



Ted Kolderie

Might John Brandl be pleased with way Minnesota's public education is evolving?

A Minnesota education policy interview

October 2, 2020

In an interview both reflective and forward-looking, the Civic Caucus spoke with education policy expert Ted Kolderie on October 2, 2020, on the topic "Would John Brandl feel his vision with respect to public education has been fulfilled today?" Kolderie said he thinks Brandl, a former Humphrey Institute dean and legislator, would be distressed by much of

what ails public policy today, but would be generally pleased by the redesign of public education in Minnesota. The discussion arose in honor of the 15th anniversary of the very first Civic Caucus interview, with John Brandl, which can be found [here](#).

Notes of the Discussion

Background. 00:49

Holding up John Brandl's book *Money and Good Intentions are Not Enough: Or, Why a Liberal Democrat Thinks States Need Both Competition and Community*, Kolderie said Brandl liked to describe it as having "the longest subtitle of any book ever published." The book captured Brandl's extensive legislative experience and economic background which led him to think deeply about the structure and effectiveness of state and local government.

Kolderie: John Brandl believed choice was key for the design and operation of the services provided by state and local governments. He saw choices, competition, as "the institutionalization of countervailing power." For John, state government was a "provider" of services-in the sense that it designs and finances the service systems. Other institutions then deliver the services. In most instances, state government does not itself deliver services.

Over the past 30 years, the Minnesota Legislature has substantially transformed the state's public education. What was a classic public utility has become a broad array of public options. This actually began in districts in the 1960s with the alternative schools in Minneapolis. It was later extended by Governor Rudy Perpich. The area learning centers legislation expanded the opportunity for the district sector to offer alternative schooling. In the 1980s came interdistrict open enrollment, allowing students to attend in a district other than the one in which they lived, and the postsecondary option allowing juniors and seniors to finish high school at Minnesota colleges. In 1991, the Legislature enacted chartering, a kind of R&D program for public education. The law was improved in subsequent sessions. In the charter sector, schools appeared that offered larger professional roles for teachers-a change some districts are now copying. All this was not the implementation of a master plan: there never was a master plan. The end result was a changed system, which I think John would approve. (See the Center for Policy Design paper "[Minnesota Is Creating a Self-Improving System.](#)")

What Brandl meant by community was that society is more than individuals acting out of self-interest. People do come together in groups to help themselves and others. But his experience taught him that even with good intentions, good people grouped in

organizations—even in public organizations—cannot always be relied upon to act altruistically in the public interest. For this reason he believed competition needs to go along with community.

John would, I'm sure, be disappointed that Minnesota never included parochial schools in its strategy for public education. He believed Catholic schools displayed the characteristics of good community. But he might also agree that a number of schools and districts, smaller and teacher-led, display the qualities of community that he had in mind. In an interview with young people who quit conventional school, good relationships and personal attention are what they say they wanted. These students don't typically speak ill of the schools they left, but instead speak of the kinds of schools that would have engaged their interest. Often chartering can create this community in its nonconventional schools.

Discussion

19:47 - Administration and public unions can be barriers to transformation in public education. Why aren't school boards more involved in this discussion?

(John Cairns)

Kolderie: The school district sometimes is inert. For boards, differences can be seen as problematic. Superintendents do sometimes try to change, but one I know says that in every district, he felt a powerful pressure for sameness. The unions, I think, are wondering whether to continue with the industrial model or move to a professional model. Minnesota is the only state where people who'd led a teachers union created a separate organization to authorize charter schools.

There is resistance, of course. But I like the comment that the progress of change can be measured by the intensity of the resistance. I believe good things will come if we can make teaching a better job and a better career.

24:32 - John Brandl's voucher plan from 1983 would have limited vouchers to families whose incomes do not exceed 130 percent of federal poverty guidelines. What would John Brandl think today of how the families most in need of exercising choice seem to be those who exercise the least amount of choice? (Paul Gilje)

Kolderie: As choice appeared, the *Kappan* magazine began tracking public opinion. I got a person at Gallup to give me the unpublished breakouts. These showed support for choice was highest among people who had not finished, or not gone beyond, high school; people in the big cities; people of lower income and people of color. The support, and use, of choice is inside the Democratic political constituency. Support is lowest among advantaged people, who can afford to buy into the district they want, send their children to private school if they want and buy music, art, sports and other lessons privately. Joe Nathan and

Aaliyah Hodge have been tracking families in Saint Paul that are moving their children to charter schools. it shows what Gallup reported. First-generation immigrant families sometimes want to keep their community together, in schools.

25:48 - Minnesota educational reform legislation was beneficial to advantaged communities, but there needs to be a corresponding improvement in the ability of disadvantaged communities (often for whom these policies were intended) to maximally implement these policies. Our Legislature recently has not been as productive in creating legislation that benefits the general citizenry of Minnesota, and as a result, we see the rise of special-interest groups looking to benefit specific segments of the population. How would John have responded to these kinds of changes in our Legislature? (T Williams)

Kolderie: He'd have wanted the Legislature to help those who need help the most. There's a lot left to do. I like to think he might be encouraging those working to reduce incarceration to be more involved with efforts to help, earlier, with getting young people the kind of schooling that holds them to graduation.

33:49 - An overlooked-piece of education reform is who decides what is it that kids should be learning, and how do we make sure that they learn it. We see the slow deterioration of student preparation for higher education. Is the problem on the part of higher education or is something still missing even with the reconstruction of the K-12 system? How do we prepare kids for the work world? (John Adams)

Kolderie: A major question currently is, Who decides what students should know? How far "society"? How far the students? Is the goal of secondary public education limited to preparing young people for college or should this include vocations or other pathways in life?

35:36 - The business of higher education is overdeveloped, admitting students neither prepared to do, nor interested in, college-level work who could have been guided towards technical or vocational training, but weren't given the opportunities to get involved in this. How in secondary education do we provide different paths for kids that match their abilities and interests, and that also match what the society needs in terms of economic, civic and social preparation ? (John Adams)

Kolderie: Why does this need to be more complicated than providing multiple pathways and helping students decide? There is a tendency to search for the one right thing that everyone ought to know and be able to do, which leads us back to the non-diversified standardized concept of school. There's an assumption that if society tells students they must learn, they will. I don't know about Brandl, but I'd have tried to persuade him to make school more engaging. I know of one superintendent who asks why we push young people

to work harder at what they do least well and are least interested in, rather than help them do what they are best at and most interested in.

40:52 - A comment. In his classes as a professor, Brandl would assign a book, "**Motivation, Agency and Public Policy**" in which the author, Le Grand, explains that **within each of us, there is some Knave and some Knight**. John worried about policy having to construct defenses against the risk of the Knave predominating. It was to balance against that risk that he argued for the design of systems, policies, to bring in the Knight in the form of countervailing competition. (Ed Dirkswager)

45:56 - **Innovative Quality Schools (IQS)**, a charter school authorizer, allows **the charter schools it authorizes the ability to engender community and enables students, teachers and parents to align**. Teachers are given the flexibility to decide what their students need and how to deliver it, with the ability to adjust along the way to the needs of their students. (Ed Dirkswager)

49:59 - **Public school districts often use alternative schools as a place to send kids who are disruptive in their schools**. I talk with some of these kids in the juvenile detention centers. It was not an effort to get them a better education-and for many it doesn't. **Why is the school district a semi-autonomous system, separate from other units of local government? Does the political influence on school boards from teachers unions and special-interest groups interfere with their ability to create comprehensive planning? Does school choice cause kids to leave the district schools?** (Clarence Shallbetter)

Kolderie: Several questions here. The push-out of students from district schools has been real, especially in Minneapolis. It's true the quality of education in alternative schools is not always good. Brandl recognized there would be problems with the competition model, just as there are problems with the public-bureau model. The independent special district arrangement in which most American schools organized is peculiar, a separate elected body with only the job of "running the schools." Board members promise to get your children the best possible education, but in fact they put the kids into the schools of an organization they own and run and in which they sit as the officers and directors. In that arrangement, sure, organizational interests and employee interests press on the board. I went with the American delegation to Finland: In Helsinki, public education is a function of general municipal government along with public works, public safety, public parks, etc. As to choice: In public education parents have two ways to be effective: "voice" and "exit." If the district doesn't "hear you," there is the opportunity to leave. We are seeing significant departures from the big-city districts. Districts have some impulse to block this. Perhaps instead they should pick up what the choice schools are doing.

58:37 - Why do we create opportunities for school choice if we do not invest energy in comparable efforts to support communities' capacity to effectively implement them? The chartering policies work well for the advantaged, but do not always reach the disadvantaged, yet we blame those groups for not using their opportunities. If we do not address the disadvantaged students, the problem will remain, and absorb more resources in order to address it. **Why do we take a destination approach looking for outcomes, rather than taking a journey approach and being there along the way, gradually achieving pieces of the puzzle as we stay the course?** (T Williams)

1:03:01 - Why do we attack symptoms rather than address underlying causes, many of which originate in toxic neighborhoods? Could we place more efforts into proven solutions like charter schools and early parent education as tools to reduce racial and income disparity? How do we replicate on a larger scale the smaller efforts of directed gentrification for social justice, attempting to integrate neighborhoods by combining the reduction of white-flight blockbusting with development investment in less desirable neighborhoods to make them more attractive ? (Walt McClure)

Kolderie: Difficult questions, Walter. There are good things happening: Recording Arts charter school in Saint Paul provides temporary housing for their homeless students and their engaging program is consistently ranked at the top of the Hope Survey, a measure of the ability to inspire young people to believe they can do more than they've been told they can do. But progress is always gradual and never as fast as we'd like. Education|Evolving's Joe Graba says it perfectly: Everyone wants schools to be better, but almost no one wants them to be different. He argued for creating schools new. "We cannot get the schools we need by changing the schools we have," he has said many times. Districts might be finding a way now to change existing schools, though. In current education policy we see things both encouraging and discouraging.

Conclusion **1:13:52**

Kolderie: The ideas of competition and community are absolutely central. Although John Brandl spent a lot of time in government, he was not a fan of organizing everything in the public-bureau model. I heard a Harvard professor once talk about "the larger community, represented by government." John Brandl would not have agreed; he would have responded that government is a subset of the community, of the society. He believed that questions about the structure, design and operation of the government belong to the larger community.

[Present on Zoom interview](#)

John Adams, Helen Baer, Shelly Brandl, John Cairns (vice chair), Janis Clay (chair), Ed Dirkswager, Paul Gilje, Jeff Johnson, Randy Johnson, Ted Kolderie, Dan Loritz, Walt McClure, Lee Munnich, Paul Ostrow, Bill Rudelius, Dana Schroeder (associate director), Clarence Shallbetter, T Williams.

Biography

Ted Kolderie is senior fellow at both [Education|Evolving](#), a Minnesota-based nonprofit, nonpartisan organization focused on improving American public education, and the [Center for Policy Design](#), a Minnesota-based nonprofit, nonpartisan organization committed to system redesign in education, health care and government. He is most recognized nationally for his work on K-12 education policy and innovation, which he has focused on since the early 1980s. He was instrumental in the design and passage of the nation's first charter school law in Minnesota in 1991. He has since worked on the design and improvement of charter legislation in over 17 states.

Kolderie has worked on system questions and legislative policy in several areas of public life, including urban and metropolitan affairs and public finance, throughout the 1960s and 1970s. He was a reporter and editorial writer for the *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, executive director of the Twin Cities Citizens League and a senior fellow at the University of Minnesota's Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs, where he ran the Public Services Redesign Project.

His books include *Thinking Out the How* (2017), *The Split Screen Strategy: How to Turn Education into a Self-Improving System* (2015), *Improvement and Innovation: How to Get Education Changing the Way Successful Systems Change* (2014), and *Creating the Capacity for Change: How and Why Governors and Legislatures Are Opening a New-Schools Sector in Public Education* (2004).

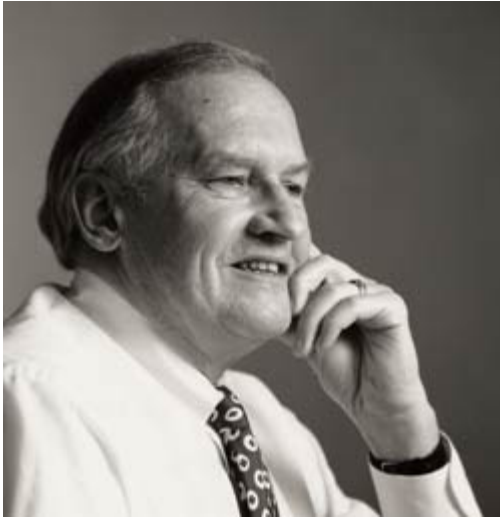
Kolderie is a graduate of Carleton College and has a master's degree from the School of Public Affairs at Princeton University.

Reflections on John Brandl.

by John S. Adams

October 2, 2020

John Brandl grew up in St. Cloud, Minnesota, and earned his undergraduate degree at St. John's University in 1959. With support from his professors, he went to Harvard to pursue a Ph.D. in economics, which he received in 1963, with a dissertation on the history and uses of econometrics.



John Brandl

Econometrics is based on multiple-regression analysis in which some *dependent* outcome, Y , is understood to be some function of-or dependent on-one or more *independent* factors or variables, X_1, X_2, X_3 , etc. From a policy standpoint, this line of reasoning implies that if you modify or influence the independent X s, you can influence the outcome-that is, the dependent variable Y . John's approach to policy analysis often followed this line of reasoning-until later in his career when he began studying the nature and influence of institutions in history and society.

John had been in Army ROTC at St. John's and had a military obligation. When he entered the Army in 1963, following graduate school, he was sent to work in the Pentagon with Robert McNamara's analysis group in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, where he served his military obligation between 1963 and 1965.

John taught economics at St. John's University in Collegeville (1965-67) and at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (1967-68) before returning to Washington for a one-year stint (in 1968-69), working as an analyst in education planning and as deputy assistant secretary at the Department of Health, Education and Welfare.

Meanwhile, at the University of Minnesota, the University's vice president for academic affairs had appointed a review committee to examine the University's Public Administration Center and its master's program and to make recommendations on what to do about them. Law School Professor Carl Auerbach chaired the review committee, which declared "bankruptcy" of the Center and recommended that it be turned into a School of Public Affairs, a concept and proposal that the vice president supported.

So, a decision was made in 1968 to create such a school to replace the Public Administration Center and the degree and certificate programs that it managed. The next year, 1969, Brandl was recruited to head the new School of Public Affairs.

In terms of new approaches to policy analysis, the thinking in both the Pentagon and the Office of Education at that time was influenced by applications of econometric methods. One example in the Pentagon during the Vietnam War was the use of "body counts" as an

outcome, or dependent variable, that was linked with different strategic initiatives and tactical maneuvers during the war. John insisted that this method of analysis should be a required element in the School's curriculum.

John and I had worked together in summer 1963 on the Upper Midwest Economic Study following his Ph.D., before he went to the Pentagon. When I returned to Minnesota from Penn State in summer 1970, I saw John several times per week as he developed curriculum and staffing plans for the School of Public Affairs. There was a lot to discuss, because he really was not well prepared to develop and lead an academic unit, although he was very smart, well educated, and had had a variety of Washington experiences.

As he developed his ideas and plans for the School, he consulted frequently with friends at the Kennedy School of Government, which had been established in 1966, by pulling together faculties of the existing School of Government and the Institute of Politics. Between 1970 and 1974, John spent a great deal of time reading and thinking and working to define a *guiding philosophy* on which the school's academic program would be built and a faculty would be assembled.

Two of the thinkers John read-while drawing several of us into late-afternoon conversations for discussion of the readings-were Harvard's Political Philosophy Professors John Rawls and Robert Nozick. John Rawls was a political philosopher in the liberal tradition who advanced a theory of *justice as fairness*, in which he described a society of free citizens holding equal basic rights and cooperating within an egalitarian economic system. John was highly impressed by Rawls' work.

Rawls also advanced a theory of *political liberalism*, the legitimate use of political power in a democracy, and how civic unity might endure, despite the diversity of worldviews that free institutions allow.

Rawls' most discussed work was his theory of a just, liberal society, which he set out in detail in his 1971 book, *A Theory of Justice*. Brandl read Rawls' book closely-and we faculty members discussed several of its concepts during a series of late-afternoon sessions in John's office.

A later book by the other Harvard political philosopher Robert Nozick appeared in 1974, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. It focused on the legitimate uses of state power, for example, in the justification for redistribution of earned wealth.

John wrestled with these contrasting philosophies as he worked to refine his guiding ideas for shaping the new school-and what they would mean for *educating* post-graduate students preparing for public service.

He emphasized the need for *education* rather than *training*, which had been the focus of the previous Public Administration program. He also insisted that the new Public Affairs degree be a *Graduate School degree* rather than a *professional degree*.

His *education program* had a core comprising three components: (1) policy analysis, (2) study of the policy process, and (3) the application of quantitative methods in the study of public-policy challenges. The course of study for master's students would also require a three-month internship in a local, state or federal government office or agency.

In 1976, after getting the School underway, John decided to run for the Minnesota Legislature. He was elected to the House in November 1976 and served for eight years (1977-78 and 1981-86), followed by four years in the Minnesota Senate (1987-1990). John remained active in local politics after he returned full-time to the University in 1988 and for several years, he wrote a regular op-ed column for the *Star Tribune*. He served one year as president of the Citizens League and also served a term as dean of the Humphrey Institute, which replaced the School of Public Affairs in 1977. In 2011, the Humphrey Institute was renamed the Humphrey School of Public Affairs.

John's legislative experience, along with his Citizens League activity, prompted him to think hard about the structure, operation, and effectiveness of state and local government. That led to his 1998 book with the Brookings Institution, *Money and Good Intentions Are Not Enough: Or, Why a Liberal Democrat Thinks States Need Both Competition and Community*. The arguments in the book are well-aligned with the Public Service Options project the Citizens League ran in the 1980s.

John died in 2008 from stomach cancer at age 69. We miss him.

John S. Adams is University of Minnesota Emeritus Professor and a Civic Caucus interview group member.