

# LAUGHING AT THE ELEVATOR

**What Steve Ballmer, the iPhone, and education's resistance to disruption have in common.**

In 2007, shortly after Apple unveiled the iPhone, then-Microsoft CEO, Steven Ballmer, famously laughed at the idea. A \$500 phone? No physical keyboard? Not a serious business device?

The clip has become a staple in leadership keynotes and innovation talks—not because Ballmer was uniquely wrong, but because he was perfectly representative of the prevailing wisdom of the time. This distinction matters. Let's be fair to Ballmer; he was not an outlier. He was not reckless. He was not uninformed.

In fact, his reaction mirrored the dominant sentiment across the tech industry in 2007. Business users wanted keyboards. Enterprise email mattered more than touchscreens. Apple, at the time, was selling zero phones, while Microsoft's ecosystem, along with BlackBerry and others, was deeply embedded in enterprise workflows.

Ballmer's job, arguably, was to protect stable revenue, not gamble on an unproven consumer device that challenged everything the industry believed about productivity.

Ballmer was correct; Microsoft was selling “millions, and millions, and millions” of phones in 2007. But how many did they sell in 2025? Or 2020? In fact, ten years after that 2007 interview, Microsoft exited the consumer phone market entirely. Apple, on the other hand, had become the world's leading smartphone manufacturer. In 2025 alone, Apple sold approximately 247 million iPhones globally, all of which lacked keyboards! The device had redefined email and reshaped how the world worked, learned, and communicated.



Scan to see  
interview clip



Ballmer was making decisions based on what people said they wanted...but how often do people really know what they want? In fact, you can only want what you know exists. This is why Marketing exists as a vocation.

Consider the following quote often attributed to Henry Ford: “If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses.” Imagine if Ford had asked people what they wanted, and worse, what if he had listened?

The point here is not that Ballmer was foolish. The point is that disruption rarely looks reasonable in real time!

## “It's Not a Business Device”

One of Ballmer's most quoted criticisms was that the iPhone didn't make a good 'email machine', and wasn't designed for 'business users'. From a 2007 vantage point, he wasn't wrong. But from today's vantage point, it reveals something deeper: a tendency to evaluate the future using the metrics of the past.

The keyboard wasn't the future of productivity; it was simply the best version of the present.

This is where the parallel to education becomes unavoidable.

## Education's 'Ballmer' Moment

In education, we often respond to new ideas the same way Ballmer responded to the iPhone:

- "That will never work here."
- "What we are doing is working, why change?"
- "We've never tried something like that before."
- "It's not realistic."
- "That's not how school is supposed to look."

Sometimes, those critiques are valid, but sometimes, they are simply reactions to discomfort.

The irony? Many of the ideas now considered "best practice" in education were once met with the same laughter.

- Work-Based Learning
- Dual Enrollment
- Competency-based assessment
- Industry-driven curriculum
- Flexible scheduling
- Career Academies

Every one of these innovations, every pushing of the needle, had an early champion who was told, "That's crazy. I'll take the stairs."

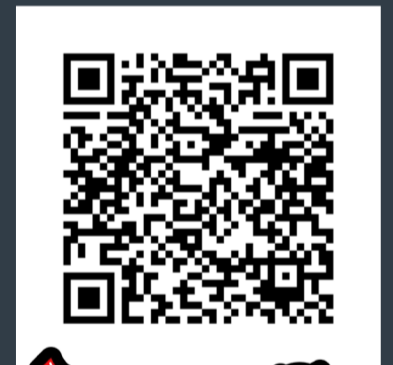


## A Podcast Built on Disruption

I keep coming back to a podcast hosted by two friends, Peter Hostrawser and Alli Dahl, titled Disrupt Education, a much-needed addition to the landscape of educational discussion. Their guest list is a who's who of educators and industry partners doing things differently, and doing them well. These are leaders achieving measurable outcomes, building new systems, and expanding opportunity for students. And yet, many of them share the same experience: snickers, jeering, mocking laughter, and outright resistance from the traditional establishment.

Not because the ideas lack merit, but because they challenge comfort. So why? Why the resistance to new ideas or the sunseting of an antiquated process, regardless of how longstanding it may be? This may be an article worthy of future consideration.

I experienced a funny interaction recently that may help drive home my point. My friend, Jeremy Smith, founder of Pega6, made a LinkedIn post arguing that every career is, in some sense, a trade—a direct challenge to the assumptions propping up our broken university system. The response was immediate and revealing. Some applauded the idea. Others bristled. A few resorted to open mockery. One commenter, seemingly stymied by the logic of the argument, abandoned ideas altogether and pivoted to personal commentary—***calling me 'obtuse' and 'bald'***. To be clear, the second charge is indisputable; what I would call the lowest-hanging fruit from the observation tree. I suppose I should be thankful that my headshot is cropped at the shoulders, and that he couldn't see that I am also a bit overweight! Humor aside, the exchange illustrates a familiar pattern: when deeply embedded systems are challenged, and the argument lands, resistance often shows up not as evidence or counter-reasoning, but as ridicule. Laughter is rarely the final word; it is usually just the first reflex.



## Elevators, Ride-sharing, and Open-heart Surgery

History is full of examples: the elevator -vs- stairs, organ transplant -vs- natural expiration, ridesharing -vs- taxi's, the electric light -vs- gas. All were met with skepticism. All were dismissed as impractical. The safety alarmist's screamed the loudest. Each one of these shifts required someone willing to look foolish before they looked visionary.

And what about the emergence of automobiles that I mentioned previously? Early laws, like the Locomotive Act of 1865 (in the UK) restricted self-propelled vehicles to very low speeds—2 mpg in town and 4 mph elsewhere. These laws also required a person to walk ahead of the vehicle carrying a red flag—effectively slowing early automobiles to walking speed and negating the emergence of the new technology altogether.



Innovation almost always sounds absurd before it sounds indispensable!

## A Leadership Question, Not an Accusation

This article is not a rebuke; it is an invitation—one extended to school leaders, classroom practitioners, system-level decision-makers, and industry partners—to examine their posture toward disruption.

Have you ever heard a new idea in education and felt the reflexive response: *That will never work?* If you haven't, go listen to the Disrupt Education Podcast, you'll certainly find more than a few!

Then pause and ask yourself, is this idea that I am uncomfortable with genuinely flawed, unsupported by evidence, misaligned with outcomes, or harmful to students? Or is it simply unfamiliar, inconvenient, or threatening to the systems I know how to manage? ***We must understand the following bifurcation: strangeness isn't sin!***

Steve Ballmer's reaction to the iPhone, however embarrassing it may be now, was not malicious. It was rational, data-driven, and anchored to what was working at the time. Education often finds itself in the same position—defending proven structures, established practices, and stable outcomes. And to be clear, there is wisdom in stewardship. BUT leadership is not only preserving what works; it is also about recognizing when the conditions have changed.



Sometimes leadership requires the courage to admit that the keyboard, however effective it once was, is no longer the future. And the greatest risk that we face is not moving too fast, but standing still while the world our students are preparing to enter moves on without us.