

# Politics Cannot Produce the K-12 System We Need: Part III

**By John Merrifield,  
Professor of Economics  
Director, Entrepreneurial Conservatism Institute**

June 28, 2006

Decades of experience demonstrates that changing the K-12 system's central commands or the people empowered to implement them, changes very little for the better. Indeed, additional rules generally make things even worse. Political control of schooling policies yields disappointing results because of: 1.) Unintended Consequences (May 22 *Newsletter*); 2.) The Lawmaking Process (July 3 *Newsletter*); 3.) Resistance to Change; 4.) Debilitating Uniformity; and 5.) Information and Incentive Deficiencies. Resistance to change is the subject of this piece.

Academic gains have been poor because a diverse student population needs what politics has never produced; relentless, customized renewal. We need a constantly improving menu of school choices that differ as much as our children.

But all organizations resist change. It is hope triumphing over experience to expect entrenched organizations to drastically change themselves. Private sector firms are no exception, but when they resist change they succumb to replacement by entrepreneurial newcomers. Indeed, despite business firms' greater flexibility in responding to change, more often than not, most eventually fail to adapt to external pressures and give way to newcomers. So, it is incredibly naive to expect greater responsiveness from taxpayer-funded, public sector producers better able to resist change (as individuals, they are largely unaccountable for their effect on student learning), and less able to respond (schools have little autonomy).

Collective decisionmaking (the political process) does not favor the entrepreneurial renewal common to the world's cutting edge, high growth industries. Absent energetic, entrepreneurial leadership, special interests can thwart political transformation and force the government to discriminate against private sector alternatives that would work better for many children. Inertia, combined with the reform resistance of the present system, is why strategies like more money, higher standards, and better teacher training, that seem like they can't fail, do just that. They just yield disappointment, higher taxes, and lost opportunity for millions of under-educated young adults. Reform resistance takes a heavy toll on our prosperity and political cohesion.

We need genuine leadership to recognize the inherent limitations of the political process. To break our costly cycle of frustration, our leaders need to limit the government role to referee, information provider, and unbiased subsidizer. Unbiased means that a child's tuition subsidy (e.g. direct payment, scholarship, voucher, tax credit) would not depend on who owns the school the parents choose.