



# Wayne Jennings, Director, The Institute for Learning and Teaching

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle #920, Bloomington, MN 55437

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**Present:** Verne Johnson (Chair, phone); David Broden, Janis Clay, Bill Frenzel, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland (phone), Sallie Kemper, Dan Loritz, Tim McDonald, Wayne Popham (phone), Clarence Shallbetter, Bob White

**Summary of Jennings' comments:** Students have an innate desire to learn, Jennings argues, so we need to design schools that successfully channel that interest and motivation. More money will not solve the problem of poor performance in education; rather, changing school design to take advantage of well-established learning principles will achieve better results with less money.

Chartering has not necessarily resulted in true innovation; most charter schools recreate conventional curriculum. Policy makers should encourage those inside the school system to break out of the confines of traditional subject matter and teaching methods, and understand that success can be demonstrated in ways not captured by conventional measurements.

**A. Welcome and introductions-** Over a career spanning five decades, Jennings has started or helped start eight elementary and secondary public schools and one private school. He has been a teacher, principal, central office administrator, school board member, and post-secondary educator. He has published many articles and books; among his works are *Bridging the Learning/Assessment Gap* and *Inciting Learning*. More information may be found on his personal website at: [www.waynejennings.net](http://www.waynejennings.net) .

**B. Comments and discussion-** During Jennings's visit with the Civic Caucus, the following points were raised:

"I appreciate the work of the Civic Caucus," Jennings said, "and it reminds me of TED videos," the pithy-usually 10-20 minute-talks given by individuals with 'ideas worth spreading' to a conference group assembled in an auditorium. The TED organization has hosted innumerable such presentations, now readily accessible on its website at: [www.TED.org](http://www.TED.org) .

Students will learn if you let them

"In fact," Jennings continued, one of those TED videos featured a speaker by the name of Dr. Sugata Mitra who performed a study known as the 'Hole in the Wall'. The experiment shows that young people are inherently motivated to learn, and will teach themselves if only given the opportunity.

In this experiment young people from a poor part of Calcutta discovered a computer positioned by Dr. Mitra in a hole cut out from a wall-placed there with no explanation, but observable from within. Mitra found that the children were soon very successfully figuring out how to use the computer by themselves. Mitra went to other poor areas, reproduced the experiment, and found the same result. Inherent curiosity led to self-teaching. The video of his talk may be found here: <http://tinyurl.com/393s951> .

### **There is enough money-instead schooling needs change**

"All my colleagues in education want more money," Jennings observed, "so that more teachers can be hired, they can have more experts, and get class size down."

But when he asks them how *much* more money they want, "they hem and haw, but when we get down to what they want in terms of a desirable class size, they're talking about twice as many teachers. That's just not possible."

Foundations are no longer as willing to subsidize school operations as presently constituted. The McDonnell Douglas Foundation, for one, has said they just aren't going to do it anymore. A participant recalled the Ford Foundation's report "Ford Foundation Goes to School" decades ago when the foundation sent staff to go into schools to see where their money was going. They couldn't figure out how it was spent.

"I think we have the money," Jennings said. The question has more to do with school design. "We're not being clear about our objectives. One objective now seems to be that we have a particular set of courses to pass. But another, far more important one is that we have an educated citizenry, and lifelong learners. We don't pay nearly as much attention to that objective." The curriculum and pedagogy are out of sync, he argued, with what is needed for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The Mitra experiment demonstrates that there is potential in every child, and we have to recognize that students sitting passively in a classroom in what we might call 'batch process' schools just totally violates what we know about the ways people learn."

It is probably true, he added, "that most of what we do in schools is brain-antagonistic-opposed to how people actually learn."

### **The remedies *are* the problem in K-12: improvement instead of re-invention**

Jennings does not have much faith that the system will change on its own. He cited the book *Disrupting Class* by Clayton M. Christensen, et al and its explanation of how Target could not have developed within the traditional operations of Dayton Hudson Corporation, but instead was created as its own autonomous entity reporting directly to the corporate board. See an illustration of this concept, taken from a book by Ted Kolderie, here: <http://tinyurl.com/2d724uv> .

Existing schools are trying to do exactly the things they do now, only do them better. It's that kind of 'remedy' that is the problem. In fact, as Ted Sizer pointed out, "it's hard to change much of the present system without changing everything. The result is paralysis."

He suggested we think in terms of 'just-in-time learning,' so that students obtain the basic competence and skills to learn when required by the self-directed activity they are engaged in. The Internet provides a limitless resource of free, quality information. Expertly created YouTube videos explain math concepts in a few minutes, and the resources for science, history and other topics are virtually limitless. If teachers don't need to do all the teaching, he asked, do we really need to have traditional schools when all this information is available?

Jennings described something he has done at schools before called 'sparks.' "We bring people in from the community to talk about their experiences, their interests, their lives, their challenges. One person brought in a huge dog, and talked about how much they eat, need to walk, what kind of shots it needs. A student might be "sparked" by such a discussion and get excited to learn more about veterinary science." Some students have discovered major areas of interest and undertaken serious study of a topic as a result.

### **Let those who want to do something different do it**

"Every school has people that want to do things differently, but few schools have something new that everyone can agree on." Most people who talk about change talk about improving the existing system. But it's always easier if you start something entirely new. Let people do things differently. Everyone does not have to agree-they should not all be expected to agree-in order for some to move forward on a new idea. "We should allow people inside schools, inside the existing system to try new things that they want to do."

Referencing a recent visit with the Civic Caucus by Walt McClure, a participant noted McClure's argument that if the architecture of a system is changed those inside it will adapt behavior in response to changed incentives. Jennings read the interview-did anything occur to him that applies to his own experience?

"I've thought of that a lot. We have administrators that want to change, but what happens is the middle management structure obstructs the change. So Walt's paper about incentives runs into that sort of problem."

He described a superintendent in Appleton, WI that has something like 10 different programs running in his district. "That is commendable, but it was almost impossible for him to do."

Jennings told an interesting story of a principal that took over the Wilson Campus school, and wiped out compulsory attendance along with 69 other changes by fiat, "taking on the department to do it." They soon found that compulsory attendance was not even needed. Students wanted to come to school. The Hole in the Wall experiment tells you that if school is structured correctly you won't be able to stop students from learning.

A superintendent once said: Teachers should hang a shingle out their door, and unless they attract students, they will have no job.

## **Save money in education through new models of staffing**

To save money, Jennings said that schools might enlist greater amounts of labor from students and could move to "differentiated staffing models" for the adults. For example, of the medical profession, 7% are doctors; of all education professionals, 60% are teachers. Not everyone in the school needs to be a highly credentialed expert to add value, he argued.

Also, the learning model can change from teachers presenting information in lectures to teachers coaching students who retrieve the information themselves-lessening the burden on the adults, improving productivity and effectiveness, and leveraging motivation. "When people talk about education they're talking about a teacher lecturing. Instead of talking about 'teachers,' I find it helpful to talk about them as 'facilitators of learning.'"

A participant asked Jennings whether he believes we can do these sorts of innovative things inside the existing structure? "We can try," he responded, but "I think there will be resistance. It is hard to make change within the system."

Teachers and administrators do not sufficiently get exposed to new ideas in education. "I think students that are preparing to be teachers need to see these new kinds of schools and be excited by them," he said. "I taught classes at St. Thomas, and used to tell the students that their final exam would be to design their own school of the future. Most came in to my class as conventional thinkers. During the 12-14 week course I introduced them to many different models. They would work together and by the end of the course they had developed very interesting and brilliant new learning models. Then they'd get angry-because they knew that they would probably never get to work in a school like the one they imagined."

The legislature could push districts to provide multiple kinds of schools and redefine the role of charters.

A participant asked Jennings if he could wave a wand, what is the one best thing the legislature could do this session for the long-term restructuring of E-12?

"I would say we have a Legislature that says 'I understand students learn in different ways,'" he replied, and then compels every district to have a minimum of three different kinds of schools for students to choose from. It is a source of pride that we have been a leader in open enrollment, he continued, but for the past eight years the state's progress in education has been stagnant.

Other possible actions for the legislature could include revising the charter law so that it more explicitly states that its purpose is innovation. "It does imply that now, but that's not really what the law is being used for. We have not gotten very far yet with chartered schools because most are simply reproducing the traditional ways of schooling." Those that go beyond the traditional "get slapped around by bureaucratic rules, such as 'go ahead and change but meet all the present rules and procedures.'" Instead he wants to see charters as places where robust research and development is undertaken.

Jennings said that he believes the legislature may play a significant role in education reform, in part because it has in the past. "Remember most of the big innovations came through the legislature, over the bitter resistance of educators. Remember open enrollment ('What are we now, the unions and administrators would ask...in competition with each other?!'), and Post Secondary Education Options,

fiercely resisted by some. I think the legislature is critical, but they need to hear from a broader constituency than just the department of education, the union, and administrators."

There are many more instruments for measuring success than we presently use, or know.

Basic skills in reading and math are important. But we don't test for anything more than these basic skills. "Something that's getting a lot of coverage now is the Hope Survey," an instrument that measures the outlook students have for their future, measuring growth in aspirations over time—an important indicator for future success. It is not in vogue, Jennings cautioned, but arguably more important than any conventional measure. (Find an article about the Hope Survey here: <http://tinyurl.com/266y2q6>.)

And there are other instruments out there—we just haven't paid enough attention to them, or encouraged their development. There are website communities, for example, where psychologists have come up with numerous, different tools to measure people. Various aspects of "success" are measurable. We just need to get at doing it.

"If we limit our objectives to attaining certain test scores,, how can we expect schools to be created that do anything other than teach to the test?" What gets measured gets done. "I don't think kids are learning enough in schools today, and I don't mean just with regard to international comparisons. There are important life-centered 21<sup>st</sup> century skills that are being ignored."

### **C. Closing**

To close Jennings reiterated that he does not have a lot of confidence that the people of Minnesota can work within the existing system to change education. "So I continue to advocate chartering as a way to accomplish change, but that way of creating schools has not yet yielded many new models."

The greatest untapped resource in our schools is that of the students themselves. They're like racecars at the start line, he said. They are there ready to go, and would like to do something real out in the world but the flag never falls. They're not being challenged.

Education has to be better, but don't get caught thinking that means better test scores. Education has to be better in the general sense. We have to free up creative people inside the systems and outside to develop parallel or competing models, "give them time to refine their features and assess results with real world measurements." Legislatures are still caught up in raising standards and test scores based on conventional subject matter.

"Free creative educators to form different kinds of programs with realistic 21<sup>st</sup> century goals, personalized rather than one-size-fits-all curriculum, facilitated learning through hands-on experience, and maximum effective use of technology. It's not the money that is the problem—it's the need to redesign schools."

Thank you, Dr. Jennings, for a very insightful meeting.