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The Privatization Principal

Real education reform is upon us.

Eugene Hickok & Gary Andres

A meeting took place in Boston recently that screams volumes about the direction of American public education. It wasn't so much what was said, but who attended it, why they were there, and what they took home when the sessions adjourned.

It was hosted by an organization called Eduventures, which provides entrepreneurs and venture capitalists with valuable information on the "education industry." And it is very much an industry, by the way. Last year America's taxpayers poured over \$500 billion into K-12 education and that amount increases every year. It is an industry of over 15,000 school districts, each with buildings and budgets and teachers and students — an industry that has underperformed for years. This nation's investment has not yielded what it should, leading to President Bush's landmark education initiative No Child Left Behind and its calls for more accountability. The meeting in Boston included discussion about that law, and the many new opportunities it presents to educators and entrepreneurs. But that wasn't what made the meeting interesting or important.

In previous meetings in previous years, the audience and participants have been almost exclusively from the private sector; owners and managers of firms, large and small, doing or seeking to do business with what is referred to as the "education space." This year, there were about as many from public education in attendance as there were from the private sector. And they were talking to each other, not talking at one another.

For years, the public-school establishment has rebelled against profit-making corporations engaged in educating America's children. It has drawn a line in the sand, saying it is unethical to make money off of kids and asserting that one can't be for public education and also support such nefarious ideas as vouchers or for-profit or non-profit alternatives. The public, according to polls, generally accepts the establishment's argument. Americans who care a great deal about their schools and support public education are still leery of private school choice, and seem nervous about private-sector solutions for ailing public schools. But times are changing.

The No Child Left Behind Act, for all of its flaws, has added a measure of accountability and transparency to education, highlighting problems in our nation's schools, such as the achievement gap between low-income and minority students and their more affluent white peers. It illuminates those schools and districts and states where educational decision-making is based on solid data and evidence, and those where it remains primarily art rather than science — decision-making by intuition and instinct. And it is testing the capacity of schools, school districts, and education's leadership response to what the evidence is telling their clients — the job is not getting done. The heat is on more than ever, and so traditional leaders

in America's public schools are beginning to look for help, even from some nontraditional sources.

It's about time. It is ironic that a country built upon the notion of free enterprise, capitalism, entrepreneurship, and the power of ideas has for years embraced the idea that none of this pertains to how we educate our children. We have instead bought into the idea that there is only one way to provide public education: through a system that looks the same everywhere, funded by taxpayers and responsible to them through school boards. It is an idea of public education that has eschewed any potential benefit that might be derived from private-sector initiatives and ideas. But a new dialogue has begun.

Increasingly thoughtful and somewhat desperate school leaders look to the private sector for help in public education. The complex management of schools, from employing data to drive decision-making to managing revenues and expenditures, has caused some in public education to consider turning to organizations and firms that have a track record and whose experience and skills can be readily applied in the public-school setting. For example, private-sector firms have the ability to help schools budget better, monitor student and teacher accountability, provide supplementary services like after-school tutoring, and develop testing protocols to measure achievement. These opportunities have piqued the curiosity of enlightened school leaders, who look to the best and brightest in the private sector to fashion what the next generation of teaching and learning might look like. This is happening because it is in everyone's best interest. The private sector has ideas, skills, tools, and experience that it wants to "sell" to the education market.

The conversation is really just beginning. But the fact that it is taking place holds great promise. Those most familiar with public education today know that it will take dramatic and fundamental change in order to do what needs to be done; public education, as a system, has not really changed very much since its creation, while virtually every other social and governmental institution has undergone profound change in the last decade or so. There is a tremendous need for new thinking, and it is unrealistic and unfair to expect it to come from those who are already overwhelmed by their day-to-day responsibilities.

Other policymakers need to join in this dialogue. For example, the role of private sector in public education represents a promising topic for congressional hearings. Education reformers in Congress like Chairman John Boehner should highlight the benefits and opportunities of this new partnership in a series of hearings before his panel next year. It's also an opportunity for President Bush and his administration to underscore how the No Child Left Behind Act demonstrated the need and provided the incentives for a greater role for the private sector in educating America's kids.

It will take a long time to enact the sort of fundamental change that is needed in order to reestablish this nation's leadership in elementary and secondary education. And surely there will remain those who resist any invitation to even think that someone "out to make money off of kids" might offer an idea that might actually ensure those children get the sort of education they deserve. But at least the conversation is taking place, and both sides are listening and learning and seeking opportunities. The marriage of the public and private sectors in education holds the promise of a new American education revolution. What a symbolic coincidence it began to take shape in Boston.

— *Eugene Hickok and Gary Andres are both principals with Dutko Worldwide. Hickok is the former deputy secretary of Education. Andres is writes a weekly column on politics in the*

Washington Times and is a frequent NRO contributor.

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