



The “Yen” And Yang Of Transforming Education

How to Turn Outdated Shopping Centers into Innovative Learning Centers

By William Mattox

Darkhorse presidential campaigns are often distinguished by their quixotic policy ideas. And Andrew Yang’s long-shot bid to become the 2020 Democratic nominee is certainly no exception.

In his effort to win over new “Yang Gang” supporters, the 44 year-old education entrepreneur has proposed a plethora of

peculiar policy proposals – including one that looks strangely out of place on the agenda of an aspirant for *federal* office.

It’s called “The American Mall Act,” and it would create a \$6 billion national fund to help struggling shopping malls all over the country. Specifically, Yang’s fund would seek to help malls innovate to “attract businesses, schools, organizations, and entrepreneurs

to find new uses for their buildings and commercial spaces.”

“Malls used to be a hub for socialization and commerce in many American communities,” Yang notes. But as e-commerce continues to take over more and more of the retail market, many malls are losing customers. In fact, Credit Suisse projects that 25 percent of U.S. shopping malls will close by 2022. Accordingly, Yang believes “these giant spaces need to be revitalized in order to spur investment in the local economy and to combat suburban and urban blight.”

Yang’s proposal is fraught with constitutional and jurisdictional problems. For starters, shopping mall revitalization is not among the enumerated powers of the federal government. And no branch of government – at any level – really ought to be in the business of creating special slush funds that favor specific commercial ventures.

Still, there is much to like about the notion of repurposing abandoned shopping centers for productive use in the 21st Century digital economy (provided it is a private market initiative rather than a public sector one). And the goal of such repurposing shouldn’t be primarily nostalgic – to preserve the favorite teen hangout of former “mall rats” like Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox’s character in “Back to the Future”). Rather, one major goal of mall repurposing should be to help future teenagers (and their younger siblings) attain an even better education than the one McFly received at Hill Valley High School.

Indeed, “schooling malls” could help address some very practical needs in

education today – such as overcrowding problems in areas with high population growth. Even more significantly, repurposed learning malls could help facilitate the rise of an alternative paradigm for how Americans think about education – a paradigm of highly-individualized learning that is vastly superior to the big-box model of K-12 schooling commonly seen in America today.

An End to “Undifferentiated Big-Box Education”

Education analyst Grant Lichtman, author of the book “Moving the Rock,” argues that “the tsunami of retail closures may well be a canary in the coal mine of ‘big-box’ education.” Lichtman notes that the disruption of the retail marketplace is being driven by e-companies that offer more than just the convenience of shopping online. These e-companies use big data and digital personal assistants “that know what we need or might want even before we do.”

“These future-focused consumer modalities are pretty much the opposite of the big-box stores that try to stock everything for everyone – at enormous expense in space, inventory, and people,” he says. Instead, these digital companies offer consumers product offerings tailored to each individual’s particular needs or preferences.

Lichtman believes “the parallels to undifferentiated, big-box education are just too clear to miss” and that schools that continue to operate with a big-box mindset “are in trouble, even if many do not see the warning signs.”

Yet, interestingly, even though digital



education software can now perform some amazing and individualized functions (like identifying and addressing a particular student's learning gaps), Lichtman does not believe that digital education ought to replace certain aspects of traditional, brick-and-mortar schooling. "Education is not retail," he says. "Learning is both relational and transactional; and, of the two, the relational is more important for long-term deeper learning."

Lichtman believes education often is more akin to shopping for a tailored article of clothing (where "fit" is highly important and having a personal relationship with the provider is often quite valuable) rather than shopping for a canned good or some other standardized product (where the exchange

is largely transactional and the value of personal interaction quite low).

Thus, the future of education ought not to be dominated by big-box schools that offer systemized one-size-fits-all instruction for the masses without the individualized learning opportunities that students increasingly want and need. But neither should K-12 education become the sole province of digital companies delivering highly individualized, self-paced learning content to students online.

For big-box education typically offers students relational learning without individualized "fit." And digital education typically offers students individualized "fit" without relational learning.

What is needed, then, is a highly

adaptable “hybrid” model of K-12 education that seeks to offer students the best possible “blend” of relational and remote learning, recognizing the different needs and interests of different students. Such a model would give parents the opportunity to choose a single provider – or multiple providers – for their child’s education. And such a model, ideally, would make it possible for students to do much of this learning under the same roof.

Which brings us back to the learning mall of the future.

What a Repurposed Mall Directory Might Offer

Historically, when people have gone to major shopping malls, they’ve found a wide variety of retail outlets there. According to the International Council of Shopping Centers (ICSC), the typical regional mall has at least two “anchor” department stores that take up at least half of the mall’s overall retail space and another 40+ specialty stores that divide the rest of the space. These smaller, “boutique” stores typically specialize in a specific area of merchandise (toys, women’s clothing, men’s clothing, shoes, hats, jewelry, health and beauty supplies, greeting cards, housewares, sporting goods, etc.), often competing with one or more of the anchors.

Indeed, shopping malls illustrate the value of both cooperation and competition in the marketplace, since mall merchants simultaneously work together (to attract shoppers to their mall) and compete against one another (in product lines they hold in common).

If shopping centers were repurposed

into learning centers, these same market dynamics very likely would occur. Large schools offering a wide array of courses in all the core subject areas would serve as education mall “anchors.” (For example, the Tallahassee Mall currently has a charter school operating in its space.) At the same time, small educational enterprises typically specializing in a single field of study where they have considerable expertise (foreign language, lab science, music education, shop class, etc.) would occupy “boutique” spaces that vary in size.

Like traditional mall shoppers, students would avail themselves of the learning mall’s offerings based on their varying needs (as determined by their parents). Some students would become veritable “learning mall rats” and spend as much time at their local learning center as they currently do in traditional schools. Other students, perhaps especially those taking advantage of online offerings at home, would come to the learning center less frequently and/or spend fewer hours when they get there.

The point is, repurposed learning centers would offer parents the opportunity to do in education what parents have always done when shopping for other goods and services – compare prices, look for the best “fit,” take advantage of exceptional values, and determine when to buy “generic” and when to “splurge” on some boutique offering that is of particular interest or need.

Put another way, repurposed learning centers would offer parents the opportunity to find the best blend of learning opportunities for their child. Rather than having to choose between two less-than-ideal extremes – standardized “big-box”



schooling or remote online learning – they’d be able to fashion the best plan for meeting their child’s specific learning needs.

The Need for an Alternative Education Currency

However appealing one may find turning outdated shopping centers into innovative learning centers, there is one obvious obstacle to this idea that would need to be overcome by state policymakers. (Yes, Mr. Yang, there is a role for government here – but it’s not what you think.)

In order to make this transformation possible, state policymakers would need to redirect the monies they currently allocate to education suppliers (school districts) and allocate them instead to education consumers (parents). While this may sound like a radical move to facilitate an uncertain outcome, it’s important to recognize that our supplier-based system of financing education is the primary reason public education in America is so heavily tilted in favor of big-box, one-size-fits-all offerings and against boutique, differentiated

offerings tailored to the unique needs of individual students.

So long as education suppliers have a financial pipeline that is divorced from individual consumer interests and needs, we'll continue to have an education system that caters to the interests of central planners. Which is to say that we'll continue to have a system that seeks to maximize one-size-fits-all standardization and to minimize individualized customization.

Thus, even if it did not lead to the emergence of a single learning mall, there still would be merit to converting our system of education finance from one that allocates monies to suppliers to one that provides "flexible scholarship accounts" for parents to govern. And such a move would hardly be radical.

In fact, Florida already offers parents of special-needs children access to per-pupil flexible scholarship accounts via the Gardiner Scholarship. These accounts function, in many ways, as an "alternative currency" with which parents can purchase a wide array of educational goods and services. And any unused monies can be saved for future use on a child's education, giving parents an incentive to seek the highest possible quality at the lowest possible price.

Universalizing these flexible scholarship accounts undoubtedly would draw lots of education entrepreneurs into the

marketplace – some as "anchor" providers that bear a resemblance to existing schools, and many as "specialty" providers that offer families and students the opportunity to "go deeper" in an area of particular need or interest.

Less Yang, More "Yen"

In conclusion, Democratic presidential candidate Andrew Yang deserves credit for calling attention to the need for outdated shopping centers to be turned into innovative learning centers. But for this appealing vision to become a reality, we'll need less Yang and more "yen" (to borrow the currency term).

That is, we'll need for policymakers to deviate from Yang's reliance on central planners in the federal government to mastermind this transformation. We'll need, instead, for state policymakers to redirect existing education resources into per-pupil flexible scholarship accounts that parents can utilize to meet the specific needs of their particular children through a wide array of anchor, boutique, and online educational offerings.

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