

# Back to the Basics and Good Ideas; Let the Spirit of Innovation Prevail

Nicholas Torres and Tine Hansen-Turton 21 April 2010

A recent Pew Research Center report on the nation's mood concluded that two-thirds of the public is dissatisfied with the way things are going in the country. With consumer confidence plunging, the jobless rate rising, millions of people uninsured or under insured and the American economy faltering in a way most of us have never seen before, there appears to be little hope of good economic news anytime soon. A look back in history, though, tells us that hard times can produce innovation and invention.

We're not talking about those businesses that thrive in tough times or entrepreneurs with products that sell when the economy is down. We're talking about basic ideas that can improve the way we live. This past fall President Obama said, "It is time to tap into the spirit of innovation that has always succeeded in moving America forward." He's right. The spirit of innovation is what we are about as a people, and it will always prevail. We are a people and country with the creativity to solve complex issues. And our courage to adopt good ideas is what will get America back on its feet.

Now, the best ideas are those that are good for the average person. In health care, most people want accessible, affordable, and quality care. However, 70 percent of us report that we cannot see our doctor on the same day we feel sick, and over 30 percent of us don't have a regular doctor in the first place. Yet 90% of our basic primary health care needs can be met by a nurse practitioner who functions similarly to a doctor.

In recent years, a series of so-called "disruptive innovations," a term coined by Harvard professor Clayton Christensen, in the health care sector have capitalized on nurse practitioners and their ability to provide high-quality primary and preventive care in convenient care clinics located in retail settings such as pharmacies, big box stores and supermarket chains – and in community settings, such as nurse-managed health centers.

Research has documented that both retail-based clinics and nurse-managed health clinics provide safe, accessible and affordable care to millions of Americans. In these settings, nurse practitioners already touch millions of people each year. What this tells us is that millions of Americans are not waiting for Congress to solve the health care problem. Instead, they have voted with their feet and are changing the rules on their own. For health care reform to be successful, we need to embrace these disruptive innovations.

Similarly in education, parents and children are not waiting around for government to fix the education system.

Instead, millions of them are flocking to alternative schools that are able to adapt to the changing needs of the students who now live in a competitive global economy. When our education systems do not adapt and there are no alternative options, our students are voicing their own opinion by choosing not to participate at all. Many of our urban districts are experiencing drop-out rates above 50%.

More and more students and their families are flocking to any available public or private option that meets their needs, academically and financially. We know how to educate our students for the 21st century and have documented successes across the country. For education reform to be successful, our public education districts need to demonstrate the ability to adapt, and our higher education institutions need to train educators to be student-centric. If our systems cannot adapt, then the best hope will be the expansion of the alternative options.

We have all heard the adage, "necessity is the mother of invention." With the challenges we face as a society today, whether it be health care or education, the time for invention is now. The best ideas are grounded in solving our basic challenges. And when we focus on those everyday challenges, our spirit of American innovation truly prevails.

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