



# School Reform That Can *Work*

By Frederick M. Hess  
and Thomas Gift

Year in and year out, education reform shows an earnest tendency to paint by numbers. Those seeking to improve schools latch onto the familiar litany of “best practices” and hot new instructional techniques, asserting that if only administrators identified and implemented the right set of prescriptions, successful reform would cascade through every level of the system. Yet for 40 years, this approach has delivered few lasting results. Perhaps it’s time we sought another track.

In October 2007, the American Enterprise Institute hosted a research conference devoted to “entrepreneurial” reformers who believe that real, sustainable change may require the emergence of new providers able to create and deliver educational services in more effective ways. Such reformers have traditionally been stifled by a morass of regulations, contracts, and a compliance-driven education culture. But some have found ways to break through, and the results are encouraging.

Steve Pines of the Education Industry Association reports that over 26,000 educational ventures are up and running in the United States. Many operate in established niches

such as tutoring or textbook sales; other now-familiar operations such as the Knowledge Is Power Program and Teach For America either run schools or recruit teachers; and many others are tackling issues of instructional literacy, professional development, and information technology. To get a better sense of what these ventures are accomplishing, it’s worth taking a brief look at three: Blackboard, SMARTHINKING, and New Leaders for New Schools. The point is not to hail these particular efforts but rather to illustrate what is possible when smart, creative thinkers are given space to experiment with new ideas.

Blackboard, a for-profit firm, was founded in 1997 by Michael Chasen and Matthew Pittinsky. It has become the world’s leading provider of educational software, applications, and services. Its signature technology, the Blackboard Learning System, is a computer-based learning program that provides virtual access to classroom activities such as homework assignments, labs, and tests. With the click of a mouse, students can obtain academic feedback, communicate with their teachers, and collaborate with peers.



Now used by over 12 million students in 46 states, Blackboard has been integrated into the curriculum by some of the nation's most tech-savvy schools, including nine of the top ten high schools as ranked by *Newsweek*. *The New York Times* has referred to Blackboard as a "disruptive technology ... with the power to change how established institutions operate." *The Washington Post* has called it "a high-tech star ... that is doing more to change the way teaching and learning is done in America than any policies of the federal government."

SMARTHINKING, another for-profit company, was established in 1999 and has rapidly grown into a leading provider of online tutoring. Students can log onto the company's Web site 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and chat in real time with experts in writing, Spanish, mathematics, chemistry, physics, biology, economics, business, accounting, and statistics. By combining the convenience of at-home learning with the effectiveness of expert instruction, SMARTHINKING shows how modern technology makes it possible to personalize learning for students of every age and ability level.

To date, SMARTHINKING has delivered nearly 1 million tutoring sessions to students enrolled in over 1,000 academic institutions. In a survey of almost 1,500 users, 93 percent of students said they would recommend SMARTHINKING to a friend; 73 percent said it had improved their academic performance; and 92 percent said they would use the service again. In 2007, the company won the prestigious Codie Award (given annually by the Software and Information Industry Association) for the "Best Instructional Solution for Students at Home," which recognizes "the educational technology solution that best extends traditional learning into the home."

New Leaders for New Schools (NLNS), a nonprofit firm, was launched in 2000 to

recruit a new population of urban principals and provide a chance for mission-driven leaders to transform inner-city schools. Selecting "hybrid" candidates from within and outside education, NLNS trains passionate individuals to lead some of the most difficult schools in the country. All New Leaders undergo an intensive six-week boot camp prior to assuming their jobs, and then continue with professional development and mentoring throughout their tenures as principals.

Currently, over 300 New Leaders run schools in cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago, New York City, Washington, D.C., and Baltimore. From 2003 to 2005, 75 percent of schools led by NLNS principals for at least two consecutive years made significant progress and, on average, outdistanced their local peers. The Alliance for Excellent Education has praised NLNS for demonstrating "innovative leadership that has successfully improved American high schools," and *Fast Company* magazine has identified it as one of the "top 20 groups that are changing the world."

The lesson here is not necessarily that policymakers or educators should jump on the Blackboard, SMARTHINKING, or NLNS bandwagons. The broader message is that entrepreneurial ventures hold great promise for education reform. While obvious uncertainties remain, preliminary successes suggest that entrepreneurship may have the power to fundamentally retool 21st-century American education.

*Mr. Hess is the director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute and the editor of Educational Entrepreneurship (Harvard Education Press, 2006). Mr. Gift is a research assistant in education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute. This article is reprinted from The American magazine © 2007 The American. Web address: www.american.com.*

