
The 21st Century School: Offering a More Relevant and Innovative Education

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If your school is not experimenting, you risk your survival

Any quick glance of the programs of independent school workshops and conferences across the country makes clear that there is a strong push for these schools to offer a more relevant and innovative education for their students. This movement has galvanized around the soon-to-be-outdated term “21st-Century Schools.” Despite this rallying cry, most schools have not really broken from their more traditional approaches. Some of the reasons are valid: there are tried and true pedagogies that, in many ways, are timeless. These traditional approaches can engage students and spark their intellectual curiosity and love of learning. However, there are clearly new modalities of thinking that are transformative, and there is an urgency related to changing conditions in our world to which school leaders must react.

One reason schools have been resistant to change is rooted in the strong traditions of success in our schools. As an industry, independent schools have proven track records. Many, many schools can point to decades of 100% of their graduates going to four-year colleges and universities. Other schools carefully track their graduates and note their performance in college and beyond. On a more immediate level, independent schools can point to high performance on standardized tests like AP’s, SAT’s, and ACT’s. At the core of this success is faculty, most of whom have been educated in the nation’s best colleges and universities in a very traditional manner. In their own course of study, few faculty members have been forced to break out of the paradigm of the “academy.” In their teaching in independent schools, they have passed along the best of these traditions to their students. They have done so at a time in which the quality of public school education has declined dramatically, and this disparity has served to reinforce a more traditional worldview. Armed with smart, talented teachers, small class sizes, and a clearly defined sense of purpose, it has been a recipe that has worked well for years. But, in a rapidly changing world, is this formula enough?

Consider rising tuition. For years, boards of independent schools have wringed their hands annually

when looking at tuition increases. “Financial Sustainability” has been a favorite theme at various conferences as well. Yet, there is no clear solution in sight. Tuitions are high at our schools—there is no escaping this fact. At the same time, the charter school movement is offering a free alternative to families. Also, colleges and universities are experimenting with open course software. For independent school leaders, identifying the value proposition of independent schools will be critical to the type of education offering that serves so many valuable roles in society.

This “value proposition” is diverse and variable, as there are so many different types of private schools. But, as Harvard professor and author Tony Wagner has noted in his books, *The Global Achievement Gap* and *Creating Innovators*, schools need to be intentional about preparing students for work and citizenship in the 21st century. Independent schools have such an advantage over other educational institutions in that we can move rapidly to embrace changes, trends, and developments in our society. We do not have to teach to problematic state standards that do little to promote essential 21st-century skills. Schools need to develop the critical thinking and problem-solving abilities in young people, foster creativity, nurture collaboration, improve oral and written communication, and instill a moral and ethical understanding of the world. Independent schools are in the best position to build on our traditions and deliver this type of education.

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So what is a school leader to do? How does one make this transformation from a traditional place of academic excellence to a 21st-century school of academic excellence? There are no easy answers and each situation varies dramatically, but I would suggest there are some common approaches.

1) **Educate your community to the changing conditions of the world.** In some markets, there are large numbers of parents who connected globally and have a broad perspective of education. They see that their child is no longer competing for admission to a college with another student in same city, but is actually competing for a future job with a student from another continent. Laying the groundwork for why your school needs to change is essential. In a Pre-K through 12 school, some families can have 13 or more years of experience at one institution. Such long tenures can lead to entrenched attitudes about the school's program. Traditional projects and assignments can be become beloved, even though they are clearly outdated. School leaders have to "wake up" their school community to the exciting ideas about education that are out there. Use a strategic planning process as an inclusive means of gaining support for a new approach to teaching at your school.

2) **Invest in professional development.** At a 2010 conference, I was in a group with other heads of schools and asked how many had to cut their professional development budgets because of the economic downturn? About 75% raised their hands. This is shocking and self-defeating. Most school leaders did it because their boards wanted the schools to respond to the economic crisis; yet, this is cutting a school's ability to be innovative. It's "R and D" that is critical to our long-

term success. As I noted earlier, most faculty at our schools have been trained in a traditional manner (I certainly was) and have taught so all of their careers. School leaders need to open up new possibilities by investing in sending teachers to leading schools, bringing in facilitators, and participating in the debate about 21st-Century Schools.

3) **Support failure.** As schools educate their parent and alumni community and invest in professional development, school leaders need to encourage experimentation and innovation. These are things our society values, and we must allow them to flourish in our schools. This means conversations about programs and a critical examination of what could be improved. It will mean taking chances on new projects and initiatives. Your faculty will need to feel supported if they try something different. The great thing is that our track record of success allows us to take some chances. Tap into those faculty leaders who have been trying things differently, and empower them to shape the direction of your school.

It's very easy to give lip service to being a 21st century school, but truly becoming one is a different matter. Schools are swimming upstream against centuries of educational tradition in being teacher-centered rather than student-centered. There is a balance of old and new, but if your school is not experimenting, you risk your survival. We are asking our families to invest significant resources in their children's education, and we need to ensure that this investment ensures their personal and professional success.

