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NEPC Review: Going Exponential: Growing the Charter School Sector's Best

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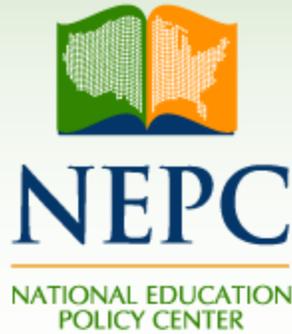


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REVIEW OF *GOING EXPONENTIAL: GROWING THE CHARTER SCHOOL SECTOR'S BEST*

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April 2011

Summary of Review

This Progressive Policy Institute report argues that charter schools should be expanded rapidly and exponentially. Citing exponential growth organizations, such as Starbucks and Apple, as well as the rapid growth of molds, viruses and cancers, the report advocates for similar growth models for charter schools. However, there is no explanation of how the dramatic growth observed by these “exponential growers” is applicable or desirable for charter schools. The report’s critical shortcoming is the almost complete lack of acceptable scientific evidence or original research supporting the policy suggestions. The report presents nine “lessons” or suggestions that are essentially common and abstract aphorisms from the business world. Unfortunately, the report fails to make the case that the suggestions or references are relevant to school improvement. The research section of the report includes, in fact, only three references – all from the business literature. Such fundamental shortcomings greatly undermine the report’s suggestions. Therefore, charter school leaders and policy makers should regard the nine suggestions as speculation rather than well-grounded policy alternatives.

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REVIEW OF *GOING EXPONENTIAL: GROWING THE CHARTER SCHOOL SECTOR'S BEST*

David Garcia, Arizona State University

I. Introduction

The report *Going Exponential: Growing the Charter School Sector's Best* was written by Emily Ayscue Hassel, Bryan C. Hassel and Joe Ableidinger, published by the Progressive Policy Institute, and funded by the Walton Family Foundation.¹ The report is introduced with the assertion that “while every child counts, the number of children served by the best charter schools is far too low” (p. 5) and that “millions more children would benefit if they had access to the nation’s best CMO’s [charter management organizations] and charter schools” (p. 6). The report advocates for exponential charter school expansion but recognizes that mere growth is insufficient – that it must be the “best” schools in the charter school sector that grow exponentially.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The report’s primary conclusion can be phrased as “High exponential growth by organizations is not only possible; it is a well-documented phenomenon in many sectors” (p. 6), and this growth observed in other sectors and in the natural world is applicable to charter schools. Based on these conclusions, which are largely unsubstantiated premises, the bulk of the report (22 of the 32 pages that constitute the main body) includes nine “lessons from research about exponential growth” that charter operators and policy makers can follow to achieve exponential growth. The collection of policy suggestions includes: (1) commit not just to excellence, but also to reaching large numbers of children with excellence, (2) negotiate performance-based funding in charter contracts, (3) import and induct management talent and extend the reach of the best teachers and leaders, (4) reward charter leaders and staff for reaching more children, (5) use micro-reach and micro-chartering, (6) use branding to enable innovation and build a community of rapid-growth seekers, (7) invest in systems for scale, (8) acquire other organizations strategically, and (9) pursue operational alliances.

The report fails to demonstrate, however, that this collection of policy suggestions is based on any rigorous research. Thus, the collective suggestions are left open to the criticism that they are speculation rather than well-researched policy alternatives.

III. The Report's Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The report poses an intriguing question to guide the rationale for its findings and conclusions: “But is sustained annual growth of 40 percent possible? Can organizations, with long, complex lists of necessary resources and policy conditions, do it?” (p. 8). It then proclaims an answer:

In fact they can [grow this rapidly], but only the elite in fact achieve it. In other sectors, elite organizations can change whole slices of the human experience by driving new levels of quality, service, convenience, aesthetics, and innovation into our lives. These are the organizations we studied to inform our thinking for the charter sector (p. 8).

Yet the report offers only minimal research evidence and provides no useful information about the research, which – as suggested by the above quotation – is taken from the business literature. The report also examines exponential growth observed in the natural world, specifically “mold, algae, cancer, crystals and viruses” (footnote 31, p. 35). But the report fails to make the case that the organizations and organisms that were reviewed are applicable to education. How is the business transaction between a Starbucks barista and a customer applicable to the interaction between a teacher and student? How does the growth of viruses apply to the growth of charter schools?

In a way, it is not reasonable to apply academic standards to *Going Exponential*, since the report does not resemble anything in the academic literature. If one must apply those criteria, the

The report offers only minimal research evidence and provides no useful information about the research.

document is below generally accepted standards. But a more reasonable evaluative comparison is to a similar type of publication. In concept, this report is nearly identical to the book *Good to Great* by Jim Collins,² although it is executed with considerably less methodological rigor. For example, *Going Exponential's* purpose is to “understand the period of time just before and during which some companies grow at far higher, better-sustained exponential rates than others, achieving scale and bringing their products and services to large numbers of customers – fast” (p. 10). Similarly, Collins and his team,³

... identified companies that made the leap from good results to great results and sustained those results for at least fifteen years. We compared these companies to a carefully selected group of comparison companies that failed to make the leap, or if they did, failed to sustain it. We then compared the good-to-great companies to the comparison companies to discover the essential and distinguishing factors at work (p. 3).

Going Exponential contains no details on how the “exponential growth” organizations or the natural exponential growth examples, such as viruses, were selected and analyzed. In contrast, the *Good to Great* recommendations are supported by 40 pages of detail on the selection of companies (along with a complete list), the criterion for the company comparisons, the type of documents that were analyzed, and the coding strategy they used in their analysis. It is the

careful attention to detail that provides the grounding for research-based conclusions and recommendations such as those in *Good to Great*.

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

The research section of *Going Exponential* is minimal. It includes only three sources (two journal articles and a book) to make the case that charter schools can and should grow like the discussed rapid growth businesses.⁴ The two journal articles are both from the *Journal of Business Venturing*, and one of these articles is twenty–five years old.

The recommendations section cites extensively from additional business literature, with business-school case studies being the most frequent type of source cited. A total of 15 such case studies are cited throughout the report. The disproportionate number of citations in the recommendations section (rather than in the research section) is unusual for a research report. This approach is susceptible to charges of “cherry-picking” supportive arguments.

There is also one notable reference absent in the report. Jim Collins, the author of the aforementioned *Good to Great*, addressed a nearly identical question as *Going Exponential* in a monograph entitled “Good to Great and the Social Sectors.” According to Collins, “We must reject the idea—well-intentioned, but dead wrong—that the primary path to greatness in the social sectors is to become ‘more like a business.’”⁵

V. Review of the Report's Methods

The report's methods consist of three different “examinations”:

1. An examination of the existing research on “sustained, high-exponential growth organizations” (p. 9) to cull the most common strategies used to “improve quality and organizational effectiveness” (p. 10). High-exponential growth organizations are defined as those that have grown at a rate of 40 percent annually for a sustained period of time (Figure 2 of the report). The report does not include a comprehensive list of the organizations that meet the aforementioned definition, but the two most-often cited businesses in the body of the report are Starbucks (9 times) and Apple (5 times). The report indicates that a selection process was used to determine when an organizational tactic rose to the appropriate level to be included in the report, but little explanation is provided. The report simply states, “we focused only on elements that have been noted by researchers as likely distinguishers of sustained, high exponential growth organizations” (p. 10).
2. An examination of “stand-alone cases of organizations” that meet the definition of sustained, high exponential growth. Once again, the report suggests that a selection process was used to identify the stand-alone cases, but the reader is not given the details of this selection. The report notes, “We avoided organizations that were merely large (for example, because of moderate growth sustained over a century) or merely excellent in their products or services” (p. 10).
3. An examination of growth in the natural world:

We also conducted research about when and how exponential growth occurs in the natural world, specifically examining mold, algae, cancer, crystals and viruses. We used these findings in addition to cross-sector lessons to fuel our thinking about fresh directions for the charter sector. The similarities between the natural world and organizational worlds are rather striking and useful for understanding the critical elements of exponential growth. (fn. 31, p. 35.)

The report provides no indication of how such findings were used to influence the report or exactly how it is useful to expanding charter schools.

Without a credible research base, the report fails to make the case that the nine policy suggestions, and not myriad other (well-researched) policy alternatives, are a proper and productive course to improve student achievement. Rather, the lack of detail leaves the report defenseless against the charge that the suggestions and references were “cherry-picked” in advance to support a predetermined position.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

A discerning reader should consider the recommendations of any report only after coming to an independent determination that the underlying research is rigorous and applicable. *Going Exponential* does not meet this standard. The report provides virtually no evidence to support the conclusions. Given this lack of evidence, the report does not sustain the validity of its findings or conclusions.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

It is doubtful that studies comparable to *Going Exponential* would be found in the academic literature, since such reports would not generally meet minimal scientific standards. The report includes insufficient explanations of research used to derive the policy suggestions. It simply does not provide adequate evidence to support the suggestions that are proposed for charter school operators and policy makers.

Educators and policy makers need thoughtful policy alternatives to make data-driven decisions in an increasingly complex environment. Those who wish to advance public policy must make the intellectual bridge between their research and education policy. Without a sound research base, the policy suggestions in *Going Exponential* become speculation rather than well-researched policy alternatives.

Notes and References

¹ Hassel, E. A., Hassel, B. C., & Ableidinger, J. (2011). *Going exponential: Growing the charter school sector's best*. Washington, DC: Progressive Policy Institute. Retrieved March 2, 2011, from http://www.progressivefix.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/2.2011_Hassel_Going-Exponential_WEB1.pdf.

² Collins, J. (2001). *Good to great: Why some companies make the leap ... and other don't*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc.

Interestingly, the word “great” appears 47 times in the 40-page document.

³ Collins, J. (2001). *Good to great: Why some companies make the leap ... and other don't*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc.

⁴ See:

Barringer, B. R., Jones, F. F., & Neubaum, D. O. (2005). A quantitative content analysis of the characteristics of rapid-growth firms and their founders. *Journal of Business Venturing*, 20(5), 663-687.

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Thompson, D. G. (2006). *Blueprint to a billion: 7 essentials to achieve exponential growth*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

⁵ Collins, J. (2005). *Good to great and the social sectors: Why business thinking is not the answer: A monograph to accompany Good to Great*. Boulder, CO: Jim Collins.

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