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## **Disruptive Changes Will Invigorate Education**

Are Kansas schools ready for some disruption? It's coming their way, ready or not.

"Disrupting Class," a new book by Clayton M. Christensen, recently made the front page of *Education Week*, the Bible of the education industry.

It's easy to see why. Christensen, a Harvard professor who has studied the ways that businesses change over time, says that schools will soon face "disruptive changes." By 2020, half of all high school classes will be taught online.

Think for a minute about what that might mean. Students will get individualized, self-paced lessons and access to world-class instructors. Some will be able to take advanced classes currently unavailable to them. Students will become active participants rather than passive listeners.

How will all this affect schools? To borrow from Christensen, disruptively.

We've already seen the effects of technological innovations in the business world, where some companies die, others are born, and many are transformed. In the digital camera-age, Polaroid is a shell of its former self. K-Mart has been displaced by Wal-Mart. Pay-per-view cable and Netflix have decimated drive-in theaters.

Overnight delivery, a staple of many firms today, was practically invented by Fred Smith when he started FedEx. Wal-Mart grew from Sam Walton's single store to a global empire because it learned how to profit from tracking customer purchases. Bill Gates changed offices everywhere when he started Microsoft.

These life-altering innovations were introduced by new companies, not old ones. That's because most organizations, including many of today's schools, find it hard or even impossible to adapt to technological innovations, even ones that are in plain sight.

Why? One reason is organizational culture. Change is difficult, so why disrupt comfortable and predictable routines? Then there's the "not invented here" syndrome. Finally, managers, subordinates and even customers have vested interests in doing things they way they've always been done.

Some organizations, Christensen says, try to "cram down" new technology. They use it, but they fail to change their daily routines to make the best use of it. They pound a square peg into a round hole.

Today's schools, too, are "cramming down." They install computers and wire classrooms to the Internet. But their methods of selecting and paying teachers, evaluating students and selecting materials for the classroom remain the same.

Christensen says that when a disruptive change comes to an industry, you can first see it in "nonconsumers" and the companies that rise up to cater to them. In

education the nonconsumers include students who lack access to Advanced Placement classes, homeschooled students, and students who are academically failing.

Who will reach these nonconsumers? A new breed of charter schools, together with a new set of supervisory organizations. Virtual schools, too, will play a part—again offered and overseen by new organizations.

With few exceptions, the Kansas education sector has “crammed down” the latest technologies onto old organizations. In Arizona and some other states, charter schools that strip away old bureaucracies and red tape are valuable parts of the public school landscape. In Kansas, it’s hard to notice them.

Here’s one reason for the difference: Arizona created a new agency just to oversee charter schools. Kansas, by contrast, foisted charter schools onto its existing school system.

Some states, such as Florida, have set up entirely new organizations to offer or oversee virtual schools. Once again, Kansas depends on old organizations to deploy a new technology. A few districts, such as USD 497 Lawrence and USD 458 Basehor-Linwood, have done fairly well with the idea. But as the Division of Post Audit revealed in its April 2007 report, many school districts fail to properly manage this new way of educating students.

If Kansans are going to enjoy the full benefits of charter schools, online learning and other innovations in education, they will need their own versions of Fred Smith, Sam Walton, and Bill Gates.

To make it easier for innovative leaders to step forward, Kansas needs to accommodate choice across school and district boundaries. It must not discriminate against online schools. It can invigorate charter schools by creating new authorities to oversee and support them. Most importantly, it must focus not on schools as ends in themselves, but on education. If new organizations are required as part of the mix, so be it.

Technological and organizational change gives us temporary pain, but much greater gain. Disruptive education is coming to the nation. Kansas should make the most of it.

*John R. LaPlante is an Education Policy fellow with the Kansas-based Flint Hills Center for Public Policy. A complete bio on Mr. LaPlante can be found at <http://www.flinthills.org/content/view/24/39/>, and he can be reached at [john.laplante@flinthills.org](mailto:john.laplante@flinthills.org). To learn more about the Flint Hills Center, please visit [www.flinthills.org](http://www.flinthills.org).*