

Education Innovation: Tougher Than It Looks



Leon Youngpeter, a "time coach" for the School Administration Managers model, takes part in a conference in San Antonio last week. His program is among dozens seeking to attract investors.

—Alicia Wagner Calzada for Education Week

Experts Say Entrepreneurship in Education Has Its Challenges

By [Sarah D. Sparks](#)

Massive federal education competitions like the \$650 million Investing in Innovation fund have heightened interest in practical education research, but even the most promising findings aimed at improving student learning face a long, uncertain path to become something more concrete and usable for the classroom. Unlike fields such as physics or genetics, education science historically has not benefited from a large cadre of engineering and implementation firms ready to test lab results in a market context and launch successful programs quickly. To the contrary, experts say, the education and business communities often have trouble pulling in the same direction.

"The path to the market from something that shows promising implications in the lab is fraught with complications," said Larry Berger, the chief executive officer and co-founder of the New York City-based Wireless Generation, at the first [Education Venture Fair](#) held last month, in Washington. Sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education and the Washington-based Aspen Institute, it was designed to showcase the projects of runners-up in the federal Investing in Innovation, or i3, grant contest. Because philanthropic or federal seed grants, like i3 itself, rarely take an intervention all the way from research to commercial product, often "you're stuck with a professor or two and an entrepreneur trying to make their way through a market filled with 10,000 salesmen," said Mr. Berger, who also sits on the board of Editorial Projects in Education, the publisher of *Education Week*.

Mark Shellinger, the project manager for the School Administration Managers, or SAM principal-coaching model, illustrated a case in point. With help from a more than \$1.8 million multiyear grant from the Wallace Foundation, Mr. Shellinger and his colleagues at Jefferson County public schools in Kentucky developed and tested the SAM program, which focuses on helping principals manage their time so they can spend more of it on instructional leadership. (The Wallace Foundation also underwrites coverage of educational issues in *Education Week*.) The SAM program came up short for a \$36 million i3 validation grant, but earned a spot at the venture fair because it has a successful evaluation from the Washington-based Policy Studies Associates under its belt, adoption by 305 schools in 12 states, and the technical capacity to double that in the next two years.



Mark **Shellinger**, a project manager for School Administration Managers, a principal-coaching model, says potential investors sometimes balk at backing nonprofits such as his.

—Alicia Wagner Calzada for Education Week

Yet by the close of the conference, Mr. Shellinger said he'd had no investment nibbles.

Missing Pieces

Potential investors wanted to purchase the group's services, he said, but balked at supporting implementation research without a set profit return. "We're a nonprofit structured so all the profit goes back into making this better," he said, shrugging. "We have not found a for-profit organization that wants to invest in research. I'm not saying that they're not there, but we certainly didn't see that."

SAM's experience is unsurprising, experts say.

Most early-stage education companies, Mr. Berger said, either begin in the world of education research—and so are "rich in education ideas but not as rich in technology or business models"—or come from outside industries looking to apply new technology or business models to the education field without significant understanding of pedagogy or politics.

"The learning market is not like any other market," said Diana Rhoten, one of three co-founders and managing directors of **Startl**, a new nonprofit created to identify and ramp up education technology innovations. The

organization is funded in part by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, which supports coverage of “deeper learning” and the federal economic-stimulus program in *Education Week*.

“In learning, you are making the promise that this will improve the academic performance and cognitive performance of your end-user,” Ms. Rhoten said, “that requires a lot of research before you get to market and a lot of testing after, and that’s very difficult. That’s the really critical barrier to entry.”

Norman Winarsky, the vice president of ventures, licensing, and strategic programs for the Menlo Park, Calif., nonprofit research and innovation firm SRI International, agreed. SRI might help launch two or three of the more than 2,000 new company proposals it receives each year from outside the company, Mr. Winarsky said, but it primarily helps well-established companies like the Dallas-based Texas Instruments Inc. and Scholastic Inc. of New York City use existing research to develop new products. “We don’t snub our nose at good opportunities, but ... we wouldn’t want thousands of researchers coming to us and saying, ‘We’ve got this great research, what can we do with it together?’ ” he said.

SRI’s client companies identify a problem in the markets in which they work, such as students having difficulty conceptualizing fractions. SRI might spend a year to 18 months helping the company develop a product to address that problem, but it tends to focus not on new research but on risks: Is the intervention sustainable and unique? Can it be developed at a price districts will buy? Will teachers and students actually use it?

Everything in Context

By contrast, in an academic or philanthropic setting, it’s often too difficult and expensive to test an intervention in many different school contexts. Researchers often prefer to study interventions measured within controlled implementation conditions in order to show clear cause-and-effect links between the intervention and a given outcome. “That approach doesn’t work,” Mr. Winarsky said. “It might help that researcher produce the next paper, but it won’t help deploy that system into thousands of classrooms.”

For that, Mr. Winarsky and others argue that scientists, educators, and businesspeople must work to expand one of the most atrophied areas of education research: the efficacy of an intervention in different real-life school contexts.

“There’s a ton of research on the sorts of things that work; there’s much less implementation research,” said Douglas E. Lynch, the vice dean of the University of Pennsylvania graduate school of education and the creator of the [Milken-Penn Education Business Plan Competition](#), an award and support program for innovative education start-up companies, now in its second year. “That’s not as sexy, but that’s where the rubber meets the road.”

Mr. Lynch argued that while highly public grant competitions can raise interest in education innovation generally, they can cause business people and educators alike to focus too much on finding a single, great intervention to scale up, rather than identifying more varied niche interventions for local school situations.

“Everyone is convinced they have the algorithm that works, and ... it’s just a scaling problem,” Mr. Lynch said. “I think that is utterly a red herring. It’s akin to walking into an emergency room and offering one treatment for everyone with a sickness. We need an array of strategies and an education system that is more adaptive.”

In a field like genetics, where there is a historic partnership between academic research institutions and for-profit pharmaceutical companies, an academic researcher might identify a chemical process, patent it, and rely on industry to use it for a new gene therapy. Yet Mr. Lynch and others agree that education has less tradition of academic, district, and for-profit partnerships to test innovations, and there is often even outright suspicion among such groups.

Finding Risk-Takers

"We need slightly more appetite for risk-taking and investment," Mr. Berger said at the conference. "Education is not a bad get-rich-slowly scheme, if you're willing to be patient for the eight, 10, 15 years it takes to build a healthy education company. ... The problem is there are very few folks in school districts willing to take these kinds of risks."

Yet the ranks of those risk-takers are growing. StartI estimates for-profit companies have invested \$590 million in education since April 2010, and that's excluding individual "angel" investors or the federal grants.

Also, there are several new firms and programs intended to teach innovative researchers and entrepreneurs how to navigate the education market. The Kauffman Labs for Enterprise Creation, an initiative launched by the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation of Kansas City, Mo., last month announced its first class of 25 participants in its [Education Ventures Program](#), which provides four months of intensive implementation and market training.

Likewise, the University of Pennsylvania and the Milken Family Foundation of Santa Monica, Calif., have expanded on Mr. Lynch's original education business plan competition to launch the Networking Education Entrepreneurs for Social Transformation, or NEST, initiative, to hold summer training meetings.

Yet even with market training and mentoring support, it's always going to be tough to translate research into business, said Alex Grodd, the founder and chief executive officer of BetterLesson, an online lesson-sharing system for teachers and a participant in the i3 conference. "Product development is so much about intuition, building a prototype and testing it," he said. "There's just not a straight path from data to product design."

Coverage of "deeper learning" that will prepare students with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in a rapidly changing world is supported in part by a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, at www.hewlett.org.