

# Building Policy Platforms for Resilience



Laura Lefkowitz and Carolyn Woempner  
Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning

## About the Authors

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Laura Lefkowitz is vice president for policy and planning services at McREL, where she serves as a liaison between McREL and policymakers, associations, policy organizations, and other education constituencies. She also informs and advises policymakers and McREL staff on important emerging issues in education reform.

Carolyn Woempner is a senior researcher in policy and planning services at McREL. Dr. Woempner maintains a data archive of trends impacting education and applies the information to planning and policy decisions. She also authors monthly briefs on education trends and supports McREL's policy research work with design and analytic expertise.

## Forward

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*The 2020 Forecast: Creating the Future of Learning* (the forecast) is the second future forecast created by KnowledgeWorks Foundation with the Institute for the Future.<sup>1</sup> Continuing a partnership that began with the publication of the first forecast, *2006–2016 Map of Future Forces Affecting Education*, Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) and KnowledgeWorks offer this policy brief as part of a series of briefs and workshops designed to engage leaders in co-creating the future of learning, resulting in high academic achievement and improved life outcomes for all students and transforming the world of schooling into a world of learning. The partnership also aims to promote greater understanding among the national education community about the external forces impacting learning today and in the future, in areas such as demographics, technology, economics, globalization, and policy.

The forecast explores how future forces are pushing educators to become more active than ever in creating a future that meets the needs of all learners. It posits that over the next decade most innovations in education will take place outside of traditional institutions. If this is true, what is the role of policy in creating the future of learning? Rather than watching from the sidelines as these innovations develop at the grassroots level in communities around the nation, KnowledgeWorks and McREL propose that policymakers engage proactively in creating a new system of learning, developing policy platforms that can help take promising innovations to scale and help move the entire education enterprise closer to achieving its goals.

Proactive policy responses to change enable an organization not only to adapt to future conditions but also to play a role in crafting the future, especially in times of great uncertainty. These policy briefs speak to policymakers who are similarly committed to shaping the future of learning through policy. This series of briefs will explore six drivers of change presented in the forecast: A New Civic Discourse, Platforms for Resilience, Pattern Recognition, The Maker Economy, Amplified Organizations, and Altered Bodies.

## Introduction

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This brief examines the policy implications of two drivers of change presented in the *2020 Forecast: Creating the Future of Learning*.<sup>2</sup> These drivers—A New Civic Discourse and Platforms for Resilience—point to emerging trends in the areas of participatory media and virtual communities that are empowering individual citizens to organize around common interests and that pressure institutions to change in fundamental ways.

As seen in the related scenarios appearing throughout this brief, the forecast calls attention to emerging systems and frameworks of teaching and learning. The scenarios not only challenge educators to stretch their perceptions of current reality; they also collectively point to a rapidly developing alternative learning system that demands flexibility and innovation in the context of a society redefined by technology and communication pathways. Some of these scenarios may sound far-fetched, while others present plausible, albeit uncomfortable, situations for policymakers. Still others may open exciting new opportunities. Though they elicit different responses, these scenarios have one thing in common: they all are occurring in real time, right now.

We call on policymakers to respond to these changes and other shocks and disruptions to our geopolitical, economic, environmental, and social systems with new strategies. Specifically, we recommend that policymakers build policy Platforms for Resilience, characterized by flexibility, collaboration, and transparency, to support the inevitable transitions in systems of learning on the horizon.

## An instant global community takes action

Protesting immigration reform, students use text messaging to mobilize thousands of their peers to walk out of class, disrupting schools and even compromising the district's finances through absenteeism fines. School administrators encourage the students to stay in school and express their opinions through traditional political avenues, such as writing letters to their state legislators. Students, however, have found their own collective voice and continue to stage smart-mob walkouts.

Sources: Khokha, S. (2006, March 29). Text message, MySpace roots of student protest. NPR. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5309238>;

Carr, N. (2007, October 19). 'Smart mob' technology spurs student activism. *eSchoolNews*. <http://www.eschoolnews.com/news/top-news/index.cfm?id=50156&CFID=16456984&CFTOKEN=30903344>

## A New Civic Discourse

A New Civic Discourse refers to new community models, communication methods, and spheres of influence that arise in a global society in which community is no longer defined geographically. Rather, the technology and communication tools that undergird a truly global society also generate new forms of interaction and community-building that span geographic identity. The forecast makes the case that individuals will affiliate around common needs instead of common geography, and will claim rights to learning that have previously been the purview of the education elite. Education will become a contested resource among those who seek a claim and demand to participate.

### **Participatory media**

Today, information is an exchangeable commodity to be collected, synthesized, packaged, and distributed along top-down, bottom-up, horizontal, and diffuse channels. Students in schools know of threats, fights, social activities, and mass congregations (smart mobs) before those in "authority" hear a word. Teenagers play online video games, forming spontaneous global communities that span continents and time zones with the goal of defeating a common (virtual) enemy. Global communities are formed, dissolved, and formed again in the space of an evening while those students are doing homework. And, breaking news stories are often first reported by "civilians" on the scene. CNN has benefitted from having millions of potential live-on-the-scene reporters, called iReporters, post their own news broadcasts on a separate Internet site, from which CNN picks up the best for its own site.<sup>3</sup>

### **Virtual community**

Another arm fueling the shift toward A New Civic Discourse is the formation of communities around common roots and self-ascribed identity. These communities are largely self-organizing and self-affiliating, and are enabled by communication technologies that allow individuals to locate each other and congregate in virtual spaces. Barack Obama's campaign team acknowledged the inherent potential of these unrecognized and non-traditional communities and raised astronomical amounts of money for his presidential campaign. In one month alone, Mr. Obama raised a record-setting \$55 million dollars without

## “Grads” tout alternative credit for free online courses

A well-known college professor adapts his most popular course for online learning and throws the (online) doors open. Along with the students at his university who have paid their tuition to enroll in his class, several other online participants infiltrate the class and receive the same instructional attention. Though they don't get college credit, these stealth students receive hand-made certificates of completion from the professor and tout their accomplishments on their resumes.

Source: Young, J. R. (2008, October 3). When professors print their own diplomas, who needs universities? *Chronicle of Higher Education*. <http://chronicle.com/week/v55/i06/06a01301.htm>

personally hosting a single fundraising drive.<sup>4</sup> How? By tapping into a new movement the forecast calls “diverse diasporic movements,” where virtual communities of dispersed populations form around a shared common interest and identity. By looking outside of the traditional Beltway fundraising mechanisms, his team found a virtual community of individuals who congregated around a political message and who would otherwise have been impossible to reach.

### **Education as contested resource**

As community and society continue to take on new shapes, education will become a contested resource. Today, accountability reports spell out how well schools are performing on statewide tests, feeding the information needs of education consumers. Online and homeschooling are both increasing in popularity, as parents seek learning experiences for their children outside of traditional schooling.<sup>5</sup> And grassroots efforts at the community level, such as DC Voice,<sup>6</sup> which focuses on informing and mobilizing the public to improve its community schools, have illustrated the collective capacity of bottom-up frameworks of influence.

As these trends gain strength, the forecast envisions the rise of the “educitizen,” the empowered citizen activist who asserts his or her rights to a high-quality, meaningful, and personalized education. If the perception is that such an education is not available from traditional forms of schooling, the forecast projects, new forms of schooling will emerge. The school choice movement is a manifestation of this force for change in today's world as education consumers have catalyzed around a common educational vision and goal to create new learning communities.<sup>7</sup>

### **Platforms for Resilience**

The term Platforms for Resilience refers to the growing need for new responses to the institutional disruptions and system shocks occurring throughout society. Consider the challenges faced by President Barack Obama in his first 100 days in office. A short list includes an economic recession on a par with the Great Depression, escalation of the war in Afghanistan, bankruptcy and government takeover of the U.S. auto industry, revelations about the previous administration's “enhanced interrogation techniques,” the first seizure of an American vessel on the open seas by Somalian pirates, and a swine flu pandemic.

Each of these events signals a major disruption to our economic, security, military, medical, or global systems.

The forecast makes the case that such disruptions require leaders to respond differently than in the past. Leaders must learn how to meet these challenges with even more flexibility, greater collaboration, and increased transparency. Policymakers, in particular, should look for ways to create or enable the creation of Platforms for Resilience. These newly formed institutions will be spaces in which flexible, innovative strategies can develop for building the resilience of communities as they respond to complex challenges.

### **System shocks and disruptions**

The global economic failure that began in 2008 has had dramatic consequences for education. As seen in the 3-day weekend scenario at right, schools have experienced a major disruption from the financial fallout. Rising energy costs, coupled with the economic meltdown, landed a double-punch that has sent districts and states reeling. While districts grappled with the rising cost of transporting and housing students, they were simultaneously hit with massive ballot rejections of their bond proposals and mill levy overrides.<sup>8,9,10</sup> Suddenly, schools had more students eligible for free- and reduced-lunch, more students needing bus transportation as their parents tried to save gas money, and more students facing homelessness and uncertainty.<sup>11</sup> These pressures are not likely to ease anytime soon. Energy costs dipped slightly in early 2009, but they are expected to rise again as demand surpasses output and refinement costs increase.<sup>12</sup>

As challenging as maintaining necessary resources is the systemic shock of educating a new and very different generation of students. Indeed, students already are showing up at classroom doors with their digital tools in hand. Students today are “digital natives;”<sup>13</sup> information and the technology with which they access, consume, manipulate, and distribute it is as essential and natural to them as the air they breathe.<sup>14</sup> Young incoming teachers are themselves digital natives, comfortable with technology and ready to incorporate electronic tools and approaches into their teaching practices.<sup>15</sup> These students and teachers prefer multi-media, simultaneous streams of information in their learning environments; prefer graphics to text; and prefer random access over guided instruction.<sup>16</sup> They are adept

#### **Students get three-day weekends, like it or not**

The superintendent of a large, suburban school district calls a press conference to announce that, in light of soaring energy prices, the district is moving to a four-day, extended-day school schedule to trim transportation and utility costs. Working parents are outraged, wondering how they will get supervision for their children on the days they are not in school. The superintendent knows she's replaced one headache with another. But, given that the state has already announced that it is renegeing on promised funding for full-day kindergarten and a desperately-needed new middle school, she is almost numb to the battering.

Sources: Armario, C. (2009, March 13). 4-day school week gains momentum amid recession. *Associated Press*. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/29664981>

Jacobson, L. (2008, October 20). States' K-12 efforts feeling budget sting. *Education Week*. [http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2008/10/22/09fiscal\\_ep.h28.html](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2008/10/22/09fiscal_ep.h28.html)

Davis, M. R. (2008, October 21). Financial crisis now striking home for school districts. *Education Week*. <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2008/10/22/09credith28.html>

at using their technologic tools to sort, manage, and distill the streams of information that wash over them. However, those education veterans who cling adamantly to their own educational experiences of guided lectures and expert piece-by-piece delivery of information face a disruption that will test their ability to adapt.

## Building Policy Platforms for Resilience

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Policymakers concerned about the future of America's public education system and the traditional values it supports, if not its structures, would do well to pay attention to these trends and to choose policy responses wisely. The quality of response to disruptions, whether in the arena of generational differences, energy, finance, climate, or education, is a critical indicator of the likelihood that institutions will survive and thrive through system shocks and disruptions.

### ***Autoimmune responses***

Unfortunately, during times of dramatic change and significant challenge, rather than respond in resilient ways, society often chooses strategies that can be self-defeating. The forecast refers to these strategies as “autoimmune responses;” similar to autoimmune diseases, in which the body's immune

system reacts against substances and tissues normally present, resulting in the body actually attacking its own cells, such responses destabilize and weaken systems. Some authors have cited high-stakes accountability policies, including the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), as well as the common ban on cell phones in schools, as examples of autoimmune responses to change. Such responses attend to the symptoms but do not adequately address the signals of deep change associated with the problem. In the case of NCLB, some argue, the approach to teaching and learning is outdated, and the focus on testing and accountability limits the opportunity to build innovative new forms of learning that might ultimately result in improved student achievement. In the case of student cell phone use, having multiple forms of social networking are a fact of life for the Millennial generation; rather than try to prevent their use, schools should try to capture the opportunities inherent in these technologies for improved student achievement and engagement.

### **Californians dreamin' of better times**

2014 is approaching and California is starting to worry. Much like new homeowners who mortgaged their homes with huge deferred balloon payments, California and 22 other states set modest student performance goals in the early days of NCLB, hoping to somehow be saved when the “balloon” came due. Now, more and more California schools are failing to meet the ballooning performance demands as their promised performance targets continue to rise, and the associated punishments doled out under NCLB make it even harder to get on track.

Sources: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/13/education/13child.html>

[http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2008/02/14/24calif\\_web.h27.html](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2008/02/14/24calif_web.h27.html)



An autoimmune response in such cases is like anchoring a boat in a hurricane. Despite best efforts, the hurricane is ultimately in charge. Similarly, policy responses that only moderately tweak the system, are reactive, or are made without considering the long-term emerging trends toward which they are aimed, will not be sufficient. There must be a strategy for building flexibility and innovation into the education system—a Platform for Resilience.

Building this flexibility and innovation into the education system requires a systemic approach. Transformation on this scale demands a willingness to reconceive the education system; in essence, it requires the opposite of an autoimmune response. While an autoimmune response may well be the easiest path in the short term, significant system change that embraces the precepts of a platform for resilience needs sustained attention at the systems level.<sup>17</sup>

## **Moving toward Flexibility, Collaboration, Transparency and Innovation**

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The new norms described in A New Civic Discourse driver of change will lead inevitably to a transformation of practices in all social domains. What might a policy Platform for Resilience to support the new practices in the future of teaching and learning look like? Resilient platforms are characterized by responsive flexibility, distributed collaboration, transparency, and innovation and adaptation. Can policy be imbued with these qualities in order to support positive outcomes?

### ***Responsive flexibility***

Building flexibility into policy development will allow for adaptation to changing conditions. Flexible policies, like all policies, should have targeted outcomes and accountability measures. By including a *monitoring* provision in policies, with the option to *modify* and even sunset a policy if conditions warrant, policymakers can better respond to the environment in a rapidly changing world.

An example of a highly flexible approach to selecting curricular materials is the rise of open education resources (OER). Not only do these online open source projects, such as Curriki, iTunes University, OER Commons, and Flat World Knowledge hold the potential to dramatically decrease the cost while increasing the relevance of classroom materials, they can provide flexibility and transparency to local school boards as they make curricular decisions.

Consider the possibility that, rather than adopting printed textbooks from a single publisher once every several years, district leaders have access to a host of content developed by multiple experts in each subject area. Moreover, content can be updated routinely. There will be no more excuses for children, who witnessed in real time the inauguration of President Obama as a moment of historical significance, to use an outdated textbook that contains no information about his election or, even more confusing, staidly asserts that America has never elected an African-American president. Consistent monitoring of new scientific discoveries, geopolitical developments, and Nobel prize winners can be incorporated into curricular materials as easily as cutting and pasting into a document.

### ***Distributed collaboration***

Shareholder actions, initiative and referendum processes, and interest group mobilization are increasingly influencing or eclipsing policymaking inside the boardroom, the State House, and the halls of Congress. Consider the rising civic engagement demonstrated by Millennials who seek ways to engage politically but distrust the “official party line.” They want authentic, unbiased information on which to make decisions.<sup>18</sup> This disposition, coupled with the availability of technology that enables multi-pathway communication and opportunities for participation, makes it imperative to craft policy by seeking the advice of, and partnering with, experts, end-users (those most affected by the policy), and the public at large. To do otherwise is at best a wasted opportunity and at worst a disaster waiting to happen.

One of the first questions effective policymakers ask when confronted with a policy dilemma is, “What is the research on this?” Seeking input from experts on the issue, reading research reports, and searching for information on the Web are all important activities before moving toward solutions. In addition, policymakers should talk with those who are affected by the issue, especially students; this step is too often overlooked, perhaps because it has been difficult to gather groups of individuals together for face-to-face sessions. Today, however, all that is needed is to set up a Facebook page or identify a group of students and put out a survey online through Survey Gizmo or other survey software. These tools and techniques are inexpensive and easy to use, and the information they provide can go a long way toward improving the quality and buy-in to the policy solution ultimately developed.

An example of “advice seeking” in municipal government is a process known as “participatory budgeting.” This process of direct democratic deliberation on a public budget, pioneered in Porto Alegre, Brazil, over a decade ago, has

been shown in a World Bank study to have led to improved conditions for the poor. The process has spread around the world and has been applied to school, university, and other public budgets.<sup>19</sup> The forcaset also tells the story of *Future Melbourne*, the well-known and award-winning collaborative community planning project that has involved over 15,000 individuals, businesses, organizations, and community groups from across Melbourne and the world using face-to-face and online forums and wikis.

### **Transparency**

Transparency in policy development translates to a commitment to being open and connected to citizens. C-span paved the way for 24/7 transparency in Congress, and many local school boards televise their meetings today. All states and school districts have sunshine laws requiring free and open access to public meetings and documents. Many organizations, such as the Sunlight Foundation<sup>20</sup> and the Sunshine Review,<sup>21</sup> are dedicated to helping citizens gain access to information about public processes and officials. And, certainly, the U.S. Department of Education is attempting to set a high standard in terms of transparency in the use of federal stimulus dollars for education. The department has established a Web site<sup>22</sup> where taxpayers can not only see how the money is spent, but also report any abuses.

What else can make policy development and the deliberations of policymakers more open and transparent to the public? Simple steps, such as ensuring that school, district, or state Web sites contain up-to-date and accurate information, help maintain good public relations. Moreover, as soon as a policy has been enacted, quickly posting the documents with explanatory text and graphics on a Web site is a critical communication step.

Local school board members might consider taking advantage of the technology skills of students on your school board to get the word out through Facebook, Twitter, or a student-written blog. Alternatively, you can start your own blog. Information in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is ubiquitous. Make certain that the public has easy access to the information that seems most important for them to know and understand when it comes to creating the future of learning.

### **Innovation and adaptation**

Even before the recent economic downturn, the need for Americans to be “creative” and “innovative” was on everyone’s minds. Influenced by such writers as Thomas Friedman and Richard Florida, metropolitan areas revised their strategic plans to attract the “creatives” who would drive their local

economies.<sup>23</sup> Today, commentators from President Obama to business consultants<sup>24, 25</sup> see innovation as the key to America's economic future. Yet, many of these same commentators express concern that our education system is not preparing all young people to contribute to society or the economy through creative and innovative thinking and action. In addition, neuroscientists learn more every year about how the human brain develops and works, and about how students learn.

This new knowledge cries out for innovation in education, and for policies that, while still ensuring strong outcomes, allow for wider implementation of both new and proven innovations in student learning. Proven innovations are not hard to find, especially at the secondary level: just look at project-based learning at the New Tech Schools<sup>26</sup> or the “do-think-do” approach of Big Picture Schools<sup>27</sup> or the ideas shared regularly in *Edutopia* magazine or on its Web site.<sup>28</sup> Educators across the nation already are exploring new approaches, and as the forecast shows, new opportunities for innovation will continue to emerge. In areas such as Pattern Recognition<sup>29</sup> and the implications of The Maker Economy,<sup>30</sup> design becomes a basic skill.

How can policymakers support this kind of innovation? One way is to allow “space” for innovation within the confines of education rules and legislation. Just as waivers allowed for measuring student progress by using “value-added” systems under NCLB, the re-authorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act should provide opportunities for states, districts, and schools to use alternative measures that would drive innovative learning programs. State accountability acts should similarly allow for such waivers. Other important supports include the federal funding for innovation that is already in place and the funding being considered by states. Policymakers who get the connection between economic and educational innovation should use every tool at their disposal to propel the innovation that is a key component of Platforms for Resilience.

## Conclusion

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The real-life scenarios presented throughout this brief support potential policy platforms for taking grassroots innovations to scale. Perhaps the incident of stealth participation in online college classes alongside traditional, tuition-paying students is a harbinger of a flexible, adaptive learning ecology. Or, the virtually-organized student smart mob might be the first of many spontaneous, self-organized communities mobilized by a common goal.

The *2020 Forecast: Creating the Future of Learning* reveals both the need for and the promise of new learning systems for the benefit of all students. By focusing attention on the future, even as the day-to-day challenges of the present loom large, and by acknowledging the presence of a new civic discourse that is empowering individuals to take control of their own learning, the education policy community can build a platform for resilience upon which these new systems can emerge. With flexibility, collaboration, transparency, and innovation as the guiding principles, policymakers can be leaders in creating the future of learning.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.iftf.org>

<sup>2</sup>Request a copy, explore an online version, or download the Forecast at [www.futureofed.org](http://www.futureofed.org)

<sup>3</sup><http://www.ireport.com>

<sup>4</sup>Green, J. (2008, June). The amazing money machine. *The Atlantic*. <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200806/obama-finance>

<sup>5</sup><http://www.nheri.org/Research-Facts-on-Homeschooling.html>

<sup>6</sup><http://www.dcvoice.org>

<sup>7</sup>For example, see The Alliance for School Choice at <http://www.allianceforschoolchoice.org/Home>

<sup>8</sup>Jacobson, L. (2008, October 20). States' K–12 efforts feeling budget sting. *Education Week*. [http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2008/10/22/09fiscal\\_ep.h28.html](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2008/10/22/09fiscal_ep.h28.html)

<sup>9</sup>Davis, M. R. (2008, October 21). Financial crisis now striking home for school districts. *Education Week*. <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2008/10/22/09credit.h28.html>

<sup>10</sup>McNichol, E. C. & Lav, I. J. (2008, October 24). State budget troubles worsen. <http://www.cbpp.org/cms/?fa=view&id=711>

<sup>11</sup>Huus, K. (2009, March 2). 'Tidal wave' of homeless students hit schools: School districts across U.S. struggling to pay for needs of uprooted kids. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/29356160>

<sup>12</sup>For an explanation and additional resources, see <http://www.energybulletin.net/primer>

<sup>13</sup>Prensky, M. (2001). *Digital natives, digital immigrants*. <http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky%20-%20Digital%20Natives,%20Digital%20Immigrants%20-%20Part1.pdf>

<sup>14</sup>Seely Brown, J. (2004). *Learning in the digital age*. [http://www.johnseelybrown.com/learning\\_in\\_digital\\_age-aspen.pdf](http://www.johnseelybrown.com/learning_in_digital_age-aspen.pdf)

<sup>15</sup>Wong, H. K. & Wong, R. T. (n.d.). *Teachers: The next generation*. [http://www.newteacher.com/pdf/ascd\\_express\\_wong\\_teachers.pdf](http://www.newteacher.com/pdf/ascd_express_wong_teachers.pdf)

- <sup>16</sup>Prensky, M. (2001). *Digital natives, digital immigrants*. <http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky%20-%20Digital%20Natives,%20Digital%20Immigrants%20-%20Part1.pdf>
- <sup>17</sup>KnowledgeWorks' Transformational Dialogue for Public Education initiative at [http://www.kwfdn.org/schools\\_communities/icc.asp](http://www.kwfdn.org/schools_communities/icc.asp)
- <sup>18</sup>Kiesa, A., Orlowski, A., Levine, P., Both, D., Kirby, E. H., Lopez, M., et al. (2007). *Millennials talk politics: A study of college student political engagement*. [http://www.civicyouth.org/?page\\_id=250](http://www.civicyouth.org/?page_id=250)
- <sup>19</sup>Retrieved April 30, 2009 from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Participatory/budgeting>
- <sup>20</sup>[www.sunlightfoundation.com](http://www.sunlightfoundation.com)
- <sup>21</sup>[www.sunshinereview.org](http://www.sunshinereview.org)
- <sup>22</sup>[www.recovery.gov](http://www.recovery.gov)
- <sup>23</sup>See, for example, <http://cincinnati360.com/report/next.asp>, *Agenda 360: A Regional Action Plan for Greater Cincinnati*. One of its three goals is to keep talented workers and attract new ones because of the entrepreneurial aspirations, vigor and creativity some economists think this group offers.
- <sup>24</sup><http://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/02/24/sotn.obama.transcript>
- <sup>25</sup>[http://blogs.harvardbusiness.org/cs/2008/01/recessions\\_call\\_for\\_more\\_creat.html](http://blogs.harvardbusiness.org/cs/2008/01/recessions_call_for_more_creat.html)
- <sup>26</sup><http://www.newtechfoundation.org/index.html>
- <sup>27</sup><http://www.bigpicture.org/innovation>
- <sup>28</sup><http://www.edutopia.org>
- <sup>29</sup><http://www.futureofed.org/driver/Pattern-Recognition.aspx>
- <sup>30</sup><http://www.futureofed.org/driver/The-Maker-Economy.aspx>



1 West 4th Street, Suite 200  
Cincinnati, Ohio 45202  
513.929.4777



4601 DTC Blvd., Suite 500  
Denver, CO 80237  
303.337.0990