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Disruptive Changes Will Invigorate Education

By John R. LaPlante

Will the online world change the business of education? It better, says a Harvard professor. Clayton M. Christensen, author of "Disrupting Class," says schools will face "disruptive changes" as half of all high school classes will be taught online by 2020.

Online education offers many educational benefits, including individualized, self-paced lessons and access to world-class instructors. Students who don't have access to advanced classes now will then, and students will become active participants rather than passive listeners.

But these benefits will bring disruptive changes to schools. That's because when a technology is widely adopted and improves our lives, it changes some organizations and creates others. Fred Smith practically created the idea of overnight delivery when he started FedEx. Wal-Mart grew from Sam Walton's single store because it used technology to track customer preferences. Bill Gates changed offices everywhere when he started Microsoft.

Note that these changes came to our lives through new organizations, not old ones. Most existing organizations find it difficult to take advantage of technological innovations - even if they are in plain sight.

The blinders of organizational culture are partly to blame. Then there's the "not invented here" syndrome. Finally, managers, line workers and even customers have vested interests in doing things the way they've always been done.

When organizations do try to adopt new technology, they often fail to change their daily routines to make the best use of it. Many of today's schools do the same. They install computers and wire classrooms to the Internet, but they recruit teachers and select books the way they have done for decades.

Christensen says that when a disruptive change comes to an industry, you can first see it in "non-consumers" and the companies that rise to serve them. In education, non-consumers include students who attend schools that don't offer Advanced Placement classes, those who are home-schooled, and those who are failing.

The organizations that will best reach these non-consumers will probably include a new breed of charter schools as well as virtual schools.

With few exceptions, the Kansas education sector has bolted the latest technologies onto old organizations. In Arizona, charter schools that strip away old bureaucracies and red tape are making a difference. In Kansas, they're miniscule.

Why the difference? Here's one reason: Arizona created a new agency specifically to approve and oversee charter schools. Kansas, by contrast, foisted charter schools onto its existing public schools.

Some states, such as Florida, have set up entirely new organizations to offer virtual schools. Once again, Kansas depends on old organizations to deploy a new technology. A few districts have carried it out fairly well. But as the Division of Post Audit revealed, many districts fail to properly manage this new way of educating students.

How can Kansas education cultivate its own versions of Fred Smith, Sam Walton, Bill Gates and other agents of life-improving disruptive change? It should accommodate new models of schooling. Treat online schools fairly, and don't tie them exclusively to school districts. Invigorate charter schools by giving them an independent organization that provides oversight and guidance. Most importantly, focus not on schools as ends in themselves, but on education.

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.

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