



Schools in a Future Tense: Applied, Personal, Meaningful

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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.

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 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 are viewed as distinctive and expressive human beings, not as percentile ranks.

The Possibilities of Schooling

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.

Make no mistake. We are in the confidence business, and we must graduate students who are fully self-aware and highly skilled. Nothing else will work. Of course, the changes we seek will not happen without aligning our curriculum, assessments, and professional development, along with stronger teacher autonomy, community partnerships, and powerful civic involvement. 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 the community that are applied and transcendent, even sublime.

To this end, many promising trends are emerging across the globe. In Singapore, schools are 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 creative mind and well-rounded. This dramatic shift includes an emphasis on applied learning and social development and less on assessment and grades.

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 though 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 job skills like flexibility and creativity.

Working with their business partners, will 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 confidence, ingenuity, and even dignity.

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