



# Ted Kolderie and Joe Graba, founding partners, Education|Evolving

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

*April 30, 2010*

**Present:** Verne Johnson (Chair); Ben Aase, Paul Gilje, Joe Graba, Jim Hetland, Curt Johnson, Lars Johnson, Ted Kolderie, Dan Loritz, Tim McDonald, John Parr, Clarence Shallbetter, Bob White

**A. Context of the meeting** - The people at Education|Evolving have recently completed a new strategy paper, Innovation-Based Systemic Reform, that emerges from five years of meetings, conversations, and thinking-through the challenges facing improvement of K-12. E|E is one of the places where redesign work is taking place. Read the paper here: <http://bit.ly/9crkHD>

Kolderie and Graba, the founding partners of the organization, were in Washington for this past week having a series of high-level meetings and visits with the Obama administration, National Educators Association, and with individuals and organizations. They will first discuss the nature of the paper, and then describe the reaction in Washington.

**B. Welcome and introductions** -Joe Graba and Ted Kolderie have been working together in the area of K-12 education for a couple of decades, from the perspective of large-system design.

With a belief that schools today are not capable of the kinds of improvement the country needs, they first worked on making change possible by opening the system and 'creating the capacity for change,' as a book by Kolderie was titled in 2004 ( <http://tinyurl.com/22svlk8> ).

Much of the country has gone now toward increased choice and competition inside the public sector of K-12, but the policy and popular discussions have stopped there-seeing choice and competition as ends in themselves, instead of means toward something more.

That next part-what Kolderie calls the second half of the strategy-is where Kolderie, Graba, and their colleagues have turned their attention now. They believe that to improve performance and lower costs schools will need to be radically different than they are now.

Joe Graba's career in public education spans 40 years and includes an impressive array of leadership positions that reflect the origins and evolution of both his and Education|Evolving's thinking on system reform and legislative policy. Joe began his career as a science teacher at Wadena Public Schools, and served three years as Vice President of the Minnesota Federation of Teachers. Most recently, he was Dean of Hamline University's Graduate School of Education.

In between Joe served three terms in the Minnesota House of Representatives, which included four years as Chair of Education Finance Committee. Following his legislative service he was appointed Deputy Commissioner of Education for the State of Minnesota, Director of Minnesota's Technical College System, Deputy Executive Director of the Minnesota Higher Education Coordinating Board, and Interim Executive Director of the Minnesota Higher Education Services Office.

Ted Kolderie has worked on system questions and with legislative policy in different areas of public life: urban and metropolitan affairs and public finance through the 1960s and '70s. He is most recognized nationally for his work on K-12 education policy and innovation, which he has focused on since the early 1980s. Ted was instrumental in the design and passage of the nation's first charter school law in Minnesota in 1991, and has since worked on the design and improvement of charter legislation in over seventeen states.

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

**1. K-12 problems similar to those of other systems with utility characteristics** —Kolderie opened: When you put education into context of other systems that had utility characteristics-the telephone system, postal service-you can see one after another hitting a wall. They found themselves unable to adjust to the changes in their customers and employees, unable to progress technologically, unable to control costs, unable to adjust fast enough to keep up with the changing needs of society or the economy.

"One after another went or are going through a major process of what we call 'disruption,' unable to respond to competition with a redesign of their own. This same experience by the way is about to occur with post secondary education."

**2. No new model prescribed; instead, make innovation possible** —The common trend of disruption is toward the unbundling of these systems. The question for K-12 has been how to respond. The effort of this paper is to advise K-12 how to respond. Instead of trying to prescribe a particular new model, the effort of this paper is to convince people to start a process of innovation. Let people in the schools try things that they think will work better.

"Out there in the policy world people normally take the existing arrangements as a given," Kolderie said. When the famous paper 'standards based reform' appeared in 1990, it accepted as a given the public-utility arrangement of K-12 education. Education|Evolving countered with the paper 'The states will have to withdraw the exclusive,' (<http://tinyurl.com/239ntc2>) which laid out the case for making it possible for entities other than the districts to create new schools; and so, for choice, and variability.

"The problem we see is that there's a very widespread sense that huge changes in education are inevitable, and desirable, driven by digital electronics and young peoples' capabilities." But in policy there is still a pervasive notion that the key is to perfect traditional school. This means there are efforts underway now in the federal government, which has a role in K-12 now that it never had before, to push very hard for better people in teaching, more rigorous standards. They do this without raising any fundamental questions about 'what is teaching,' and what is achievement/performance. People are talking about 'better school; not rethinking the definition of 'school'."

"The assumption is that the technology of learning is teacher-instruction, almost , as if learning were a transitive verb.

**3. Traditional assumptions about education need to be challenged** —In the nation's efforts at improving school, the speakers argued, the fundamentals are not being challenged or changed. They fall along three lines.

**First** there is the approach to learning. The technology of teacher instruction is batch-processing, and necessarily uniform. "We liken it to a bus driving down the road, with everyone on board and the teacher pointing things out along the way. Everyone moves at the same pace, nobody is able to get off and pursue something further." **Second**, people assume the traditional organization of a school as a boss/worker model. **Third**, especially in the current effort at national standards, people are very focused on conventional definitions of achievement.

In rethinking the approach to learning there is not so much resistance. "We were out at Education Week, the major industry weekly, and the current issue of their magazine about technology features an article about personalizing learning via electronics. There is an openness also to a testing of a professional model of school-organization. The big resistance comes when you suggest broadening the definition of achievement."

**4. Design is the issue, not performance** —The big problem, where they meet resistance, is the sense that 'we know now what works,' and that it is just a matter of better execution.

"Education leaders in the country, and particularly those inside the education establishment, have had an unspoken assumption that what we have is a performance problem. What we have instead is a design problem."

**5. OK to continue improving existing schools; but also allow innovation** —The strategy E|E advocates is that of the 'split screen': continue to improve existing schools, while at the same time innovating with new and different ways of doing things.

The so-called early adopters will move into that innovative side of the system. It is all opt-in. Not everyone will want to go there. Those who want to do that—parents, students, teachers, school leaders—should be allowed to do that. Nobody should be forced to go to an innovative school, but nobody should prevent it from happening.

**6. Too many people are fixated on "real" school** —The speakers met with Bill Tucker with the Education Sector upon first arrival, who warned that they would run into trouble because people in that town are not able to keep two things in their head. "There's a very interesting professor over at Madison," Kolderie recalled, "who says most people have in their mind a notion of what is 'real school.' It's a room, 30 students seated, a teacher in the front of the classroom, instructing." That is the one way they see it. It is difficult to understand there are different ways to do things.

The conventional model of school is pervasive. They met with Bill Galston, who used to be on staff at White House, and is at Brookings now. "He is adamant that no concept of innovation applies in K-12. Must not do that. The job is absolutely to perfect traditional school. Said that questioning our current definitions of achievement is absolutely the wrong way."

**7. Too much emphasis on choice?** —A member raised a concern about side effects of policies-in particular, in an age of choice it is difficult to keep neighborhood kids and/or groups of friends together through the years with so many options.

That is true, they agreed. It gets to the point, Kolderie said, that there are objectives parents have other than academics when choosing schools-important as academics are. It also emphasizes the need to operate a split screen strategy, as many people will still prefer the traditional district school .

**8. Refusing to open the door to innovation is an unacceptable risk for kids' future** —"We don't have particular school designs that we promote as innovations," Graba said, "but what we do have is a strategy. Our goal is to develop the policy framework that encourages and allows change to occur."

Nobody knows how the innovations will work out, as innovation is a process. So the country needs a process to uncover new ways of doing things. "In a situation where the future is uncertain, what do you do?" Create space to maneuver, and try different things.

To insist the door to innovation need not be open represents a risk. "It's not a necessary risk, and since it's not a necessary risk it is an unacceptable risk for policy makers to be taking with the country's future, and other peoples'children."

**9. This country will not be able to survive just by being proficient** —A member asked the speakers where the standards push is coming from. Kolderie said the 'No Child Left Behind' law provided for the states to set the standards, and for the national government to enforce the accountability; as, declaring a school was not making "adequate yearly progress' (AYP). As schools failed to make AYP the states reduced their standards and/or their passing-scores, creating a "race to the bottom".

So now wanting to avoid the term 'national standards,' there are to be "common" standards. After that will come national assessment. There is a strong desire for this process to be completed; not to be questioned.

**10. An agenda for excellence, not just equity, is needed** —Washington's historical involvement with K-12 has been in the taking care of disadvantaged children. Then in 90's through 2000's they made major initiatives in leveraging title I money to get into influencing policy.

"There's the equity end of public education, and NCLB has some very desirable aspects of it in the equity area. But our concern is that NCLB has so dominated the agenda out in the states that the agenda for excellence has moved off the table."

A member asked whether the traditional school is the model that should be used to work on equity. Graba expressed deep skepticism, saying that, "We've been working at this since 1983, and we haven't moved the needle hardly at all. It is quite possible innovation will be needed to implement the equity agenda.

"There has been so much focus getting students just up to the level of proficient, that it is regarded as off-target when people talk about what's up there, beyond proficient. But this country will not be able to survive just on proficient. We do not believe that this country will meet its needs in economic competitiveness with only the equity agenda, important as it is."

**11. Traditional learning style is squashing excellence** —Motivation and specialization are key to achieving excellence. They both must be allowed for in the system, and encouraged. But the factory model of school is uniform. And uniformity produces mediocrity.

Graba added that he has come to believe that in addition to the performance questions, the current system is not economically sustainable.

**12. Report from Washington** —Fresh on the heels of their trip to Washington, the speakers reported on the reaction to the paper.

**a. Progressive Policy Institute** —The Progressive Policy Institute hosted a meeting for them with people from foundations, policy organizations, the National Youth Rights Association, National Commission on Teaching and America's future, others. "We heard less agreement with Bill Galston's sentiment and more with ours."

**b. U.S. Department of Education** —Tuesday they went to the US Department of Education, carrying in particular the agenda of teacher professionalism-how schools are arranged, and who runs them.

There has been a major push across the country over the past 5-7 years about improving the quality of teachers. But the problem is not necessarily recruitment.

Richard Ingersoll, at Penn, says: We have a retention problem. And a big part of that problem is that teaching is not now a good enough job; a good enough career.

**c. Support for professional partnerships among teachers** —This gets E|E closest to a particular model that it supports-the Teacher Professional Partnership (explained here: <http://tinyurl.com/yzo8xn9> ).

They support it because it's not a particular model of instruction. It is an organizational model that acts as a platform for different ways to organize learning, and innovating.

"We think that we need an arrangement where teachers are asked to accept responsibility for success of students and success of schools-but only if, in return, teachers are given the authority to control what matters for student and school success.

"We think there are lot of problems could be figured out through the concept of professional practices in schools, and have teachers enter into collegial arrangements just like any other professional arrangement. There are around 60 schools in the country that run this. It is amazing how few people have thought about this possibility, they said.

**d. National Education Association** —They met with John Wilson, executive director of the National Education Association, who is favorable to the idea as a way to improve the character of the job for their interested members.

**e. Discussions on the professional partnership model** —They took to the meeting at the U.S. Department two teachers who work at schools that run on the professional partnership model—one from Avalon high school in Saint Paul, and another from an Hispanic bilingual elementary school in Milwaukee.

Kolderie and Graba had 18 or 20 of the top people in the Department of Education in this discussion, including secretary Arne Duncan. Also Joanne Weiss, who is running 'Race To The Top; Karen Cator running technology; Jim Shelton, running the innovation competition; the Secretary's counselor for teachers and unions; career staff. The whole thing went on for about an hour and a half.

The message here was narrowed-down from other meetings, from the general strategy to the teacher-professional agenda. "The teachers were very effective. We wanted them to talk about how they handle recruitment, management, compensation—all the issues others want to handle by strengthening management." These teachers made it clear the issues can be handled as well or better in the professional-partnership arrangement.

The reaction at the Department was favorable.

**f. Move government from being the provider to the buyer of education** —Mark Tucker has a proposal — Tough Choices or Tough Times —( <http://tinyurl.com/3azzj2> ), which he has been working on intensively now for some time trying to get district boards out of owning and operating the schools and moving them toward the districts running the schools on contract. Like the building trades model of a union, Graba said.

Tucker got the NEA to endorse the framework, in 2006. He's been working with John Wilson, now executive director of the NEA, on this sort of context. "When we went in to talk about this framework, he was quite supportive. They believe this is worth further explanation. We're confident we can get further discussions going."

A member asked whether this would be contracting out to private providers? In effect it is, Kolderie said. Paul Hill at the University of Washington talks about 'portfolio' districts (report: <http://tinyurl.com/2b86hr9> ), whereby the top policy-making body for the district manages four or five different arrangements of schools—state chartering, contracting, running schools themselves in the traditional utility model.

**13. Two main principles stressed in Washington meetings** — "We'd been advised by people that if you go into Washington you must have a fully-thought-out plan for what to do. That seems bizarre to us. It's just not possible to figure out ahead of time everything that's to be done. We've found it important to establish a couple of simple, powerful, ideas that can change the direction of thinking.

Kolderie and Graba stressed two principles during the meetings. The first was E|E firm belief that this country could be getting much more than it is from its students and its teachers. The second, which was the focus of their talks with John Wilson at the NEA, was the position of teachers in schooling. "Our deal with teachers has been that we don't give you professional authority, and you don't give us accountability. Cut a new deal: in exchange for real accountability we'll give you real authority."

One of the impacts of chartering has been the growth of districts around the country trying to emulate the same conditions as the chartered sector. Minnesota's 2009 Site-Governed Schools law, which gives districts the ability to create schools with similar exemption from state law, is another major step. They're all efforts toward the opening-up of the system. Otherwise you run into these complaints of charters having freedom and districts not.

A member commented "What I find inspirational is that you recognize there will be failures-but don't make people go into things. It's voluntary." The risk takers can take the risks, seeking a better return for the time they spend in schools.