

# What's Actually Working in the Classroom?

After visiting 200 schools in 50 states, one author highlights what makes students shine

By Ted Dintersmith   April 30, 2018

## Commentary

A few years ago, I connected some dots. As a venture capitalist for most of my career, I have devoted my energy and funds more recently to helping schools rethink education. I recognized that machine intelligence is racing ahead, wiping out routine jobs, and reshaping the competencies students will need to thrive in an innovation era. Yet, our test-driven education system seems to prioritize low-level skills, rather than creativity, curiosity, and audacity—all of which are critical. Absent profound changes in our schools, children's futures are in jeopardy.

Many business-minded innovators are quick to offer opinions about schooling without doing their homework. Given education's complex and disparate constituencies, I didn't want to become one of those people. So I've been talking to the people closest to education to understand what we can learn from their successes and struggles. I began showcasing examples of innovative schools in my 2015 documentary "Most Likely to Succeed." And then, for the entire 2015-16 school year, I traveled to all 50 states, visited 200 schools, and met people from every nook and cranny of the education system.

I listened to and learned from thousands of teachers and students across the full spectrum of America's classrooms—public, charter, and private; urban,

suburban, and rural; low-income to wealthy districts. What I discovered is that amidst all the chatter about education's desperate state, there are many educators preparing kids for a world of innovation. And other educators need to pay attention to the conditions that let these powerful learning experiences blossom.

I drew daily inspiration from the teachers I met. Many were in tears over policies with catchy names and disastrous consequences, but their dedication was a constant. Across America, teachers in ordinary circumstances are breaking the standardized mold. They cast aside worksheets, textbooks, lectures, and test preparation in favor of empowering students to collaborate, solve real-world problems, and discover their strengths and interests.



—Edel Rodriguez for Education Week

The specifics of these remarkable classrooms were all over the map: kindergartners in Fort Wayne, Ind., designing robots; elementary students in Dunbar, W.Va., running the school's information-technology help desk; middle schoolers in Fargo, N.D., producing documentaries about local historic buildings; high school students in Albuquerque, N.M., creating social-media campaigns for the city's soccer team.

As the months rolled by, I saw that transformational teachers are those who help their students develop four important areas of expertise, which I call PEAK principles:

- **Purpose.** If students are going to stay engaged, schoolwork has to be meaningful and connect to real-world initiatives. At Lab Atlanta, a community makerspace in Atlanta run by a private school, high schoolers can take a semesterlong course to invent projects that promote sustainability for their city, such as addressing air and water quality and improving public transportation.
- **Essentials.** The most important strengths students must develop are those they cannot learn by taking a test: creative problem-solving, communication, critical analysis, collaboration, citizenship, and character. I saw this firsthand at Waipahu High School in Honolulu, where students are developing these skills and mindsets by blending career-and-applied learning with academic theory.
- **Agency.** Students should have room in the classroom to grow into self-directed young adults. This starts when teachers let students own their learning, evaluate their academic progress, and explore specific interests. At Acton Academy in Austin, Texas, for example, students set their own agenda, learn to access online resources, and manage their own progress. The school has no formal teaching, just adult "guides" who aren't expected to be subject-matter experts or allowed to answer questions.
- **Knowledge.** Students master what they study by applying their learning to real-life situations and teaching other students—the ultimate forms of accountability. Their knowledge should be deep and retained, not crammed into short-term memory. Currently, students across New Hampshire are evaluated not on pop quizzes, but on demonstrated competency tied to teacher-driven, performance-based assessments.

"Across America, teachers in ordinary circumstances are breaking the standardized mold."

At these schools, teachers were able to do this work because of bold education

leaders who communicate the urgency of a reimagined school experience. They build community consensus around the skill sets and mindsets students need in the future. They trust teachers to lead the way in advancing classroom practice. And they encourage progress in their schools by taking small steps that lead to big changes over time.

While this work gives me hope, I also saw the harmful impact of the policies and priorities that legislators, school boards, bureaucrats, billionaires, and college-admissions offices impose on our teachers and students. These particular stakeholders want simple measures to rank students and schools. Their high-stakes standardized agenda, for which students study the same curricula and take the same exams, removes teacher innovation from student learning. It also holds teachers and school leaders accountable to unfair measurements and leaves out trust—one of the most necessary ingredients to creating the kinds of classrooms that work well. If our legislators and bureaucrats would step into the actual classrooms as I have, they might understand that it's time to get out of teachers' way.

I visited some schools where teachers combine theory with practice: culinary arts with chemistry, auto-repair and electrical work with physics, art with website design, history with video production, literature with media arts. In developing practical expertise, these teachers told me their students leave high school with the kinds of skills to explore multiple career options—not just college—which will help them thrive in a future workforce where careers may come and go.

U.S. education is at a crossroads. We can continue to push a rigid agenda, demanding that schools boost test scores, graduation rates, and college matriculations. Or we can reimagine learning by drawing on the insights of our innovative teachers. They are showing us a powerful vision of what school could be. For the sake of our children, we need to listen to them.

*Ted Dintersmith is the author of the recently released book **What School Could Be: Insights and Inspiration From Teachers Across America** (Princeton University Press).*

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