

# The right goal for education is **BECOMING** a better, more capable person.

—

“Learning” is only a *means* to that goal; an even better means is “accomplishing.” By making school about “learning” we deny our kids what they most need — a sense of what they can accomplish and become.

By Marc Prensky

To be published in *Education Week*  
[1,044 words]

**A**s I continue to delve deeper and deeper into the realms of education and school, and what they need to be to prepare our children for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I find myself focusing on, and becoming more and more frustrated by, a single word: “**learning.**”

That might seem strange. Pretty much everything you hear and read on education these days **assumes** that “learning” is the goal for our students. But it’s not.

The real goal of education— and of school — is BECOMING. Becoming a “good” person, and becoming a more capable person than when you started. Learning is nothing but a means of accomplishing that goal. And it is dangerous to confuse the goal with the means.

Learning *would* be the right goal if we wanted our children to become “learnèd” (in the old sense of “knowing stuff”), or “scholars” as some parents and teachers still demand. But that’s hardly the goal today for most of us or our kids. Today very few educators or parents have in their hearts “learning” or “scholarship” as a goal for their children — except in the sense of the kids’ getting good grades. Most of us, rather, would like our children to become the very best people they can be, capable of effective thinking, action, relating, and accomplishing, in whatever field they enjoy and have passion for.

Yet — with the exception of some of our independent schools and the small “character-based education” movement — the only type of “becoming” our conversation about education and school focuses on is “becoming a member of a particular college class.” School focuses almost exclusively, on kids’ “learning” four basic subjects: math, language arts, science and social studies. Our tests, big and small, are attempt to put numbers around that “learning”— and to rank students in their acquisition of it. We ask, *ad infinitum*: “How much are our kids learning?” “Are they learning enough?” “What is the best way to measure their learning?” “How do they learn best?” “What gets in the way of their learning?” Are they maintaining “average yearly learning progress”(AYP)?”

We may ask our kids “What did you learn in school today?” but most of us, I submit, don’t really care— nor should we. What we *don’t* ask is “What did you BECOME today that you weren’t before? Have you moved in positive directions for yourself, and for society?” That is, of course, what we really want to know, as parents, citizens, employers and taxpayers.

But rarely do we expect our K-12 kids to *become* anything besides good test takers. We certainly don’t expect them, by means of their education, to become what the Dalai Lama might call “good” people, or even to become prepared to think, act, relate or accomplish effectively in the hugely different world in which they will live — except in a tiny and often outmoded number of ways. If we did, we would do things very differently.

There is nothing *wrong* with our kids’ “learning” — and there is a great deal to be said in favor of it — but *only as a means to the end of becoming*. Learning “for its own sake” — enjoyable as some may find it — is empty. There are probably billions of people in the world who have finished school without “becoming” what they could have. Some of them may know, and know how to do, a lot (i.e. they have acquired knowledge and skills through their education)— but they accomplish little or nothing.

Learning is not, ironically, even the best means to becoming — the best means to becoming is accomplishing. Rather than putting so much effort into creating an implementing “Common Core Standards” for math, English, social studies, and science skills, we would do far better to be designing “Accomplishment-Based Education” i.e. ways of having all our kids become, through real-world accomplishments, the kinds of person we want each of them to be, e.g. a creative, effective thinker, an effective relater, an effective doer already, when they leave school, with a strong resume to her or his credit. Anyone who thinks that that is the case today, in most places, is fooling themselves.

Are our kids asking themselves: “Who am I becoming?” “Have I become a better thinker, and in what ways?” “Am I able to do things I couldn’t? — what things, and why are they important?” “Am I able to relate better to individuals, in teams and in virtual communities?” “Can I accomplish bigger, more sophisticated things and to add to my

portfolio of worthwhile accomplishments?” “What kind of person have I had to become in order to accomplish these things?” Not in most of our schools.

We spend so much time and effort looking at test scores, averages, and other petty measurements of "learning," that we have little time or energy left to focus on who our students are (or are not) becoming as individuals — what they love, what they hate, what their passions are. Since we place so little focus on what our students are becoming, why are we surprised when they sometimes become people we do not like, respect, or want in our society?

Although "becoming" may be harder to quantify than some of the things we measure today, people generally do not have a hard time recognizing it. Suppose every teacher had to sit down a few times a year and write about what they think each of their students is becoming?

It would be far more useful and interesting to a parent — or a potential employer — to know how good a student has become at thinking, doing, relating, and accomplishing — and what that that student is passionate about — than to know what that student's grades are in math, language arts, social studies, and science.

"Learning" is a false goal for our education and schools. It is the wrong objective for us to be giving our students. Despite centuries of academic tradition, we should stop focusing on "learning" as our educational goal. If we focus instead on becoming — i.e. if we set our schools and education the goal of helping all students be the very best and most capable people they can be — as some of our best independent schools have been consciously doing for some time — our kids' education, and our society, will be light-years ahead.

####

*Marc Prensky is an internationally acclaimed thought leader, speaker, writer, consultant, and curriculum designer in the field of education.. He is the author of five books: From Digital Natives to Digital Wisdom (Corwin, 2012) Teaching Digital Natives: Partnering for Real Learning (Corwin, 2010), Don't Bother Me, Mom, I'm Learning (Paragon House, 2006), Digital Game-Based Learning (McGraw Hill, 2001) and Brain Gain: Technology and the Quest for Digital Wisdom (Palgrave MacMillan 2012). His writings have been translated into 10 languages.*

*Marc is the Founder and Executive Director of The Institute for Global Future Education, a not-for-profit organization devoted to promoting Future-oriented Education, Accomplishment-Based Education, and The Future Curriculum in the world. He is currently speaking and writing books on these subjects.*

*Previously, Marc founded and ran Games2train.com a corporate game-based learning company whose clients included IBM, Bank of America, Pfizer, the U.S. Department of Defense and the Los Angeles and Florida Virtual Schools. He is the Chief Design Officer of Spree Learning Games, an education-focused "curricular games" company.*

*Marc holds an MBA from Harvard and a Masters in Teaching from Yale. His writings and speaking schedule can be found at [www.marcprensky.com](http://www.marcprensky.com).. Contact Marc at [marcprensky@gmail.com](mailto:marcprensky@gmail.com) .*