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## INTERVIEW

# Reimagining Teaching and Learning: An Interview with Joel Rose

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# Reimagining Teaching and Learning: An Interview with Joel Rose

**J**oel Rose is boldly reimagining and reshaping teaching and learning to better meet the needs of today's students and to make teaching more effective and rewarding. Rose was founder and CEO of School of One, an initiative within the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE), the largest school district in the country. Named by *Time* magazine as one of the top 50 inventions of 2009, School of One uses a mixture of live and online instruction that is customized to meet students' unique academic needs and learning styles. Most recently, Rose co-founded New Classrooms Innovation Partners, a non-profit to help schools nationwide create adaptive, personalized learning models. This new organization will unveil its first model, Teach to One, in four U.S. cities this fall and will serve approximately 5,000 students.

Before creating School of One, Rose served as chief executive for human capital and as chief of staff to the Deputy Chancellor at NYCDOE, where he oversaw the restructuring of NYCDOE's human resources division. Rose has been involved in education for more than 15 years, first as a Teach For America corps member in Houston and later as a senior executive at Edison Schools, a pioneering, for-profit public school management company, where he served as the company's associate general counsel, chief of staff, general manager, and vice president for school operations. He earned a bachelor's degree in political science from Tufts University and a law degree from the University of Miami School of Law, and is a graduate of the Broad Urban Superintendents Academy.

In this edited interview with DMC CEO John J-H Kim and DMC Vice President of Product Development Richard Viard, Rose discusses innovation, the effective use of technology in the classroom, and the potential for scaling this innovative model.

## **Tell us a little bit about Teach to One and how it works.**

Teach to One is an integration of multiple modalities of instruction into one learning environment. Let's say you are a sixth grader at Jones Middle School. You have reading first period in room 204 and science second period in room 305; third period, you have math. Instead of going to room 103, we've knocked down the walls between 101 and 104 to create a large open space that we call the math center. And, in that space, there are 12 or 13 different stations with a sign above each one.

Some stations are for live, teacher-led instruction; some are for collaborative learning; some are for students working with software; some are stations where kids work with virtual instructors; and some are for kids working by themselves. Every day, when students come into the room, they see a big monitor that looks like the monitors you see at the airport; on the monitor, they find their name and which station they're supposed to go to. There, they engage in one or two activities around a single skill, and at the end of the day, they take an online assessment. We then take the data that we get from ▶

that assessment and create unique schedules for the next day for both teachers and students based on how each student performed. Each student follows a personalized pathway to learning.

### **When was the “Eureka!” moment? What sparked the idea for School of One and now Teach to One?**

Well, I think there were a couple of events that led to the “Eureka!” moment. When I was chief executive of human capital at the NYCDOE, I took our human resources team to meet with the human resources teams from IBM and GE as part of a benchmarking exercise. We wanted to really understand what constitutes great talent management. When we were comparing what they were doing to what we were doing, we realized that we were focusing on the same four Rs that they were focusing on: recruit, retain, remediate, remove. But, from the visits, we also learned about a fifth R that we had never even talked about: role. We

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discovered that these companies not only thought about which employees were best suited for certain positions, but focused on designing the positions themselves so that people could be successful in meeting the company’s objectives.

So, we asked ourselves, “Are we putting people in a position to be as successful as we need them to be?” We realized we had never had that conversation. We went back and ran the data and found that only 13% of our eighth-grade math teachers were able to get 80% of their kids to proficiency by the end of the year, and only 12% were able to get one year’s growth out of 80% of the class. The reading numbers were even lower. And remember, we had over seven applicants for every position.

In any other industry, if only 12–13% of an entire employee classification were successful, you would change the job description. You can talk about accountability and performance management when you’ve got 70, 80, 90% of your employees doing the job that you need them to do; but, when the numbers are down around 13%, that’s on us as policy makers. Clearly, the job as we are now defining it is extremely hard to do and not easily sustainable. That, I guess, was the first “Eureka!” moment.

The second “Eureka!” moment occurred when I was visiting a friend in Florida who was running New Horizons Learning Center, a post-secondary institution for technical training and certification. I went to meet him for lunch and saw a big sign in the lobby that said, “Choose Your Modality.” You can learn live, or you can learn online, or you can do a blend through a mentored learning format. I thought, “Wow, that’s what we need in K-12!” We need more modalities because if we have different modalities all in a single learning environment, the burden of personalizing learning wouldn’t fall exclusively on the backs of teachers. That’s what could allow us to personalize learning, and simultaneously make this job a lot more sustainable.

It was really these two realizations that led to our team’s work with School of One and now Teach to One.

### **How did you end up with the specific modalities you have chosen?**

When designing Teach to One, we thought long and hard about how the different modalities complement and reinforce one another. Some modalities are best for conveying information, others stimulate critical thinking and student collaboration; some are best for pinpointing individual student misconceptions, and others are best for reinforcing discrete skills. It’s the combination of all of these modalities that provides students with rich, holistic learning experiences.

### **Do you have a favorite modality?**

I don’t. I really think kids benefit from having a variety of modalities, and that each modality brings something different to the experience. We try not to



DMC CEO John J-H Kim, DMC Vice President of Product Development Richard Viard, and Co-Founder of New Classrooms Innovation Partners Joel Rose (left to right).

be so reductive as to say, “Well this is the best modality, or this is the best lesson.” The fact is that different modalities and different combinations of modalities work best for different students.

**Fundamentally, you are talking about using technology to drive a better classroom experience for teachers and students. But, as a nation we’ve spent about \$60 billion on technology in public education, and the promise hasn’t been fulfilled. Why is your model going to be different?**

Let’s remember, in 1843, Horace Mann went to Prussia and saw the future of public education for this country. He saw one teacher and 28 or so kids in a room, and brought this model back to Massachusetts; this became the blueprint for how we provide education across the nation. And everything that we’ve done since then has just been built on top of that same model. So, in 1983, when we learned through *A Nation at Risk* that our schools weren’t as good as we thought they were, we lowered class size, incorporated choice, adopted standards, introduced accountability, and dropped a whole bunch of computers in the classroom, but we never changed this fundamental assumption of one teacher and 28 or so kids in a box.

I was a teacher. I remember the day my door flung open, and the office manager said, “Mr. Rose, we have your three computers. Where would you like them?” I said, “I don’t know. Put them in the back of the room.” I tried to use the computers: I had 28 kids, so I had three kids work on the computer while I worked with the other 25. But, then, one kid finished on the computer early, and when he joined my lesson late, he got confused. Another kid was having a login problem. Another kid was upset because he missed his turn the day before and he wanted to make it up, but he couldn’t have another turn for another week. Having these three computers actually made my life harder. And that’s what we’ve done; we’ve just grafted technology on top of the same Horace Mann–inspired model as opposed to reimagining a new way of providing instruction that is mindful of the ways that the talents of teachers and the power of technology can both be leveraged.

**What are some of the barriers to implementing technology in schools today?**

Well, there are some barriers that are just pure nuts and bolts, but with wireless connectivity, devices, etc., these are actually the smaller of the challenges. The larger of the challenges is actually ▷

designing models that can be adapted. If you simply just wire up a school, buy a whole bunch of computers, and say to the teachers, “Here are some computers. Good luck using them tomorrow,” we’re going to continue the pattern we’ve seen. But if we develop thoughtful ways of integrating technology into comprehensive instructional models that help teachers to personalize learning, then I think everything else will take care of itself.

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**Most of our readers are struggling with higher accountability standards, a more challenging population of students, and diminished budgets. Is your approach going to help that situation?**

We hope so. That’s what we’re trying to do. We think that there are more effective ways to deliver instruction than simply one teacher and 28 kids or so in a box. Most major industries have been transformed by technology. In fact, industries that have the highest penetration of information technology per employee have been shown to have the highest productivity growth. Among major industries, education has the lowest level of information technology penetration. And although per pupil spending has doubled over 30 years, student performance remains largely flat.

The current model puts an unreasonable burden on the classroom teacher, and new methods of integrating technology need to be explored. We have a long way to go before we can conclusively say, “We have cracked the code and we’re ready to scale this more broadly,” but I would say that’s the path that we’re on.

**But, do you fundamentally think that this could be a more cost-effective way?**

Our goal is to optimize all the resources that are in a school—talent, physical space, time, and money. We constantly ask ourselves, “What is the best use of the limited resources we have to optimize the outcomes for kids?”

**So, let’s switch gears a little bit. Tell us about how you’ve made the transition from School of One to New Classrooms Innovation Partners.**

I left the NYCDOE about a year ago to co-found New Classrooms Innovation Partners with my partner, Chris Rush. The idea is to create a new non-profit that can design instructional models that can be implemented with existing staff in existing schools across the country. We spent the last year designing Teach to One, raising money to support the organization, and entering into partnerships with school districts that want to serve as our initial host sites. This fall, we will unveil Teach to One in ten U.S. schools across the country serving approximately 5,000 kids.

**Can you share with us where these schools will be?**

Sure. They will be in New York City, Chicago, Perth Amboy (NJ), and one other district.

**I look at that list and I think, “What do they have in common?”**

They have superintendents and school leaders who bend over backwards to make it happen—leaders who have decided that their students deserve personalized learning and who want to be pioneers in next-generation models. They want their districts, their schools, their kids to benefit from this kind of innovation and are willing to be the earliest of adopters. ▸



### **Perth Amboy must be a fairly small district, right?**

For us, the school is what matters, not so much the district. The middle school that we're working with in Perth Amboy has 1,400 kids. The middle schools we're working with in Chicago each have about 300 to 400 kids. We think about scale in terms of school size more than the district size.

### **What will New Classrooms' relationship be with School of One in New York City?**

Our founding team at New Classrooms includes many leaders and original members of School of One. We are taking some of the lessons learned from School of One, but building on it in entirely new ways as we develop Teach to One. We're starting to shift our attention to examining classroom practices

### **You are starting with Teach to One: Math. Are there other subjects that you think could be applicable or subjects that you think would not work as well with your approach?**

Our whole concept of providing different modalities is based on the premise that live, teacher-led instruction can't be the best way of doing instruction for every kid, every hour of the day, in every subject area. There have to be ways of integrating multiple modalities of instruction to support learning. How that plays out in different content areas is what the design work is all about. We started with math because we thought the learning provisions were a lot more clearly defined, and there was more content available that we could access. We don't intend to stop there, but we want to get our math model right first before we start designing other content areas.

### **How are you going to measure success from your first set of ten schools?**

We're solving for three things. First, we want to make sure that we're delivering measurable academic improvement; there will be rigorous evaluation instruments so that we can prove out the effectiveness of the model. That's the most important. The second thing we want to prove is that this model can be implemented in ways that are highly satisfying to teachers—that this enhances their job, makes it a more sustainable job, leverages their talents, and reduces the hours outside of school that teachers have to spend preparing and designing lessons and doing administrative work. Basically, we want to ensure that teachers feel they never want to go back to the old model. The third thing we want to be able to prove is that the model can be financially sustainable. These are the three objectives we are aiming for.

### **What are some of the challenges that you see in scaling this approach?**

Every school is unique. Each one has its own schedule, its own personality, its own staffing structure, its own way of managing its school and its facilities. What we do requires that our model

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that make some of our learning modalities successful or not successful. Figuring out the school culture and the operational and instructional design pieces are becoming more important and more interesting. All these are inputs to the model, and we have to improve every component of the model.

New Classrooms will be managing, operating, and supporting the NYCDOE's School of One program, including the next phase of expansion into the four NYCDOE middle schools participating under the i3 (Investing in Innovation) grant over the next two and a half years. New Classrooms will also be developing a system that, at a minimum, will enable NYCDOE to support the expansion of their School of One program to 50 of the district's other schools after the i3 grant period is complete.



fit within the DNA of how each school operates; that takes a lot of planning and a lot of work in the trenches with teachers and principals each and every day to facilitate the transition from the old way to the new way. That makes scale a bit harder, but it also makes what we do more impactful. Once the model is sufficiently embedded into a school, we're confident that we'll have the academic outcomes and the teacher satisfaction levels such that schools will never want to go back to the old way.

### What's driving you in this new effort?

What's so compelling about working in public education is that there's just enough success to know that change is possible, but such widespread challenges that you know that tremendous effort is needed. Getting out of bed each day and collaborating with an incredibly talented team committed to designing a new way of educating students is exciting work. And, the challenges we face each day are challenges that I don't think other organizations have necessarily faced because they're so unique to our model. So, it's both intellectually interesting and difficult, but when you see the power of the model in real schools with real kids and real teachers and hear parents talking about the impact it's having on their kids, it's just a great feeling.

### Innovation is a hot topic in education these days. What do you think are the leadership characteristics necessary to disrupt the status quo and to implement something new within existing constraints?

We need district leaders who are bold—who are willing to push the boundaries of what's possible and who see as part of their legacy bringing enduring innovations to a community. Superintendents and school leaders who have a sense of urgency and passion and who are willing to push their organizations to deliver are the kinds of leaders that we as a country need to continue to move us forward.

For breakthrough innovations to happen inside a large organization, the leader has to be willing to take some chances on unconventional, potentially unpopular ideas. It's fair to say that School of

One would never have made it off the page and into reality without Joel Klein's (chancellor of NYCDOE) willingness to back it.

### Any closing comments on your work or the process of innovation?

This kind of innovation takes time. We're committed to the process, but with Teach to One, we're designing a whole new model. There can and must come a day when we reflect and ask, "Does this work or does it not?" But, I think we need to understand that we're just not going to get breakthrough innovation right away. We have to allow time for new models to be tried and time to learn from them. It is through the process of learning and doing and continuing to iterate and enhance that we can ultimately arrive at a better model.

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It takes 14 years for a drug to go from the idea to the supermarket shelf. You know, we had people after five weeks of School of One saying, "What were the results? How did it work? What about this? What about that?" That's just not how innovation's going to happen.



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