



Calling all Educational Entrepreneurs

An Idea for a New Public School Model
Serving Poor Children

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At a recent New Carolina meeting, an insightful educator observed that “public schools are designed for middle class families.” Because many students from middle class families are successful, it’s argued that if a poor student is not successful it’s not because the school doesn’t work, but rather the student and his family aren’t doing what is necessary.

A recent meeting of the New Carolina Board highlighted a very successful conference and printed companion guide on

[*Increasing Parent Involvement in Education*](#). Especially

encouraging was a report from an African-American pastor of his church’s efforts to help families in his congregation.

Everything starts with a passionate champion, but...

I’ve been involved with dozens of companies, and the most successful was [*Earth Fare*](#). Half of our customers were

vegetarians, and we created a very distinctive grocery store to meet their needs. Conventional grocery stores serve mainstream customers, and serve them well, but vegetarians just aren't going to find a broad selection tailored to them.

For every child to have two educated parents highly involved in their education clearly is ideal, but it is not always possible. It doesn't mean parents in poverty don't love their children to suggest they aren't doing algebra homework at night; these parents likely aren't capable themselves. If anyone can get poor parents involved, it is African-American churches, but even the pastor at the

[New Carolina](#) meeting asked, "How do you reach the unreachable?"

A recent article in the [Raleigh News and Observer](#) highlighted [Gaston College Prep and Pride High](#). "Located just off I-95 south of the Virginia line, the school sits in a part of the state where poverty rates are high and expectations are often low. But the school's test scores are among the best in the state." The school, open from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm and every other Saturday, provides 100% of the academics students need to succeed, and doesn't depend on parents, who themselves often lack a

quality education, to help with algebra homework. It's not a panacea, but it is a proven model for educating students in poverty.

Last year, New Carolina invited entrepreneurial scholar [John Sibley Butler](#) to South Carolina for a Conversation on Minority Entrepreneurship. He suggested that immigrants make great entrepreneurs because they are outside the current power structure. Gaston College Prep and Pride's new education model "makes perfect sense to founders Tammi Sutton and Caleb Dolan, who weren't trained in a traditional college of education and don't spend much time

Insightful entrepreneurs starting a new business wouldn't try to target all customers from the most affluent to the poorest, like school districts do. They'd segment the market and design an innovative solution to meet the distinctive needs of a focused group of customers.

worrying about the way schools are supposed to operate.” Sutton and Dolan are the immigrants of public education, and we need to find, nurture and support outstanding educational entrepreneurs like them.

What if, for example, we supported an educational entrepreneur to create an entire chain of public schools not based on a given geography, but based on a proven model for serving children in poverty across the state. This chain of schools could develop efficiencies and distinctive competencies: curricula focused on children in poverty; teacher development focused on children in poverty; facilities and technology focused on children in poverty; etc. In other words, this chain of schools would deliver a distinctive value proposition to students not currently well served by the status quo, much like Earth Fare does for vegetarians.

New Carolina has explored changing education consumers. Now we need to explore the far more difficult challenge of changing public schools to meet the needs of poor parents and their children not well served today. Some of the most creative and innovative solutions are likely to come from educational entrepreneurs who don't currently control the status quo.

Expect the debate to be intense.



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