



The Challenges That Schools and Educators Face

As society continues to rapidly change due to the evolution of a global economy and advances in technology, schools continue to function in the same way as they did 100 years ago. Students, teachers, and leaders are changing as a result of the proliferation of technology in the real world. Our information society needs people who can effectively manage and use ever-increasing amounts of information to solve complex problems and to make decisions in the face of uncertainty (An & Reigeluth, 2011). This presents a bit of a paradox as schools as the traditional factory model of education is incompatible with the evolving demands of the information age (Reigeluth, 1996). Despite decades of national, state, and local promotion of educational uses of technology, classroom practice in most schools has changed little from that of the mid-20th century (Means, 2010). This challenge is compounded by

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issues related to aging infrastructure, inequity in funding, and a global focus on standardization.

INFRASTRUCTURE AND MONEY

New Milford High School was built in 1928. Architecture back then was profoundly beautiful as buildings were designed to resemble other structures of that time period. Not only were these buildings aesthetically pleasing, but they were also built with high-quality materials throughout, including hardwoods and brick. When looking at aged school buildings like this one, everything on the outside looks fine, but the inside is another story. One must remember that the internal structure of the majority of school complexes in the world was built during a time when there was literally no technology. This poses a huge obstacle for educators and students wanting to access the many treasures of the Internet that ubiquitous access to Wi-Fi provides.

Not only are schools with aging infrastructures having challenges meeting the needs of digital learners and educators who want to effectively integrate technology but rural schools as well, who lack access. The emergence of technology as a critical component of education has presented rural districts with an invaluable tool for overcoming the problems created by sparse and remote populations. But the same districts often face barriers to effective implementation of technology from lack of infrastructure and funding to a shortage of tech-savvy teachers, staff, and potential community partners (Gordon, 2011).

The physical conditions in many schools provide educators with steep obstacles to overcome when providing a world-class learning experience to students. This is where financial stresses begin to take their toll. The recent recession resulted in the loss of funding for schools all over the world. As teachers were cut, precious funds that remained were used to retain staff and procure essential items that were required to assist with teaching and learning on a daily basis. Many schools then experienced drastic cuts to much-needed

professional development opportunities while neglected buildings continued to become worse and worse. Without a clear plan to allocate funds to infrastructure that will support innovative instructional practices, the pressure to stay the course and continue doing what has been done for many years persists. The result of this challenge has been a widening poverty gap in the United States that thwarts many essential change initiatives from taking place. Without the proper funds a lack of access to technology and the Internet inhibits learners from using powerful tools and techniques that can unleash creativity while focusing on essential skill sets that the global job market demands.

In light of these challenges national initiatives have taken root that focus on ubiquitous connectivity for all students. More funding also is becoming available for school construction projects the address aging infrastructure issues. Creative educators are finding ways to bridge the gap when funding comes up short by forming mutually beneficial partnerships with educational technology companies. All of this is made possible through the use of free social media tools to connect, engage, and form relationships to move learning forward. Chapter 9 will provide a road map for educators looking to take advantage of connecting with social media to spur uncommon learning pathways in their schools.

CONTROL AND COMPLIANCE

For more than a century, the industrial model of education did a fantastic job of preparing students for careers. Those careers are no longer relevant in today's rapidly changing world. With obvious remnants of this system still in place, new changes are being pushed through under the guise of education reform. Instead of preparing students for an industrialized world, the education system is now being tasked with preparing all learners to be college and career ready to compete globally with their peers. However, there still has been little change in the overall structure and function of many

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schools. In essence students are being prepared for a world that no longer exists, even though the objective has changed.

The education system is not changing fast enough to account for societal shifts. There also tends to be a focus on control and compliance to maintain models of teaching and learning that have long outlived their usefulness. Many leaders have assimilated into a culture of compliancy and taken a more subversive role implementing mandates (Ball, 2000). When schools focus primarily on compliance, they tend to concentrate school improvement efforts on what and how they can be measured (Bernhardt, 2013). The failed legacy of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) should provide a stark reminder that increasing the amount of weight standardized tests have on measuring school performance will not achieve the desired outcome. Diane Ravitch (2013) brings some additional light to current education reform. She explains that the unnatural focus on testing has produced perverse but predictable results. It has narrowed curriculums to testable subjects to the exclusion of the arts and the full capaciousness of culture. She goes on to explain how it has encouraged the manipulation of scores on state exams. "Teaching to the test, once considered unprofessional and unethical," is now "common" (Ravitch, 2013).

So again our education system is in a pickle consisting of an outdated model and the pressure to prepare students for an absurd amount of testing days throughout the school year. The world does not rest on standardized tests. Success now lies in one's ability to create solutions to problems, collaborate with peers to meet a goal, communicate effectively, and develop unique ideas that can change things for the better.

Unfortunately autonomy has been slowly stripped away from many educators and schools, something that has defined our country for decades. Even with an outdated model, we still have found ways to provide innovative pathways to unleash a passion for learning among our students. Control has been a challenge that some have chosen to overcome. In the face of adversity, educators have strived to overcome it to benefit our most precious resource—students. However, the current

rhetoric and testing blitz that is upon us seeks not only to undermine what makes education special but to control us to a point that will break the morale of many, if it hasn't already.

There is another type of control that we need to acknowledge that is prevalent in virtually every school in the world. This is the control fostered by administration and teachers as to how learning should, and will, be structured. This hits home for me on many fronts, as I was guilty of this years ago. We are often our own worst enemies as we work hard to control what students can do in school or classrooms. This stems from the fact that we don't want to give up control. Compliancy has worked for so long, and quite frankly we don't trust students or even our own teachers. What we don't know and understand, we fear. So we react by trying to control every facet of school structure, function, and learning.

I was just like every other principal. My narrow focus was on sustaining a school culture focused on rules, compliance, conformity, and preserving the status quo. The end goal was to make sure that standardized test scores increased (or at least didn't go down) and traditions were preserved. On the inside everything was great. Students and staff seemed happy, while the community was supportive of our efforts. Each monotonous day began with students arriving to school and then going directly to their first-period classes, where they sat in desks arranged in orderly rows. After listening to the daily announcements, the delivery of instruction began. My compliant students then went through their rigid eight-period day schedule with each class lasting 48 minutes. At the end of each class, an annoying bell would notify everyone in the school that it was time to continue through the repetitive process. Throw in a few specialized programs, assemblies, and pep rallies, and this was basically the schedule we all followed each and every day.

It is scary to think that the culture I describe here is still prevalent in the majority of schools across the country. The reality is that school for most students is the polar opposite of the real world. Thus they come to school knowing that they will sit

through endless lectures, endure the same lessons that have been delivered year after year, be assigned homework that does nothing to support learning, be given assessments that require little thought because they are easy to grade, and have to succumb to numerous rules that are meant to make sure they conform more than learn. Getting through the curriculum aligned to Common Core has become the driving force in many schools as pressure is mounting with high-stakes testing looming right around the corner. This was me for many years.

YOU NEED TO WANT TO CHANGE

Change is a word that is thrown around in education circles more and more each day. The fact of the matter is that education has to change dramatically, but how this is initiated should no longer be a contentious topic for discussion or debate. It is relatively agreed upon that the structure and function of the majority of schools across the globe no longer meet the needs of students in the digital age. There is a quiet revolution that is gaining steam as more and more educators and students push back against the very policies and mandates that have been forced upon them. You need to decide if it is worth it to conform or to carve out your own path instead to provide your students with the education and learning experiences they deserve.

Meaningful change has and always will begin at the individual level. This is also where it is sustained to the point that it becomes an embedded component of school or district culture. It does not rely on someone being in a leadership position in a traditional sense but more so on a desire to want to change professional practice. This is the point where all educators and students must realize that they have the capacity to lead change. School leaders need to remove barriers to the change process, remove the fear of failure, provide autonomy, and empower teachers to drive change at the classroom level.

These successes can then be promoted within the school and district to serve as a catalyst for cultural transformation. The same holds true for both teachers and administrators when it comes to students, who happen to be our number one stakeholder group. Schools should be designed to meet the needs of our students, but if they are not given a seat at the table and allowed to be a focal point of change efforts that ultimately impact them, a golden opportunity is missed. Never underestimate the power that you have to make your school, district, and the entire education system better. Be the change that you wish to see in education, and others will follow. After all, real change comes from colleagues modeling expectations to others, not from those with titles.

EXCUSES HOLD US BACK

When was the last time you came up with an excuse to get out of doing something that you did not want to do? Chances are it was today or sometime in the not-so-distant past. We even use them when there is actually no hope of getting out of the activity for which the excuse was derived.

As I was doing some research recently for a presentation, I came across a fantastic slide that really put into perspective the concept of excuses. "If something is important to us, we will find a way. If not, then we'll make an excuse." On a professional level excuses can, and often do, have dramatic negative impacts when it comes to change on many levels. If education is good for one thing, it is for making excuses not to move forward. Schools continue to move along as they did more than 100 years ago. The feeling is that our system of education has worked so well during this time; why change now? In this example the common excuse that many educators use not to change is that student achievement, defined by standardized test scores, has remained high; so if it isn't broke, why fix it? When it comes to technology, excuses are as abundant as traffic in New York City during

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rush hour. Regardless of the scenario, here are the most common excuses that I have either used myself or experienced during my years as a practitioner:

- I don't have time.
- This will cost too much money.
- It is just another thing that I have to do.
- It has worked well for so long, so why change now?
- Student safety and security will be compromised.
- Students will cheat and be off task, so I am not allowing them to use devices.
- We can't implement this due to the Common Core and an array of state mandates.

Excuses are fueled by elements such as fear of change, a desire to protect the status quo, lack of education or knowledge, top-down leadership, micromanagement, and the unwillingness to take risks. By no means is this list comprehensive, but it does provide a fairly solid foundation for why excuses dominate the education profession. Sustainable changes leading to cultural transformation in schools can and will happen only when one moves from a fixed to a growth mind-set. It is imperative in our respective positions that we create a shared vision that focuses on solutions to problems as opposed to taking the path of least resistance exemplified by the excuse.

The best way to accomplish this is to help others see the value in new initiatives and ways of thinking. Provide a clear rationale for change tied to research and examples from other schools where these initiatives have been successfully implemented. Ensure that support structures are in place such as professional development, autonomy, availability of resources, and the establishment of a feedback loop. This will set the stage for empowering others to embrace the change while discovering the value of it all themselves. Most importantly model the expectations that you wish to see implemented, and take action.

SUMMARY

The whole premise behind this book is it to provide relevancy, meaning, and authenticity in the teaching and learning process. It hinges upon our ability to provide an environment and activities that unleash our students' passion for learning and allows them to create artifacts of learning with the tools of their choice to demonstrate conceptual mastery. Additionally, it relies on a bold vision to grant students and educators the autonomy to take risks, learn from failure, and then adapt as needed. Meaningful change will happen only if we begin to give up control and establish a culture built on trust and respect. If we truly want to prepare the next generation of thinkers, doers, inventors, and change agents, we must give up control, trust students and educators, and work to develop a better system that will produce desired outcomes. Educators must acknowledge the real challenges that they are faced with each day but work to develop solutions to overcome them. Challenges should not be seen as insurmountable obstacles to change but rather opportunities to do things differently and better. The end result will be the proliferation of uncommon learning strategies that in time will become common.