

Can For-Profit Schools Revolutionize Education? One Entrepreneur Is Betting Yes.

As much as we (rightfully) decry the persistence of factory-style mass schooling, we should remember that this remnant of the Industrial Age was, at its time, quite innovative.

Schooling for the Industrial Age

To our 21st-century eyes, the continued emphasis on standardization, order, and regimentation in government schooling seems, at best, out of place in a rapidly changing economy. But to 19th-century education reformers, these were novel ideas that transformed civilization from agriculture to industry. It's no wonder that earlier schools would reflect these cutting-edge practices. Brown University historian Carl Kaestle writes in his book, *Pillars of the Republic*:

Schools thus became in some respects like factories, but not necessarily because they were mimicking factories, or preparing children to work in factories. Rather, both the workforce and the schools, as well as other nineteenth-century institutions, were partaking of the same ethos of efficiency, manipulation, and mastery.

Schools didn't try to emulate factories as much as they tried to implement the then quite modern and revolutionary techniques that made factories and similar institutions so successful. In other words, 19th-century factory-style schooling was considered to be state-of-the-art. David Tyack, an educational historian at Stanford University, explains how 19th-century educators drew inspiration from the economic and industrial progress of the era. He writes in his book, *The One Best System*:

They were impressed with the order and efficiency of the new technology and forms of organization they saw about them. The division of labor in the factory, the punctuality of the railroad, the chain of command and coordination in modern businesses—these aroused a sense of wonder and excitement in men and women seeking to systematize the schools.

All this is to say that maybe we should cut these 19th-century educators some slack. While

it's clear to us today that factory-style schooling is mismatched to our contemporary economic needs, it mirrored the innovations of the Industrial Age.

The Innovation Era

Today, as we leave the Industrial Age for the Innovation Era, educators and social reformers should once again look to the new ideas, pioneering practices, and other drivers of our modern economic success to transform education and schooling.

Some educators are already doing this. Drawing from his decades of work as an education reformer and entrepreneur, Michael Strong has created a network of US high schools designed to reflect the needs and possibilities of the innovation economy. The Academy of Thought and Industry now has campuses in Austin and San Francisco and a new one opening soon in New York City, with ambitious plans for expansion. These high schools blend the learner-centered philosophy of Montessori education, where Strong spent much of his career, with a bold focus on entrepreneurship, peer collaboration, intellectual rigor, and the skills necessary for success in the 21st-century economy.

“We encourage all of our students to think entrepreneurially whether or not they will be creating a business,” says Strong, author of *Be the Solution: How Entrepreneurs and Conscious Capitalists Can Solve All the World's Problems*.

A big motivator for Strong in creating these innovative high schools is what he sees as the need to get more adolescents out of conventional schools. “I feel a sense of urgency to create alternatives,” says Strong. “The current system is so top-down and trains teachers to be top-down. This is actively causing damage to teens, with rising rates of suicide.”

For-Profit Education for the Future

The Academy of Thought and Industry schools, which serve students ages 12 and over, are for-profit and backed by venture capital funds from Higher Ground Education, a disruptive startup that has launched a network of Montessori schools across the country.

Strong thinks the for-profit model for schooling alternatives is important for catalyzing large-scale educational change. “The only reason to go non-profit is if you have donors,” he explains. “Any time something is profitable, that is what makes it able to go to scale. The reason we have low-cost groceries now (compared to 100 years ago) is because it's profitable to bring food to millions and millions of people.”

Strong believes the philosophical lynchpin of his schools—intellectual agency and entrepreneurial autonomy—is reflective of our contemporary economy and culture. Cultivating creativity, fostering an entrepreneurial mindset, and inspiring learners to take control of their own lives and livelihoods are essential qualities for success in the

innovation era. If the industrial economy of the 19th century valued order and standardization, the 21st-century economy values originality and imagination.

As Strong scales his schools to more cities nationwide, he finds that his main challenge lies with the lingering belief system characteristic of factory-style schooling. Recruiting and training teachers to let go of their long-held notions of what education looks like and embrace a different way of interacting with young people has been perhaps the biggest challenge.

“Teachers are trained to be condescending to kids, and if we want to respect student agency, we can’t be condescending. This deschooling process takes a lot of time,” says Strong. “Respecting the kids is the biggest thing for us, and it’s the biggest problem with hiring traditional teachers.”

Factory-style schooling may have been avant-garde a century-and-a-half ago, but it fails to reflect the needs, innovations, and best practices of the modern economy. Investing in learner-centered schooling alternatives that emphasize human creativity and personal agency will ensure both economic prosperity and individual flourishing in this new era of progress and invention.