The Los Angeles Charter School War and The Peace Dividend

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From Popular Innovation to Wedge Issue

In the space of a decade, charter schools in Los Angeles morphed from a highly popular innovation to a political wedge issue. One's favorability toward charters has become a political litmus test for school board elections, and efforts to regulate them have become front-page news. Plans to replace traditional, district-run schools with charters have been characterized as bringing the district to a tipping point. The question is "tipping to where"?

In the case of the Los Angeles Unified School District, "where" depends on how the ongoing battles over charter schools intersect with two realities.

First, the nation's second largest school system is in the midst of profound institutional change. LAUSD is not a failed

school district. It is not an unchanging monolith. It is an institution that is struggling to reshape itself, moving from early 20th Century assumptions about how to organize teaching and learning to a form better suited to our times. Often it does this unknowingly, because for the most part people within LAUSD have a strong institutional culture but a very weak institutional memory. They don't spend a lot of time trying to understand how they got to where they are.

Second, the politics surrounding the school district are dysfunctional. Simply put: the politics we've got won't get us the schools we need. Instead of crisis resolution we have gridlock, obscenely expensive trench warfare, and politics that turn our attention away from solutions that are staring us in the face.

Because charter schools have become the wedge issue in politics, it is through the politics surrounding them that a new district will emerge. This short paper places the current charter school wars in historical context and suggests a way forward.

The Progressive Era Heritage

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sought to take running schools out of partisan politics and into the realm of a professionally managed public bureaucracy. College training and licenses were required for teachers and administrators. Civil service rules governed their hiring, not patronage. Superintendents and other top administrators were appointed rather than being elected. The school system was almost entirely separated from city government and mayoral control, and school board elections were separated from those for city council.

By the 1920s, Los Angeles public schools became the epitome of Progressive Era reforms. The schools created a complex, integrated hierarchy that provided a wide array of social services as well as elementary and secondary education. High school enrollment and graduation soared in the pre-World War II years, and the school board of community elites mirrored the ethos of the local business elite. It was considered the Best in the West, a school district that others could emulate, and did.

Challenging the Old Institution

Like many big city school systems, Los Angeles experienced wrenching demographic changes in the years following 1950. In the space of 50 years, a student body that had been 85 percent white and mostly middle class became nearly 85 percent students of color, many immigrant, mostly poor.

At the same time, the city underwent equally dramatic social and economic changes. Its manufacturing economy collapsed, many of the largest corporations were bought or merged. The business elite lost its iron grip on the city's politics. By the 1990s, Los Angeles again became the port of immigration, and the city's schools filled with immigrant children, just as they had a century earlier.

The school district's loss of political legitimacy has been largely a function of its inability to adequately respond to these changes, particularly racial diversity and desegregation. Desegregation lawsuits and racial politics, which began in the 1960s, were followed by student activism, collective bargaining, and a property tax limitation revolt.

Heroic Reform Efforts

There have been heroic efforts at system-wide reform. From 1993 to 1999 a classic big city coalition of corporate chiefs (mostly from businesses that no longer exist), community voices, and the head of United Teachers Los Angeles produced an elegant plan, called LEARN, to radically decentralize the district, give power and voice to teachers and principals, and to support schools with professional development.

As Robert Wycoff, the president of ARCO petroleum and LEARN's chair, said when he presented the plan to the school board in March 1993, LEARN was not a micro level blueprint for

fixing schools. "Instead," he said," it is the beginning of a new school system."

When I told former mayor Richard Riordan that I was going to write about the LEARN reforms, he responded, "That's easy; LEARN failed." It's true, LEARN did not transform the school district as its supporters had promised. But the important thing to remember about LEARN is not that it failed but that it almost worked. It was an audacious plan.

Before LEARN withered in the late 1990s, more than half the schools in the district signed up for the autonomy and training it offered for teachers and administrators. In many ways, LEARN was the parent of the current charter movement and innovations within district-run schools, such as Pilot schools.

I know why LEARN failed. It didn't fail for any of the reasons that people point to. It wasn't the union, even though there were LEARN opponents within United Teachers Los Angeles. It wasn't recalcitrant administrators, although there certainly were many of them. It was the incapacity of LAUSD to implement and sustain reforms that defeated LEARN.

The district had been hollowed out.

The old institution of public education, which had been put in place in 1903, when the school district was separated from city government, was built on the assumption of high trust and the schools' freedom from external interference. In *Learning*

from L.A., we tell the story of how, beginning in the 1960s, the Progressive Era institution of public education in Los Angeles was discredited, delegitimated, and ultimately hollowed out to the extent that it lost the capacity to undertake substantial reforms.

For three decades, what would be called "a perfect storm" of court cases, teacher unionization, tax limitation measures, and legislative activism moved the money and momentum for education policy to Sacramento and Washington.

After Proposition 13 removed its taxing authority in 1978, the school board had no fiscal capacity. And after board members were elected from districts rather than citywide, they began to see themselves as representatives of a specific constituency rather than the whole city.

When LEARN collapsed in 1999, many of its supporters followed another way to create school autonomy: charter schools.

Cases in point: Virgil Roberts was a civil rights attorney who supported the plaintiffs in the L.A. desegregation case. He was part of almost every school reform effort in the 1980s and 1990s. He's now on the board of Great Public Schools Now. Judy Burton was the assistant superintendent in charge of implementing LEARN. She went on to the head the Alliance charter group. There are scores of others.

Financial Weakness

The hollowing out of the district's capacity is made worse by LAUSD's perilous financial condition. A blue ribbon review panel called together by former superintendent Ramon Cortines projected a $333-million budget deficit by 2017-18 and a $600-million deficit by 2019-20, driven primarily by pension and health care costs.

The report concluded, "Thus, if the District desires to continue as a going concern beyond FY 2019-20, capable of improving the lives of students and their families, then a combination of difficult, substantial and immediate decisions will be required. Failure to do so could lead to the insolvency of the LAUSD and the loss of local governance authority that comes from state takeover."

Charter schools add significantly to the fiscal threat. Enrollment drives revenue in California, where stable property taxes make up only a small part of the schools' revenue base. And over the last decade, LAUSD has lost 100,000 students, significantly more than the entire student population of Long Beach. About half the decline is attributable to changes in demographics: aging families and a decline in immigration. But the other half represents students who have left district-run schools for charters, 50,000 of them.

Permanent Crisis Mongering

In the last chapters of, *Learning From L.A.*, we declared LAUSD to be in permanent crisis, essentially a condition in which the district is repeatedly declared to be failing and in which there are no long-term winners in the battle over its direction.

How did we get that way?

During the 1999 school board campaign, *The Los Angeles Times* asked candidates whether the district was in crisis. All of the challengers—including Yolie Flores and Caprice Young—said yes. Of the incumbents, only David Tokofsky agreed. Of the incumbents, only he survived.

The lesson was clear: crisis mongering can get you elected. It's been a campaign tactic ever since.

Since 1999, school board elections and superintendent selections have divided self-styled "reformers," who favor charter schools and tough-minded relationships with United Teachers Los Angeles from what might be called "incrementalists," who believe that the district is making progress and can best be improved by creating stability to work the existing district management.

Others have likened the battles between the two sides to trench warfare, and they are not far off. The battles have been vicious and enormously costly. Although it is impossible to total the cost because of the amount of dark money behind school board campaigns, it is reasonable to assert that LAUSD board

contests in the last decade have been the most expensive in the history of the republic.

The board majority has shifted back and forth and this, in turn, has led to instability in the district's top leadership, not only the superintendency but also among the second and third level administrative staff. Meanwhile, charter schools have continued to grow.

Charter Schools Emerge, Grow

In 1992, just as the LEARN reforms were beginning inside LAUSD, Gov. Pete Wilson signed SB 1448, the second charter school law in the nation following Minnesota's. Its author, Gary K. Hart (D-Santa Barbara), described it saying, "We are trying to break out of the bureaucratic, legalistic mode that is so frustrating to many people." LEARN's sponsors had said much the same thing.

From the outset of LEARN, there were those in its leadership who believed that decentralization and autonomy within the district would naturally lead to schools later seeking charter status, but the LEARN plan never mentioned such a metamorphosis.

Charters in LAUSD

In 1993, the year after California's charter law was passed, LAUSD had one independent charter and six "affiliated charters," schools granted operating autonomy while remaining in the district. Together they enrolled 3,069 students.

In 2016–2017, there were 225 independent charter schools and 54 affiliated charters. Together, they enroll 154,000 students, the largest charter school enrollment in the country. Indeed, charter schools in Los Angeles would constitute the second largest school district in California and the 17th largest school district in the United States, about the same size as the Dallas (Texas) Independent School District (See Table 1 below).

Most of the independent charter schools are operated by charter management organizations (CMO), the Alliance for Public Schools with 12,241 students and Green Dot Public Schools with 10,013 students being the largest of them.

In addition to charters, the district includes several unconventional operating and governance arrangements for schools, many of which are "choice" schools in the sense that their students do not necessarily reside in the neighborhood surrounding the school.

Charter School Growth and Enrollment
Table 1

	Independent Charter Schools	Independent Charter Schools Norm Enrollment	Affiliated Charter Schools	Affiliated Charter Schools Norm Enrollment	Total Number of Charter Schools	Total Norm Enrollment
1992-93	0	0	0	0	0	0
1993-94	1	1057	6	2,012	7	3,069
1994-95	3	2,107	7	3,578	10	5,685
1995-96	3	2,219	9	6,466	12	8,685
1996-97	4	3,354	9	6,726	13	10,080
1997-98	4	3,434	10	8,002	14	11,436
1998-99	5	3,598	16	11,280	21	14,878
1999-2000	7	4,137	26	18,800	33	22,937
2000-01	10	4,910	26	21,426	36	26,336
2001-02	13	6,111	26	21,806	39	27,917
2002-03	24	9,164	26	21,887	50	31,051
2003-04	41	19,782	8	5,476	49	25,258
2004-05	58	23,827	10	6,408	68	30,235
2005-06	76	29,105	10	6,331	86	35,436
2006-07	93	34,764	10	6,307	103	41,071
2007-08	114	40,658	11	6,860	125	47,518
2008-09	137	51,087	11	6,999	148	58,086
2009-10	150	60,643	11	7,270	161	67,913
2010-11	171	69,935	12	8,281	183	78,216
2011-12	179	82,788	19	14,109	198	96,897
2012-13	185	89,112	43	30,080	228	119,192
2013-14	196	95,381	52	41,571	248	136,952
2014-15	211	101,060	53	41,979	264	143,039
2015-16	221	107,142	53	41,555	274	148,697
2016-17	225	111,559	54	43,094	279	154,653

Source: LAUSD Charter Schools Division

There are also unique operating arrangements, such as The Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, which enrolls 14,000 students in 18 schools.

LAUSD operates Magnet schools, Pilot schools that are essentially in-district charters, and schools with a variety of self-governing options.

About a quarter of the students within the LAUSD boundaries go to classes in other than traditional attendance-zone defined schools.

The Charter Wars

In September 2015, *Los Angeles Times* reporter Howard Blume disclosed a $490-million plan to create 260 new charter schools, which would create a school system in which the majority of students attended charters. The effort headed by the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation created a new, sharp political line. Although the scope of the plan has diminished and the Great Public Schools Now organization has included district magnet schools in its scope of benefactions, the idea of a chartered district has become a political front line.

As I wrote at the time, "this effort is not a gracious attempt to rescue students from 'failing public schools' or to provide an innovative learning experience. It's an effort to transform the century-old institution of public education. As the Broad plan says, "Thanks to the strength of its charter leaders and teachers, as well as its widespread civic and philanthropic support, Los Angeles is uniquely positioned to create the largest, highest-performing charter sector in the nation. Such an exemplar would serve as a model for all large cities to follow."

To no one's great surprise, a massive counter-attack followed. As expected, the fight has spread from Los Angeles to statewide politics, and, as this is written, the legislature is considering bills to more heavily scrutinize charter approvals.

It is reasonable that philanthropists would support charters. Founders of charters are, by definition, entrepreneurial and they fit perfectly with the contemporary thrust of venture philanthropy. By investing in charters, philanthropists, some of whom were greatly disappointed by efforts to work within LAUSD, can see where their investments go and can judge whether they are paying off. Charters are an easier, more sure, investment than trying to change a large public school district directly.

But adding more charters doesn't constitute a plan for public education, even if all schools become charters. With the possible exception of New Orleans, every effort I know of to use philanthropic money to blow-up, take over, and kill the old culture of a public school system has failed.

A case in point: Dale Russakoff's book *The Prize: Who's in Charge of America's Public Schools?* tells the story of Newark and Mark Zuckerberg's $100-million gift. It should be required reading to anyone with a checkbook and public school reform hubris.

So, while it is not unreasonable that charter schools are attractive to philanthropists who are weary of trying to reform big city school districts, it is deeply irresponsible for charter school advocates not to specify the kind of school system that emerges from the endgame of their charter school expansion plan. The Broad plan talks about a tipping point. Tipping to where?

At a minimum, the charter community should step up and specify how it thinks the market in schooling would work. Every deregulated industry I know of turns into a price-fixing oligopoly that gives lousy service and beats up on its customers. Think about how California fared with the Texas price fixers during the electricity crisis or how much you enjoy flying on one of the four airlines that control 80% of the market in the United States.

Charters are Parasitic

On its face, the Broad plan calls for replacement. It contains not a single sentence about how the existing school district would benefit, except perhaps through the spur of competition. But replacement is not benign. It leaves behind a school district less capable of transformation, more obsessed with fulfilling its statutory duties with fewer resources. To recall Economics 101: in periods of decline, marginal revenue—what school districts get per student—falls faster than their costs.

For many who call themselves school reformers, replacement is just dandy. The sooner that we can rid ourselves of school boards, union contracts, old fashioned due process job protections, and requirements for transparency, the better, the logic goes. But there's a problem that will quickly confront those who want to vastly increase the numbers of charter students in Los Angeles. Charter schools are parasitic.

Like mistletoe and Spanish moss, they depend on the health of their host to keep them alive. Only because LAUSD is at least semi-healthy can it maintain a charter schools office, process applications, have some small measure of quality control over renewals, and operate the schools to which students return when they don't fit with a charter school's program. Public district schools also absorb students when a charter or charter management organization fails.

When there is no district, or not much of one, charter schools have to reinvent one, and it is the process of school district reinvention that make the New Orleans example most interesting. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina 10 years ago, New Orleans has become nearly an all-charter district. The early years were of necessity spent building and making individual schools work. The current challenge in New Orleans is to rebuild the system of schools, and both sides of the charter school war in Los Angeles could learn from their effort.

Charter advocates have a clear self-interest in seeing that the district's finances are solid. They may point fingers at fiscal mismanagement within LAUSD. Indeed, the recent independent review panel report indicates that the district has nearly 65,000 employees, more now than before the enrollment decline. But a financial default by the district would greatly affect charter financing and operations, too.

Even if the California Legislature did not intervene to restructure the district, perhaps voiding existing charter agreements in the process, a financial overseer appointed by the state would gain broad powers over how and when funds were spent. Investing philanthropic dollars in charters would become riskier and so would the prospects for raising funds for any charter or district reform plan.

So, in the end—or maybe in the beginning—it makes sense for the charter advocates to use their business acumen and political clout to see that the district itself is fiscally healthy before opening more charter schools.

Expanding Charters v. Improving the District

One of the lessons from school reform efforts in other cities is that it is very difficult to expand charter offerings and improve district-run schools at the same time. Newark, New Jersey's, reform scheme tried to do both, but it left Cami Anderson, the superintendent brought in to implement district

reforms, with a hopeless task. Charters were disproportionately attracting "the choosers."

Despite demographic similarities, the populations attending district and charter schools are different. "[P]arents who are savvy and proactive about their children's education—the kinds of parents who give their kids a head start on their schooling—are more likely to find out about charter schools in the first place, attend their meetings, enter the lotteries for admission and then help their children succeed at those schools," said a *Los Angeles Times* editorial.

The effects of more motivated students and families moving to charter schools has implications that go beyond losing attendance-based state and federal revenue. As the editorial said, "another important question as the number of charter schools grows is what the effect will be on the culture of schools and on their achievement levels as more motivated parents and their children abandon district schools."

In Russakoff's *The Prize*, Anderson calls chartering "the lifeboat theory of education reform." She added, "I told the governor [Chris Christie] that I did not come here to shuffle the deck chairs on the Titanic. I did not come here to phase the district out." She told the mayor and state superintendent, "Your theories [of chartering and district reform] are on a collision course."

In Washington, D.C., Superintendent Kaya Henderson said, "I think we are now at a point where the citizens in the city are saying, 'How do these two systems work together because it doesn't make sense to us?'"

We've known about the active, choosing-parent phenomenon for decades. The 50-year rush to the suburbs was as much fueled by a search for better schools as it was for better housing. And every major city in the U.S. exhibits a flight of the professional middle class to private schools. Although the overall private school attendance in Los Angeles is quite low—it was about 10% in 2000—in some upper income neighborhoods it exceeds 50%. In New Orleans, the laboratory for the charter school experiment, a quarter of the city's children attend private schools, and those schools are 50 percent white compared to the district and charter schools which are 92 percent students of color.

The "chooser" issue will be particularly important as the demographics of Los Angeles change. In a reversal of the trend over the past half-century, the core of Los Angeles is becoming popular as a place of residence for the young and well educated. The critical question for LAUSD is whether its schools will be attractive to them or whether they will shun district schools in favor of charters or private schooling. The idea of "common

schooling," an American hallmark since the early 19th Century, hangs in the balance.

The Peace Dividend: A Design for a 21st Century School System

I haven't calculated the cost of the charter school wars. It may be impossible. The peace dividend lies in what might be possible, but isn't now. Because the current battle lines in the charter war perpetuate stalemate, a productive peace requires creating a new goal, so that the question becomes how to design a 21st Century school system rather than whether the old system should have more or fewer charters.

While the gap between how school systems are designed and the performance we expect of them is most apparent in urban schools, but it exists everywhere. Most reforms—including most charter schools—tinker within the existing learning system of classes, semesters, lessons, and memory recall tests.

Instead, California and Los Angeles should be a world leader in personalization, adaptivity, delivering educative content directly to students. But the possibilities of designing new learning systems have not been made sufficiently vivid to gain political champions and supporters.

Neither the charter school expansion advocates nor those pushing back against them have publicly acknowledged the need to create a fundamentally different school system than the one put in place a century ago. But pivoting away from debating more or

fewer charters and toward designing a truly modern school system provides a window for a political breakthrough if someone had the moxie and political clout to take advantage of it.

At the end of *Learning from L.A.* we suggest some policy levers that might move the huge school system toward reinvention. Given a decade's hindsight, I'd amend those ideas with the following design principles:

1. Continue Decentralization

In 1967, prodded by the U.S. Department of Justice, the District began to plan in response to its changing student demographics. What was called the Planning Team produced a major reform plan with four elements—decentralization, grassroots involvement, higher standards for all, and greater variety and choice—found in virtually every subsequent plan.

Though reform plans and superintendents have come and gone, the trend toward more decentralization continues. In addition to more than 250 charters, the school district has three brands of semi-autonomous schools: 49 Pilot schools, 24 Extended School Based Management schools, and 21 Local School Initiative schools. There are also 23 Magnet schools.

A 21st Century LAUSD should build on this trend.

2. Build Networks, Not Little Hierarchies

LAUSD has been less successful in decentralizing its management structure. The numbers of local district offices, and

the powers assigned them, have waxed and waned over various administrations. Generally, new superintendents tend to centralize management as a means of asserting their authority and control, and those with more experience tend to decentralize operations.

The failure of LAUSD to successfully decentralize its operations has given rise to repeated calls to break up the district. Smaller hierarchies have advantages, but they are not the only plausible future for the nation's second largest school district.

Consider, for a moment, the inherent operational and political advantages of network style organizations.

Operationally, large, integrated civil service hierarchies were idealized as the "good government" form of public schooling in the early 20th Century, and LAUSD became one of the most complete and best-developed example of this Progressive Era idea. And it just kept getting bigger, growing as the city grew and absorbing surrounding school districts until 1964.

But computer technology and experience with organizations such as cooperatives, franchises, and loosely coupled cellular organizations point to the operating advantage of 21st Century network design. Largely autonomous subunits link with one another to provide support, training, idea generation, and economies of scale.

Network Design

Network design is one of the ways that LAUSD can effectively decentralize, a goal that school reformers in Los Angeles have chased for four decades. The basic idea is to devolve as much operating authority to individual schools as possible, then let the schools link with one another in networks.

Network style organizations represent a way to merge LAUSD's trend toward autonomous schools and its struggle to decentralize. Five years ago, I thought that LAUSD would recognize the inherent logic of what it is becoming and organize around it. But the battle about and with former superintendent John Deasy intervened.

The district needs to be legally enabled to follow this developmental path by creating legally autonomous networks of schools. Legal autonomy is important because it would remove the self-governing status from the favor or disfavor of an incumbent superintendent or school board. (This is what happened with the network idea in New York City, which was overly identified with the Bloomberg-Klein administration.)

The logical geographic form of an autonomous network would be a high school and its feeder schools, something like the clusters that the 1990s reform LEARN envisaged. But there are non-geographic forms, too. A cluster could form around a neighborhood or a pedagogical idea, like New Tech Schools or Big Picture Schools. Functioning clusters already exist within some

charter management organizations, and the autonomous cluster idea would provide them a link to LAUSD as a kind of holding company.

Given legal authorization, the District could entertain petitions to form autonomous clusters from teams of existing school managers. It could entertain petitions from charter management organizations. It could encourage and support groups of teachers to develop self-managing schools. There is experience about how to do this, and how not to, in the recent Public School Choice initiative.

Advantages of Networks

Evolving LAUSD into autonomous operating units offers several advantages.

First, the networks could be smaller and more nimble than the proposed school districts. Historically, breakup plans envisaged five or six districts, creating a series of 100,000 student districts, a size thought to be well beyond the economies of scale for schools.

Second, borrowing from charters and other innovators could take place without requiring teachers and administrators to leave the school district, its employment security, fringe benefits, and pension plan. By privileging innovation in the charter sector—through philanthropic support—essentially we have told educators that to be an innovator you must first put your job and the financial security of your family on the line.

Third, autonomous networks could be created gradually, as people are capable and willing to form them. History tells us that trying to move all the pieces of LAUSD together is difficult, as the recent history of mandating that all high school students take a college-ready "A through G" curriculum reveals. The autonomous network idea can serve as an aspirational goal, one that allows training and development, team building, and commitment among the school staffs involved rather than ritual compliance with a central office mandate.

Fourth, the autonomous network idea would allow grassroots connection between schools and communities to deepen without the cumbersome governance arrangement of a multiplicity of elected school boards, such as Chicago tried. Grassroots participation would also extend to immigrant families, whose members would not necessarily be citizens and thus be eligible to run for office or to vote.

3. Create a Big Tent

Los Angeles needs an organization that makes all its publicly financed schools work together.

Experience in New Orleans, Newark, Washington, DC, and other cities indicates that there needs to be systemic coherence.

Increasingly, charter-friendly writers and activists, such as Andy Smarick, are coming to the conclusion that simply adding more charters doesn't fix a city's education system.

Writing in the Fordham Institute blog, Smarick lauds Washington DC's charter sector, but sees the overhanging systemic issue. "We have two sectors [charter and district], scores of operators, and hundreds of campuses, but we don't have a coherent system of schools," he writes.

If groups of schools gained autonomy, what would LAUSD become? It would still be the public school district for Los Angeles and the other municipalities where its schools are located, but it would operate more as a coordinating institution than a conventional school district.

A Portfolio

LAUSD would be an operating school district. It would run some schools directly. Others would be run by charters, CMO's, groups of teachers, by university partners, or the teachers union. Like a public pension fund or a private investment trust, LAUSD would authorize the best schools it could, and it would nurture and grow new schools.

"Portfolio of schools" has been applied to this idea, but that phrase has picked up negative political baggage associated with outsourcing and for-profit providers. I think that's the wrong image and an inaccurate description.

The network idea is more bottoms-up: groups of schools, geographic or not, that want to work together. They build

capacity and then gain permission for autonomous operation from
the distict.

LAUSD would retain oversight capability, and it would have
sufficient power to alter or deny network agreements and
restructure low-performing networks. But it would not be a "day
trader" opening and closing schools because of test score dip or
rise; it would operate more as an urban farmer. (It's
interesting to recall that the Public School Choice program
quickly morphed into an effort built around cooperation and
assistance rather than competition.)

All the schools would have the same accountability rules for
outcomes. The data systems for all schools and networks would be
compatible. They wouldn't have to be the same system, just
operate on the same data conventions and specifications.

Autonomous networks would be reviewed periodically, perhaps
every five years in an examination that was paired with
accreditation. But the district would retain no managerial or
operating authority over the autonomous schools or the schools
within them.

An Incubator of New Schools
Second, LAUSD would be an incubator of new schools and
educational practices. In this way, charters could better serve
as research and development laboratories for the larger district,
one of the intentions that the founders of the charter movement

had for them. Partnerships with universities and charters could be built around innovation rather than routine service delivery or rudimentary professional development; those would be the functions of the autonomous networks.

Collaboration with private, for-profit organizations might become beneficial rather than toxic. Think, for a moment, how the ill-fated relationship between Apple, Pearson, and LAUSD might have worked if the arrangement was designed to develop and test new modes of learning instead of imposing an inadequately developed system at an impossible scale.

Quality Control Agency

Third, LAUSD would become the quality control agency for public schooling in Los Angeles. Consistent with the requirements of the state Local Control Accountability Plan, it could monitor the development and execution of plans before handing them off to the county office, as the statute requires.

Real accountability means good metrics and going beyond them. Creating the conditions for active learning and borrowing of best practices from school to school, from teacher to teacher, is much different from finding a perfect curriculum and mandating everyone to use it. Real accountability is as much process as it is an endpoint rating.

4. Design With Extreme Empathy

When I interviewed Tim Brown, CEO of the design firm IDEO, about the process of rethinking systems he said, "The first step is building empathy for the stakeholders in the system." In a school system, that means starting with the students and working out. Any idea that does not successfully motivate a student will ultimately fail.

In order to focus on students, the adults need to get beyond their self-serving partisan scripts. Stop the mantras that charter schools are the province of "billionaires and privatizers," or that "older teachers are inherently grifters, only in it for their pensions" or "charters are saving kids from failing public schools." There are no saints in this war, only interest groups, and real differences about those interests.

The moralizing evoked over the last 20 years is helping no one.

Los Angeles needs a real design studio where people can check their ideology at the door and work at being hard on the problem rather than vicious to one another. That may be one of the roles that partnership organizations, such as the L.A. Compact, should play.

Start with the lives of real students, not statistical profiles. Follow them through the day and week. Understand their context and families. Learn how they process information in school and outside. Then think about how to do school better.

Build prototypes rapidly. Try them out. Don't try to
create universal solutions.

5. Solve Structural Problems

Part of building to last involves solving big structural
fiscal problems that endanger any reform or transformation
problem at LAUSD.

It's important that political and legal attention be
directed toward solving the pension problem, funding special
education, and making the Local Control Financing System work.

Because the problems are so contentious, some special
structure is probably needed. The high-level commission created
by former superintendent Cortines, painted an alarming picture of
the district's vulnerabilities, as have previous internal
reports. None of these has been sufficient to spur action. The
state needs to create a body with sufficient authority to solve
the pension problem.

6. Create a New Learning Infrastructure

Some years ago, I started looking at new forms of learning.
The harder I looked, the more I realized that the way out of
permanent crisis was a new version of education: make investments
in it and build political support around those ideas and
investments.

The good news is that we have it within our reach to break
down the batch processing system that the Progressive Reformers

brought to us from industrial manufacturing a century ago. Public education is now in an unusual situation in which relatively small investments in learning infrastructure can have substantial impact in terms of capacity building and systems changing.

What I call Learning 2.0 is partly about technology, but mostly about how humans do their work. It recognizes that students are the real workers in this system: see Design with Empathy, above. It's about personalization, adaptation, and continuous improvement. It's about rapid prototyping of new ideas rather than waiting for a textbook publisher to run the gauntlet of state approvals. It's about empowering teachers as intellectuals.

It's about building a learning infrastructure that is available to every student, public or private, charter or district, extending the schoolhouse into the community and into the home.

Bringing new production ideas to Los Angeles is not as difficult or abstract as it may seem.

Move Beyond Batch Processing
Our predecessors in the Progressive Era, circa 1903, created the first full version of public education. If education were software, it would be Learning 1.0, a batch processing system creating age-graded schools, a scope-and-sequence curriculum, and

the enduring Carnegie Unit system of counting credits toward high school graduation. Most everything else followed: standards, tests, school rankings.

But the batch processing system has severe design limitations. If your learning style doesn't fit within the batch, tough luck. The same problems arise if you learn slower or faster than most students, or if the standard curriculum doesn't excite you.

The good news is that we have it within our reach to break down the batch processing system. Radical personalization is now possible. Public education is now in an unusual situation in which relatively small investments in learning infrastructure can have substantial impact in terms of capacity building and systems changing. Partly because of Internet technology, we have the capacity to create learning 2.0, the next full-scale version of public education, and it is possible to do so without the political costs of frontal attack on existing interests.

Students as the Real Workers

Recognizing that students are the real workers, it provides them the tools they need to learn, when and where they need them. Providing learning tools to students stokes their motivation. For example, just providing students clear information about standards and learning objectives is likely to help them self-direct. A student at Jefferson High School told me, "I'm a

sophomore; I should be a junior, but I messed up last year, didn't get my work done. Now, (I'm in a personalized program and) I know how to take responsibility for what I do." There is a lot of freedom to learn in different ways within Learning 2.0, but it's not permissive.

Help English Learners

LAUSD might prototype such a student motivating system with its English learners. Suppose that Los Angeles' philanthropists came to understand that adding another 100 charter schools wouldn't help very much, but that building a learning infrastructure for English learners would.

I am not a second language educator and won't dive into the details of a learning system for English learners, but just from a design perspective it would have three elements:

First, it would get information directly to students and their parents. I've spent time in classrooms where a student's teacher is aware of what progress a student is making, but where the student is unaware of what they needed to do to move up the achievement ladder to be reclassified as English fluent.

Gaining the coveted "reclassification" status is extremely important for students. The data clearly show that students who begin school as English learners and are not reclassified by the 5th grade face grim prospects in school. But reclassification means more than learning English; it means mastering the EL

teaching and testing system, which has multiple hurdles. Just as professional middle class families understand that getting a child into a selective college means more than studying hard in high school, EL students and their parents need to know the procedural steps and hurdles involved.

A sophisticated version of this system would have it connecting with a school and district student information system, but it would not have to start out with such a connection.

Second, a learning system for EL students would provide direct and supplemental instruction. Mobile devices, such as phones and tablets, are extremely efficient delivery mechanisms for supplementary instruction, vocabulary building, training the ear to the nuances of language, and even speech instruction.

Third, the EL system should work to allow students to test their own achievement and get formative feedback.

A parallel system should be built at the teacher level, and, as with the student systems, should be made modular and customizable. Teaching resources, networking, and professional development should be available on demand for teachers.

None of this need start from ground zero. There are both open source and proprietary products that can be skillfully combined without falling prey to the problems of the Apple/Pearson/LAUSD iPad contract.

Conclusion: Why Don't We Claim the Peace Dividend?

The politics of charter schooling have produced ugly and debilitating warfare. Neither party to the war grasps the larger issue of an institution in transition. There is a large peace dividend to be claimed, but there is no political will or apparent incentive to do so. That's bad.

Los Angeles once had a large, traditional big-city alliance of business, civic, and labor leaders brought together to reshape the school district. I believe it is time to revisit that idea.