaled, and eventually disseminated. The examples explored in this paper—small schools, specialized schools, superstar superintendents, innovation zones, efforts to reduce class sizes, and changes in instructional time—are just a sampling of innovations that have changed, at least incrementally, the way in which education is delivered.

However, while many of these innovations show promising results as local experiments, scaling and expansion have not always replicated local success. In many cases, we lack the personnel or funding to take these efforts to scale. Finding ways to build on small-scale experimentation remains the next challenge to be solved if the vision of schools as laboratories is to yield long-run improvements in the quality of education.

Guidance for Policymakers

- While many of the innovations studied show promising results in local experiments, scaling and expansion have not always replicated local success. The key problem in many cases is the cost and complexity of scaling. Policymakers need to develop a clear sense of the true costs and potential tradeoffs involved in expanding the reach of promising practices.
- Discrete components of a proven reform may be adopted in place of replicating an entire model. For example, developing the meaningful, personalized relationships with faculty and counselors that students have at small schools could be adopted in larger settings, potentially achieving similar outcomes at a lower cost than operating many small schools.
- Policymakers looking to encourage greater levels of experimentation could begin by creating or expanding innovation zones. Using the greater autonomy and flexibility these zones allow, schools and districts can explore new practices in finance, governance, curriculum, and staffing.
- Organizations such as the American Institute for Research, MDRC, Mathematica, and RAND Corporation offer repositories of research to help educators and policymakers better understand the breadth of continued experimentation and innovation in schools.

What the Research Tells Us

- Efforts to create smaller schools have shown positive long-term impacts.
- Magnet schools reduce dropout rates among those at the highest risk of not graduating and are a viable way to provide differentiated education opportunities.
- The choice of school superintendent accounts for only a tiny fraction of student differences in achievement.
- Innovation zones outperform other methods of changing governance, and schools within them outperform other public schools.
- Evidence on the impact of reducing class sizes is mixed. Some studies show positive results, but these gains may come at the cost of other education inputs.
- Increasing instructional time has positive impacts on student outcomes.
- Strategies to increase parent engagement positively impact student attendance and academic achievement.

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