

Can Self-Directed Education Exist In Public Schools?

Last week on this blog's Facebook page I asked: "Do you think Self-Directed Education (SDE) can be integrated into the current public schooling model?"

Responses ranged from "no way" to "anything is possible," with commenters pointing out the key factors that would need to exist to make it work: increasing parental empowerment and mobilization; loosening compulsory schooling regulations; trusting children more and weakening the authoritarian structure of modern schooling; investing in smaller schools and classrooms.

I particularly like The Open School's reply: "Why would you want to? That would be like trying to convert your car into a lawn mower. You'd stick a blade on the bottom of it? Reduce the engine size? You would still have a hard time making tight turns and probably either get stuck or go too fast and crash. It would be cheaper, faster, and more reliable to sell the car and buy a lawn mower. We already have working SDE schools. But most people don't want SDE."

I agree with The Open School that we already have working models of SDE, but I am not convinced that most people don't want it. I think most people don't know about SDE. For those who do know about it there is increasing interest in this education philosophy, but the model remains inaccessible to the majority of parents because SDE schools and learning centers are currently private and tuition-based, and we don't have a working education choice system to enable parents to access these schools through vouchers, tax credits, education savings plans, etc. A robust choice system would also prompt the entrepreneurship that would create more of these SDE spaces in more places for more families. I also agree that repurposing the car (public school model) into the lawn mower (SDE) is ineffectual; we need to start-over and invest in an entirely new model of public education.

This week I wrote about a Massachusetts high school that is trying to do just that. In my guest blog post for the education journal *Education Next*, based out of the Harvard Kennedy School, I write about the Powderhouse School in Somerville, Mass. It won a \$10 million innovation grant to build (literally) an entirely new public (non-charter) high school focused on the principles of Self-Directed Education. Alec Resnick, the school's founder and principal, writes: "We think the future of learning doesn't look anything like school. It looks much more similar to work: much more ambiguous, much more interdisciplinary."

Powderhouse is a promising example of how public education focused on learning over schooling could work. But I am still skeptical that this experiment can be scaled within the existing mass schooling apparatus.

It is important to understand that the only reason Powderhouse is able to do what it is attempting to do is that it has been able to completely bypass existing district policies, regulations, and union contracts through Massachusetts's Innovation Schools initiative. Essentially, it is a public school that operates nothing like a public school. I would like to believe that everyone would rally around such an exciting new model and all of the possibilities that go with it, but my sense is that there is a lot of opposition to challenging the status quo.

I truly hope I am wrong. I hope more public schools will be able to get relief from stifling district policies and be able to experiment with new modes of learning, but I think the more realistic path is to put families back in charge of their children's education. Give parents access to resources and opportunities through robust choice measures that prompt education innovation and entrepreneurship. Then, standard district schools become one of many options for parents, and not the default spot for nearly 90% of America's children.

I enthusiastically agree with Resnick's vision on the future of education. He states: "It is very clear to me that the world I want to live in is one where families have control over resources to allocate to their children and have support to allocate those resources effectively." I hope Powderhouse becomes a shining example of what public education could be, and what it will take to get there.

[Click here to read my Education Next article in full.](#)

This post was originally published at [Whole Family Learning](#).