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Democratic Education: Advancing Individuals, Businesses, and Communities



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“We are currently preparing students for jobs and technologies that don’t yet exist in order to solve problems we don’t even know are problems yet.” – Karl Fisch

Think back to the time in your life right after you graduated from high school or college. Had school prepared you for making your own decisions and facing your own consequences? Had it prepared you to understand social issues and take action around the ones important to you?

My own answer is no. Even though I did everything that I was supposed to do in school, I found myself unprepared to be successful in my work life and personal life. In fact, I found that the habits that I’d developed to attain academic success – workaholic, perfectionism, and people-pleasing – made me unhappy once I left the academic bubble.

I wish that my education had focused less on grades and scores and more on what really mattered: practical skills that I could use day to day, like financial management and networking, and the development of my autonomy. I wish my education had been more democratic — that is, that it had prepared me to be a citizen who could take the reigns of my own life and participate actively in the democratic society in which I live.

The way I see it, I became a capable adult in spite of the education system, not because of it. I often ask myself, “Is the education system working for anyone?”

Inarguably, the system is not working for students at the bottom of the heap. We’re all familiar with sobering statistics. The Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University found that in 2007 alone, 6.2 million students between 16 and 24 years of

age chose to leave school. Rates for black and Latino students nearly doubled those of white students. The report continues:

Americans without a high school diploma have considerably lower earning power and job opportunities in today’s workforce. Due to their lower lifetime earnings and other sources of market incomes, dropouts will contribute far less in federal, state and local taxes than they will receive in cash benefits, in-kind transfers and correctional costs. Over their lifetimes, this will impose a net fiscal burden on the rest of society.”

It might seem surprising, but the education system isn’t working for overachieving students, either. These so-called success story students are often stressed out, terrified of failure, and at a loss for meaning in their lives. Look at how many take medication for anxiety and depression, and how many are using layoffs as opportunities to finally pursue their passions. Employers aren’t benefiting from the current school system, either. A 2006 study by a consortium including the Society for Human Resource Management found that among the top qualities sought by employers are collaboration, critical thinking and problem solving, and work ethic. The report also found that fewer than 25 percent of young people recently hired are considered excellent in these areas.

Did you know that the American school system was developed in the 1800s during the Industrial Revolution, to train factory workers to the sound of bells and the commands of superiors? It’s scary, but it’s true. Now that our world is changing quickly and employees need to adapt and create, our factory-model education system is obsolete. It is in need of fundamental changes.

In today’s schools, teachers and students alike are pressured to achieve high standardized test scores instead of fostering a love of learning and the self-determination to pursue it.

Employers say that the most important skills in the workplace include emotional intelligence, creative problem solving, and communication, which young people most certainly don’t develop by filling in bubbles with number 2 pencils. Why don’t we put away the Scantrons and let students gain skills they can actually use?

If you think that I’m being idealistic, know that bright spots in American education already exist. For example, students in The Big Picture high schools around the country learn through apprenticeships in the community. In the K-12 Jefferson County Open School, students often take outdoor trips together and engage in peer-to-peer teaching. The Fertile Grounds Project helps young people at risk of failing meet their graduation requirements through self-directed endeavors.

Common threads of these schools are that they’re happening in public schools with socioeconomically diverse students, and that adults coach their students to develop the skills and confidence that help them thrive in the world — including the business world. Schools and programs in which young people feel valued and take meaningful leadership roles have shown higher graduation rates, academic performance, and a significant drop in youth violence.

If we want to raise citizens who care about other people and work toward real democracy and sustainability, we must stop limiting education to the four walls of a classroom and build bridges with the community. This is the kind of education that I wish I’d had. Do you wish it for your children, and your grandchildren?

So what can you do? Be a student of democratic education yourself:

Use your head

Our country is supposed to be a democracy, based on participation and equal rights. Realize that a true democracy needs a thriving

education system that is accessible and free to all. Whether or not you choose to enroll your own children in public schools, it is important that public schools be places that are truly educating our population. Our communities are safer and healthier when all children are able to learn and thrive in the world.

Do your homework

Learn more about methods of learning that go by names such as project-based or inquiry-based learning; they're included in the term "democratic education" (www.democraticeducation.org). Make a point of knowing about local policies that affect the youth around you—and the community as a result—and stay current on national education policies if you can, because those affect local schools, too.

A good introduction to 21st Century education is Dan Pink's book *Drive* and Sir Ken Robinson's TED talks online (www.ted.com/speakers/sir_ken_robinson.html), which discuss the need for creativity, critical thinking, and autonomy in the workplace and the connection to a more empowering educational experience.

Take responsibility

As community members, parents, and business people, we must all take responsibility for giving our children a real education—that is,

a meaningful education. Do your part to bridge the disconnect between school and the working world, and between youth and adults. Talk with your own children about your work, and its relationship to what they're learning in school. Host a field trip at your workplace, or mentor a young person through an apprenticeship (let community organizations like the Boys and Girls Club know that you're available). Consider holding a Career Day event with members of your church or community business group, such as the Chamber of Commerce.

In addition, get involved in change-making educational groups like the PTA at your local school, or organizations like Parents for Public Schools (www.parents4publicschools.com), that work to reform education policy and bring learning that matters into classrooms.

At the very least, make a commitment to giving your children, and our community's children, a more meaningful education than you had yourself. - **GJB**

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