From Tiny to Transformative: Match Education's Quest for Impact

By: Jeff Bradach | March 27, 2014



Stig Leschly thinks a lot about transformative scale. In fact, you might call it his obsession. Leschly is on a mission to crack the code for fixing low-performing public schools and "ineffective" graduate schools of education. Lofty ambitions for sure. All the more so given the self-described tiny base on which Leschly is building: four Boston-based charter schools, an alternative graduate school of education, and early forays into consulting and publishing.

Leschly moved from the Match board, on which he served for seven years, to CEO in 2011, bringing with him experience running the Newark, NJ, Charter School Fund; lecturing at Harvard Business School; and building a successful e-commerce enterprise ultimately sold to Amazon. His entrepreneurial spirit burns brightly in everything he does at Match Education, the umbrella name for the organization's multiple endeavors.

In a conversation last week, Leschly shared how he sees the potential of Match to help achieve transformative change in public education. In his observations, we see some of the big questions facing social entrepreneurs aiming for system change—and he illuminates a few places where we need fresh thinking and models for massive scale.

Match's theory of change starts with operating outstanding schools and teacher training. It has set a high bar for achieving success. "Our outcomes—both in teacher training and in schools—have to be jaw-droppingly good and measurable," says Leschly. When that happens, of course, the teachers being trained by Match and the students in its schools benefit in important ways. For example, roughly 90 percent of Match's high school graduates go on to four-year colleges, and Match is producing some of the most sought-after novice teachers in the country.

But Leschly has his eye on a bigger prize—school and teacher training reform on a national scale. Easier said than done. Urban school systems and "old-line" graduate schools of education are some of the "most politicized, unionized, and regulated bureaucracies around," he says. Leschly's view is that change rarely comes without a struggle, and outcomes of the sort that Match seeks in its schools and teacher training are an essential ingredient in enabling that struggle. Great results are especially important in urban district settings to "fuel the power struggle and political

fight that has to go on for a generation city-by-city to ready big-city districts for reform." To be clear, these are not battles that Match engages in directly. But their outcomes abet that struggle by "proving what's possible," says Leschly.

As theories of change go, this logic is pretty straightforward. Hard and clever work produces path-breaking outcomes in a few locations and enables reformers in other places to win political battles that advance education reform. But there's a second part to this change agenda that depends on knowledge and practice transfer.

Leschly views Match's schools and teacher training work as applied research that can generate knowledge over time for use by urban districts and incumbent graduate schools of education. Match's mission statement is built on this belief:

> *Match Education is an engine of discovery and applied innovation in education. We operate high-performing urban public charter schools and a unique graduate school of education that trains teachers for high-poverty schools. Out of this applied work, we refine, validate empirically, and eventually disseminate new ideas and practices on core questions in education reform.*

Match's commitment to innovation and quality tempers its interest in adding charter schools—despite repeated requests from officials in Massachusetts and other regions of the country—or expanding the size of its graduate school. Leschly believes that the 1,200 students in the Match school network and its current plan to produce 100 teachers per year are ample size for its research agenda. Match will not grow to "chase size for the sake of size and at the expense of our ability to drive quality gains and constantly innovate," he explains. "Growth, if it goes too fast, will conflict with quality and innovation."

Match anticipates a decade or more of research on a wide range of applied problems in school design and teacher training, from how to influence noncognitive development in students to how to measure effective instruction. "We are optimistic that we can solve a lot of important technical puzzles that matter on the ground," says Leschly.

What Leschly is less sure about is how to transfer that knowledge to others who want to use it. First, there is a general lack of interest and demand. "Vast stretches of the educational status quo are totally misaligned, and we don't think they could receive and apply the practices and ideas that we're producing." On the other hand, among the nation's 150 big urban school districts encompassing roughly 100,000 schools, there are an increasing number of forward thinkers already showing an interest, among them Chicago, New Orleans, Denver, and Lawrence, MA.

As Match ramps up its knowledge transfer to districts and graduate schools of education, it faces a tricky problem of sorting out which distribution mechanisms will work best. "Is it executive education, licensing, and applied consulting?" asks Leschly. "We like all of those means for sharing our innovations because they are high touch, but they frighten us because they have huge transaction costs."

Alternatively, he wonders, perhaps a "broadcast" approach would be better—publishing Match's intellectual property in various ways via books, blogs, massive online open courses, website self-publishing, and the like. "These publishing formats are obviously free of the heavy labor and transaction costs of applied partnerships, tailored licensing agreements, and executive education," says Leschly. "On the other hand, they might be too superficial to have impact."

What's so refreshing about Leschly's approach is that he is disarmingly honest about what he doesn't know. He admits having "little idea" which of Match's various approaches to achieving impact at a transformative scale will actually work. "We're running lots of trials to find fits between our knowledge, its use by large stakeholders, and some mode of transmission. This is uncharted territory."

Leschly is not alone in these unchartered waters. It is striking how many organizations and funders are confronting the question of how to make the leap from knowing what works to spurring massive adoption. This is the new frontier for social sector innovation. And I'd welcome hearing stories of how others are grappling with it.