

A CHALLENGE TO THE WORLD

Chapter 2 from *Education to Better Their World: Unleashing the Power of 21st Century Kids*

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**“We all want our kids to be educated.
What’s changing is what an education is, and what ‘being educated’ means.”**

I imagine reading or hearing about the following decree from some country’s Department or Ministry of Education at the end of a school year:

In the coming year, education in [our country] will be completely new and different. It will not be about subjects and grades at all. Education will be about—and only about—improving our country and our communities.

During the entire year, every student and every teacher in our country will focus all their efforts on a series of real-world projects— projects that make our country a better place in some way.

We will not define or create these projects—the students and teachers will. Some may do so as classes, others as teams of students and teachers within and across classes—and, when possible, even countrywide. To get approved and started, projects will need to meet only one criterion: “Show us how this will improve some aspect of our country.”

Each project will create its own very specific goals, which can range from improving a neighborhood’s appearance or function, to improving a community’s infrastructure, preserving part of our country’s history and heritage, helping out local government and regulators, making life better for our less fortunate, building new relationships between people in real (and online) communities, adding or improving technology, and to what we hope will be many more good ideas. The only limit is the creativity and resourcefulness of the teams. Projects can last for weeks (e.g., “Let’s turn that ugly piece of land into a community garden”), or months (e.g., “Let’s create the best Wi-Fi in the

country in our school and/or neighborhood”), or the entire year (e.g., “Let’s stop or slow the increase of some disease in our community”). Students may do several projects over the course of the year. Projects will be based entirely on applying the passions of team members to helping the country in whichever way they think best, and they will need to produce positive results and progress toward their ultimate goals within the year. Teams can be teacher driven, student driven, or both. Teams can enlist the private sector, government agencies, or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) as partners in creative ways.

Every student and teacher in our country will participate. There will be little structure and regulation—we count on the creativity of our students and teachers to set this up and make it work. Only minimal guidelines will be promulgated. Everyone now has the summer to think about this. By the end of the first month of school, we expect every teacher and student to have created or signed up for their first team, and to have begun their projects.

We will create a website for keeping track of all the projects, and make sure every school can access it by either computer or phone. Completed projects will be evaluated by online voting as being either: (1) something that made the country better (which we expect will be almost all of them), (2) something that made the country outstandingly or exceptionally better (perhaps 10% of the projects), and (3) projects that did not succeed in improving the country, with recommendations on how to change them so that they do (we hope this number will be quite small).

This initiative’s motto—and our country’s educational mission for the next school year—will be this and only this:

You can make our country better—surprise us with how much you—and we—can do.

Now imagine this had actually happened somewhere, and it is a year later. What might be the result?

- Would that country have improved?
- Would those in charge now have a great many ideas on how to make the country improve even more the following year?
- Would the country’s students, having completed these nation-and community-improving projects, be better off in terms of their self-confidence, effectiveness, enthusiasm, and participation in their education?
- Would the country’s teachers be better off in terms of their enthusiasm and participation?
- Would students have learned lots of useful and relevant information by seeking it out on their own to help their projects?

Or, would it all have become a big mess, with the kids just losing out from missing a year of academic instruction?

I don’t know the answer. But if I had the appropriate power, I would do the experiment. What we are doing today as K–12 education does very little to benefit and improve our kids, or our communities, countries, and world, compared to what it could do. We need to do better.

COULD IT HAPPEN?

There are some who doubt that a challenge like this, even if accepted, would produce much change at all. Their main argument is that people like and expect to be “told what to do” and not to act on their own toward goals they set themselves. In a great many places, these people argue, neither our students nor our teachers are ready for the concept of “agency”—that is, of taking responsibility for improving their own world. For people like this, it is a huge and difficult change in perspective.

But I think a lot more kids are ready than most think.

“DON’T EXPERIMENT WITH *MY KID*”

If a minister (or someone else in authority) did initiate the challenge described above, he or she would no doubt have to face hordes of angry parents shouting things like, “Don’t experiment with *my kid!*” or “I want my kid to have the exact same education I did (only better!).” Many parents are already shouting this today.

Were I that minister (or superintendent, or whatever) my answer to those parents, would be this:

“I understand your concerns, but we *have to* experiment and find a better way. Your kids live in a new world that is very different from the one our generation grew up in. Today’s young people are far more empowered than kids were in the past—they have enormous new capabilities that kids have never had before. We truly don’t yet know how to best educate these empowered kids in their new environment. But we do know that our current education—even with marginal improvements—is no longer working as it used to. So *not* to experiment to find better ways to educate these kids would be irresponsible. I’m sure you are all responsible parents—and I’m a responsible educator—so let’s get on with our experiments, because we are all in a new age.”

OUR NEW AGE OF EXPLORATION

For roughly 200,000 years, up until more or less the end of the first millennium (that is, somewhere around 1000 A.D., very approximately) humans were agricultural animals. Almost everyone in the world was a farmer or herder of some kind. Humans had a very long agricultural age during which all kids pretty much knew—with only the most minor exceptions—that they would be doing the same agricultural and fieldwork as their father or parents. In what we now call the first millennium A.D. most of the world’s people were still in that stage.

The following millennium—the second millennium that has just ended—was different. It was an age, particularly in its last centuries, of huge construction and development. During this millennium, our great cities were expanded, industrialization was born, great inventions were created, and great infrastructures were built. The kids who grew up in the second millennium grew up in an age of building. It was, as well, an age of discoveries, but only for relatively few individual explorers and intrepid pioneers.

We are entering, in this so-called third millennium, a new age of exploration—one far different than what we saw in the past. One of the biggest differences is that now almost everyone can participate in the explorations and discoveries of their times. Kids who grow up in the third millennium will explore and not just the Earth, but outer space. They will explore and understand the human mind and brain as never before, and they will explore the new kind of worlds—digital and virtual—that are still being born. They will help solve the problems that our planet and our species face, as people never could in the past.

What is most exciting is that kids can now start these processes of exploring, solving the world's problems, and making their world a better place in their early and formative years, instead of waiting to become adults before doing so. That is a big change for all of us.

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