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### *The Future of K-12 Public Education<sup>1</sup>*

By Charles A. Hagberg



The present school systems are big unwieldy dinosaurs and the educational planet is on a collision course with the asteroid of the internet. The dinosaur school systems will, after a long struggle, become extinct.

A century ago transportation was primitive. It was the time of smaller schools staffed by teachers who often had two years or less of advanced education called “Normal Training.” It epitomized the concept that you don’t need an elaborate college education to teach the very young and when students get older they can learn by their own motivation.

As time passed, school boards were organized and parents lost control. Teachers and the school boards imposed stricter standards. Government got involved and imposed legal standards. The end result is a labyrinth of college degrees and testing to prove teacher qualification.

Then came the teachers’ unions which required contracts, in-step raises, and higher costs. The unions became powerful and their desires were often written into law by malleable politicians.

With better transportation available it seemed appropriate to consolidate. This required a bus system and a whole new hierarchy of superintendents, principals, business administrators, secretaries, clerks and building maintenance staff. Costs skyrocketed!

The school systems began to increase their territory by initiating new subjects to be taught. Some of this was valid because of the increase in human knowledge.

Along with the school districts, and consolidated schools, came the concept of school sports, choirs, bands, etc. The so called “school spirit” was born. These endeavors, were enthusiastically embraced by parents who wanted their children to experience the social advantages of these activities. The number of activities multiplied over time and schools became known for their excellence in sports rather than their educational excellence.

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<sup>1</sup> First published in the *Brainerd Dispatch*, Brainerd, Minnesota, USA, January 18, 2008; republished with permission.

With the advent of the big school came the alienation of the students from one another. Many students got lost in the crowd. In this “politically correct” mix came the repression of teaching morality which brought on a new array of social problems.

Costs went up again and eventually got so out of hand that the citizens revolted and many bond issues were voted down. The ailments of the dinosaur were noted by most everyone. Alternatives such as “home schooling,” and on-line public schools such as “Connections Academy”<sup>2</sup> are increasingly draining off more resources.

The asteroid of the internet is now on the horizon and there will be a huge impact that will sound the death knell for the mega-school dinosaur. Small educational centers will be instituted and flourish. Teachers unions and legislators will thwart the inevitable but eventually reason will prevail and the large schools will succumb.

The educational system will consist of students in relatively small groups at many localities with computerized curricula. “Facilitators” will be in charge instead of teachers. They will monitor the progress of the students and supervise on-line testing. There will be a central, highly competent, group of teachers in separate regional locations to explain difficult concepts by phone or on-line chatting. Progress of each student will be at the student’s pace with set requirements for graduation.

Sports, music, and the arts will survive and flourish, but they will return to community- based sponsorship by geographical areas.

The need for teachers and administration will be less and costs will dramatically come down. The smaller units will be naturally more self-governing and the elaborate physical plants will be obsolete. Transportation will also be a less costly problem.

Students will feel an affinity for the small group setting and make lasting relationships. Parents will feel much more like participating in these local student bodies.

It behooves school boards and administrators to get on board and help to facilitate the transition to the internet based on local educational centers. It is a matter of cooperating or getting left behind!

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**POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM** (send comments to [forum@futuretakes.org](mailto:forum@futuretakes.org)):

- *What will “education” itself be in 2020 in your part of the world? Will it be utilitarian – for example, to prepare students for careers that exist at that time or are anticipated to exist, or to maintain national economic competitiveness? Or will learning be valued as an end unto itself? Either way, will curricula still be organized according to subject areas? If so, which subjects will be taught? If not, describe the curricula of 2020.*

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<sup>2</sup>Connections Academy is a publicly funded on-line school presently operating in 15 states. There are variations of this concept as Charter Schools in several other states.

- *As discussed by Hagberg, transportation enabled consolidation will give way smaller educational centers that are made possible by IT and mandated (at least in part) by costs. In addition to the skyrocketing costs of public education, coupled with budget shortfalls in several jurisdictions, what else will force transformation in the present school systems? Also, do you foresee a similar trend from “fusion” to “fission” in other areas of human activity – for example, healthcare, governance, self-sustainability, and even identity itself? Why or why not?*
- *What are possible impacts of localized, IT-based learning – and the educational systems of the future – beyond education itself?*
- *(for non-US readers) Have factors similar to those described by Hagberg driven the development of educational institutions in your part of the world? Now, time travel to the year 2020 and describe education – and learning – in your nation or region.*
- *Hagberg foresees that sports, music, and the arts will survive and flourish but become more community based. Will this be true in your part of the world in 2020? What other long-term impacts will IT have on student interaction and unstructured student social life? Also, what else (in addition to education) will become more community based ten years from now?*
- *In various parts of the world, education has been associated with “upward mobility” (that is, advancement in socioeconomic status). Ten years from now, to what extent will this relationship exist?*

### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

- *Late Summer 2008 Learning Section Bulletin, this issue, especially the portion on factory model schools as presented by Irene Brock.*
- *“Downloading Education,” by Jay Herson, FUTUREtakes vol. 5, no. 3 (Late Fall 2006).*
- *Learning and education points posted at [www.futuretakes.org/FIGs.htm](http://www.futuretakes.org/FIGs.htm).*