

## Article / Education



# In Pursuit of Student Engagement: A Path to Self-Actualization

Dan Evans, Ed.D. / Author. Teacher. Trainer. / Former Chief Academic Officer.

**No matter what schools look like in the future, success will come when all decisions are made with each student's best interests in mind and with relationships at the core.** This will include deep consideration of each child's strengths and passions and even how curricula and lessons are designed to enrich the home lives of children and families. Deeper human connections will be paramount because schools must be focused on developing students social-emotionally and not just academically.

If we do this well, the entire experience of schooling will feel more organic and personal for all students, from the relationships they form with their teachers to the assignments they interact with. Creating such schools will require districts to build systems and processes from the student outward. From the curriculum outward. From the lessons outward. From the core.

All of this will demand bold leadership. It will require districts to recalculate the methods and measures used to track student progress in social-developmental terms and not only in statistical language like grade point averages and percentile ranks. It will require schools to measure student success in ways that make sense to children and families and not through the cracked lens of microdata provided by state and district officials (stanines and scale scores by school, by grade level, by teacher, and by subgroup upon subgroup upon subgroup). In schools such as these, students will be viewed as distinctive and expressive human beings, not as percentile ranks.

## **The Possibilities of Schooling—Schools in a Future Tense**

In connecting the dots for us, it would be disingenuous to suggest a new way of creating and leading schools and districts if the system itself was designed to graduate young adults with only minimal skills, no continuity of learning, no sense of themselves, no understanding of the world around them, and no

self-mandate to make things better. The reality of our current school model doesn't always mesh with such lofty ambitions.

Of course, the changes we seek will never happen without a dramatic restructuring of our curriculum, assessments, professional development, and school structures, along with stronger teacher leadership, community partnerships, and student activism. Though none of these ideas alone will rid us of our struggles, they are part of a set of workable solutions designed to make learning more engaging and relevant for children. As much as it can be, learning should involve a series of experiences at school and in our communities that are transcendent, even sublime.

To this end, many promising trends are emerging across the globe. In 2018, the Ministry of Education in Singapore announced to great fanfare that the country is shifting from a highly structured, highly competitive school system designed to rank and order children to something much more personal than that, with an ambitious plan to graduate children who are highly skilled, but also creatively minded and well-rounded. This dramatic shift includes an emphasis on applied learning and social development and a lesser focus on things like class rankings. The system redesign is scheduled to be fully in place by 2023.

We find similar changes arriving in Finland, a long-standing leader in innovative practices. The country has scrapped traditional school subjects for a multidisciplinary approach that it calls “phenomenon-based” teaching. In essence, Finland is taking a thematic approach by teaching content and skills through broader topics like climate change and community building.

As with all dramatic shifts in our schools, we cannot afford to tinker around the edges. We must drill deep into the core of our industry—teaching and learning. That must begin with a review of our current standards and curricula to ensure they are meeting the needs of our kids. The call for much broader twenty-first century skills has grown louder, though most schools and districts have been slow to embed them in any meaningful way. Yes, the future demands that our students remain highly literate in reading and math, though equally competent in more nuanced job skills like flexibility and creativity.

Working with our business partners, we must agree on which of these new-century skills and competencies we want our students to master, and that work can begin right now. No matter what we decide, our curricula and lessons must keep pace with these changes. Student work must become more personalized and outcomes must move beyond the current definition of *achievement* as those things measured on standardized assessments. In the new century, achievement will be characterized to a greater degree by the academic skills required to thrive in the real world, along with a blend of social constructs like pride, agility, and even dignity.

## **What Schools Could Be—A Path to Self-Actualization**

The good news is that the future of our industry is arriving fast under titles like “personalized learning,” “project-based learning,” “discovery learning,” and related concepts like “competency-based progression” and “culturally relevant pedagogy.” Whatever we name things in the future, our customers will demand immediate access to content and more control over their learning pathways and timelines. Our students and their parents will demand to be heard, to have a seat at the table, and they are not wrong. They will require of us a system that makes each child's path unique within learning encounters that are dynamic and diverse.

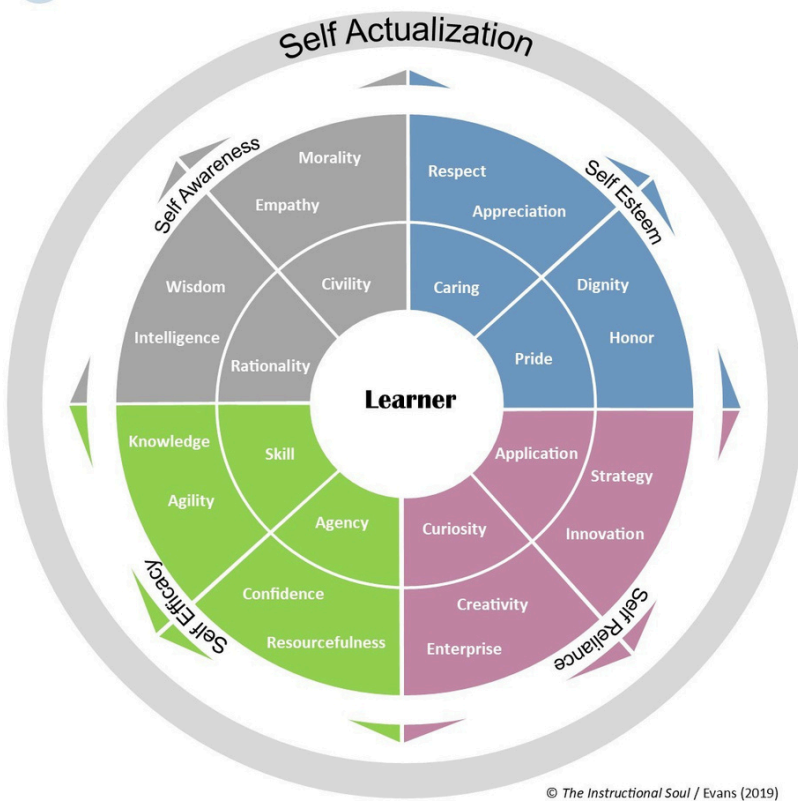
If we can create such experiences in our schools, our school principals and assistant principals must be lead learners of creative schools where all children meet minimum expectancies easily and where students arrive each day less focused on passing grades and more immersed in a marketplace of ideas, enterprise, and debate, where civility and citizenship are encouraged, and where struggle and resiliency are tested as a way of inspiring resourcefulness and even wisdom.

In education, that work cannot begin without a dedicated review of what we know from giants like Abraham Maslow (and others), who had it right all along in pushing our experiences beyond basic life skills toward the grander desires of self-actualization. Whether we call this ultimate prize of the human condition “wisdom” or “enlightenment” or something else, our common desire to reach a deep level of understanding and consciousness is found within each of us. In the simplest of terms, this is where our schools and school systems have come up short.

Engagement survey after engagement survey tells us that students are craving things like free expression, debate, discovery, and purpose. Interestingly, when our students report that they don't find school relevant, it is not so much the practical application of the material they are talking about (like writing a resume). They are complaining about a lack of appreciation or social connection or even spiritual awakening.

We should all be reminded that our students are not coming to school only to learn facts and figures. Like the rest of us, they seek to be inspired. They arrive most days searching for something much grander than we offer presently. Far too often, they leave us never having found it.

Students often describe their discussions in school as disconnected and passionless. This is why it is long past time for a dedicated repurposing of our curriculum. If such a thing were in place, subjects and lessons and standards would be overlapping and meaningful. Teachers would encourage student enterprise and community activism. Teachers too would find more meaning in their work, breathing energy and passion from their interactions with students and their colleagues.



## Maslow Whisperers—What the Hierarchy is Really Telling Us

To begin this work, we might want to review the prize of self-actualization as Maslow envisioned it. His work is presented in the attached graphic under four related outcomes that may help educators and parents better understand what is being suggested in developing an engaging, parallel curriculum for the next generation:

- **Self-Awareness**
- **Self-Esteem**
- **Self-Efficacy**
- **Self-Reliance**

Though we can agree that the emotional security of our children is foundational to their successes (see Maslow's bottom rungs), we have to wonder if all the energy we spend setting up systems to keep our children emotionally safe has kept us from tending to their deeper needs like belonging, self-worth, passion, and pride (see Maslow's higher rungs).

It should be noted that the Learner Wheel graphic is presented only as a starting point to stir discussion about what we teach our children. In keeping with Maslow's hierarchy, the wheel is designed to attend firstly to each student's human needs and desires and secondly to his or her academic ones.

Maslow's hierarchy is to educators what girth is to sumo wrestlers—far-reaching and essential. Still, it is fair to consider whether this base rung of the hierarchy is also where our deficit thinking creeps in. It

might be said that each of us is guilty of viewing our students as the goofy, silly, rebellious children they sometimes are and not as the extraordinary, transcendent figures that they can someday be.

This means that many of the students who are underperforming in our schools are doing so because the systems we have established are not pushing them to greater heights. It means that some students are underperforming not because of something they have done (or not done), but because of what we have done in designing their schools, curriculum, and lessons.

Yes, we can do better.

In fact, let us try to imagine what our schools would be like if they were not centered around distinct subjects but around lessons in literacy and numeracy that are connected to life skills like empathy and dignity or even social and economic issues like water quality or energy independence. *How many windmills do we need for wind energy to be successful? Is there a cost in giving up that much land? What are the alternatives in broadening our energy landscape?*

In fact, for many schools and districts, this type of work is not that far afield. We have tinkered with and tweaked ideas like these for years. If Maslow were here, he would tell us that every human being can aspire to self-actualization (though it is rare to accomplish it) and that our studies should push us beyond things like safety and skill-building.

In recording his observations, Maslow went so far as to study and name those who he believed reached the pinnacle of self-actualization during their lifetimes, including Albert Einstein and Abraham Lincoln. While most of us will never reach those levels of notoriety, our schools would be wise to consider how to establish systems that push students to loftier heights of academic confidence and personal clarity.

To be sure, our students will demand that much and more.

To be certain, anything less feels sadly unambitious.

© [instructionalsoul.com](http://instructionalsoul.com) / 2019