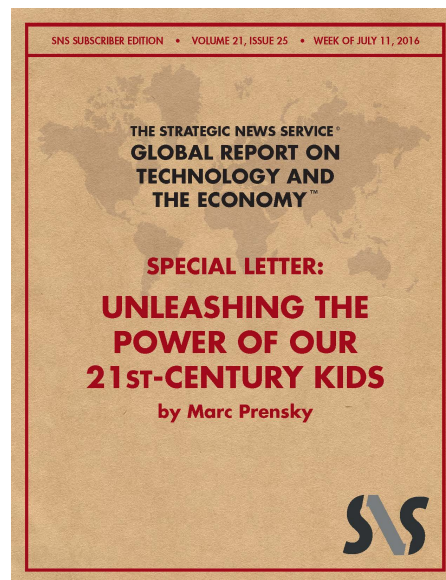


# UNLEASHING THE POWER OF OUR 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY KIDS

through an “Education to Better Their World”

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**WHAT WE OFFER OUR KIDS AS “EDUCATION” IN THE WORLD TODAY, — particularly K-12 (primary and secondary) education—is wrong for the future. A new kind of education is coming, and the map is already clear.**

Our current education is wrong - *not* because we haven't added enough technology, or because we haven't added enough so-called "21st-century skills," or because we don't offer it to everyone equally, or even because we haven't tried hard to incrementally improve it.

Our current K-12 education is wrong for the future because it has - and we have - the wrong ends in mind. We - the entire world - have an outdated idea about what an education should be *for* in the third millennium. Up until now, education has

been about improving individuals. What education should be about in the future is improving the world the kids live in, and helping each individual improve in that process.

### Why New Goals?

For centuries, the assumption has been that if all individuals, on their own, learn the "basics" and make the most progress they can, then when their education is finished, they will be ready to go out and lead better individual lives and, hopefully (but by no means certainly), improve the world.

The ends of "improving individuals" may once have been the right ends for the world and for our kids. But they are no longer the right ends for our times or for the future. Because our kids are now becoming so powerful and capable, the ends of their education can be, and now should be, to improve the world. Not indirectly, someday, when they are adults, but immediately, while they are being educated, and as an immediate and direct result of that process. The world can no longer afford to waste one-fourth of our human potential to make it better while waiting for our kids to grow up. Having our kids improve their world is now possible at scale - today's empowered young people can help to do so every day, at almost no incremental cost, in ways that absolutely weren't possible earlier - *if* we are willing to help make it happen.

### A Proposal to Bring Our Two Great Educational Traditions Together

There are two great educational traditions in the world. The first, older, and broader of the two is the one-to-one, parent-to-child, master-to-apprentice, mentor-to-mentee tradition, which goes as far back as the human race. The second great tradition began when certain individuals started to care about the world in particular thoughtful and thought-related ways, seeking to understand it better, to explore spirituality more deeply, to understand human behaviors and thought processes, and/or to create new knowledge. Over time, they established forums, religious orders, and universities where disciples gathered to help share and disseminate their thoughts, and pass on to one another what they knew and had learned.

We can call these, if you will, the "academic" (or "thinking") and "accomplishment" traditions of education. The two have developed separately over the centuries, and today they have wound up in separate spaces: the academic tradition has gone to our schools, and the accomplishment tradition has gone to our workplaces. The result is that, in more and more cases, our young people now need *two* educations. After they have completed their academic education in schools, the workplace must then give them a second education which shows them how to accomplish and add value to the world.

That, I believe, is why an increasing number of employers are complaining that after all those years kids have spent getting an academic education in school, they can't, as Google requires on its website, "get things done." Kids have to be re-educated by businesses in order to add value. It's not just because some of our schools don't teach them to think logically or creatively - although that may be true - it's because those skills taught in school are never applied to accomplishment, and most of the skills needed for accomplishment are not taught.

This an incredibly inefficient and ineffective way to go about educating our 21st-century kids; it's both wasteful and unnecessary. It's not even close to the best we can do, at a time when these kids can suddenly accomplish so much. We need, for our future world, to bring the two educational traditions back together. We need to re-forge the broken link between academic, personal-achievement-oriented education and real-world, accomplishment-oriented education - between our schools and our adult jobs and professions.

That is where I believe the world is now heading. At the start of the third millennium, the model of K-12 education is slowly but inexorably beginning to change from being just about the thinking tradition of education to combining the thinking and accomplishing traditions in a new way: through real-world projects.

The model of K-12 education is changing from kids just *learning* about the world to *actually improving it* while they are students.

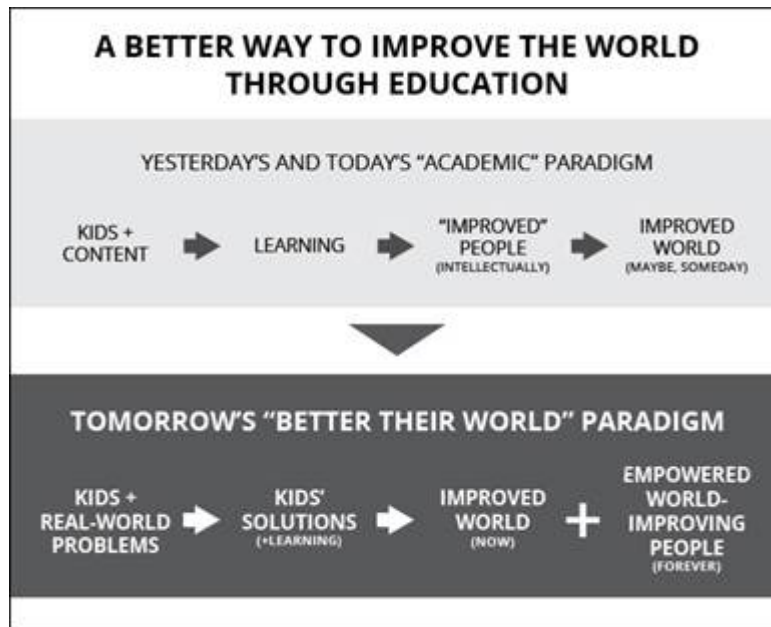
This is good for all of us.

### A New Paradigm

Here, essentially, is how our current model and paradigm of K-12 education works: We put our kids, starting in the early grades, together with "content." And we hope they will learn this content - mostly in an intellectual sense - along with a limited number of basic skills. We put almost all our efforts into trying to increase this learning, because we believe that it leads to improved people. And then we place an enormous bet: that these "improved" people will someday go out and improve their world. (The reality, of course, is that some do, but most don't.)

Here's the new model that's emerging: We begin by putting kids together - again, from the earliest grades - not with pre-ordained "content," but with real-world problems. Not with problems *we* make up and give them, but with problems *they themselves* perceive and recognize in their own local and global worlds. The kids come up with, and implement, solutions to these problems - something, being newly empowered in so many ways, they are increasingly able to do. The result is that the world improves immediately, while they are still students.

That is already a big advance over what we now do - but the real payoff comes later, as those students become, as a direct result of their education, empowered adults who *know* they can improve their world, because they have done so over and over again as their education. Having experienced that they *can* better their world, they are now anxious to continue doing so for the rest of their lives.



### Today's Kids Can, and Should, Add Value

Currently, at a time when the world needs all the help it can get, we are wasting the potential and value-adding power of, literally, one-fourth of all humans: those of school age, roughly five to 20 years old. The waste is perhaps greatest in the kids' younger years, because we have somehow decided that these young human beings have no value at all to add to the world until we "teach" them.

But the young today are no longer buying this specious argument, and neither should we. Today's kids, around the world, know they can add value to the world right now. And they are, in more and more cases, going out and doing it, either on their own or - if they are lucky - supported by scattered adults and programs.

Primary-school kids are improving their neighborhoods. Ten- and 11-year-olds are designing public amenities such as parks and doing government work such as environmental reports and cryptography. Thirteen-year-olds are 3D-printing prosthetic hands using instructions available on the Internet, which they also use to find other kids who need them. High-school kids are installing and upgrading networks, testing water quality, restoring historic ships and other artifacts, and improving public services. Kids of all ages and genders are starting companies and

NGOs to solve world problems. What is currently being done by kids is already amazing (see, for example, [globalempoweredkids.org](http://globalempoweredkids.org)), but their potential has hardly been tapped. We are at the start of something completely new and positive: the ability of school-age kids to improve the world in useful, measurable, and non-exploitive ways.

### Why Now?

We have entered a time when huge technological and societal changes are happening at a rapidly accelerating rate - a time when much of what used to take decades now happens literally in nanoseconds. It's also a world in which attitudes, fixed for generations (toward privacy, for example), are changing almost overnight. Although there are many unknowns on which we should be keeping a watchful eye, both this new environment's *technology* and *context* have already begun to empower our kids in ways never before seen in the world, extending their minds and capabilities and giving them powers that are completely new.

Consider all the capabilities already in many kids' pockets - video, calculation, Search, translation, super-computing, geolocation - and imagine the power that will be there tomorrow. And the greatest empowerment of all comes from the rapidly growing *connectivity* of our young people: connecting with one another, with all the world's knowledge, and with other people all over the planet. We now have the first truly horizontal, globally connected generation.

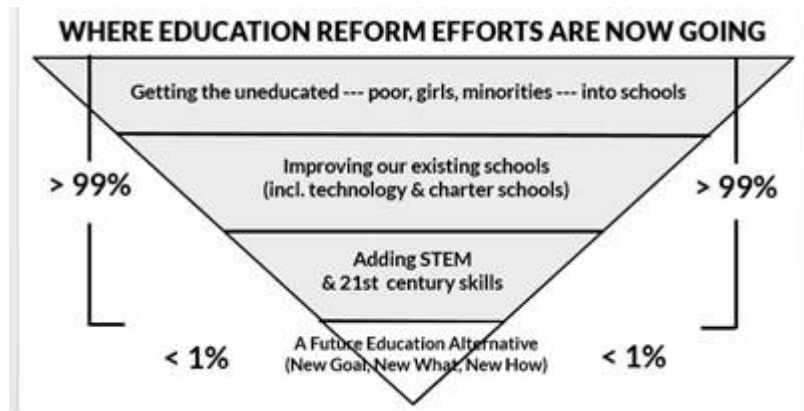
We are still learning about how our kids' "plastic" brains are reacting to their new environment. But we know for sure that the young people whom it is now our task to educate are no longer the young people we were - i.e., "kids who need to be taught by adults before they can act." They can be thought of, far more usefully, as "extended minds, all networked together," with whom we have to work and explore jointly. They are people who have the power, while they are still kids and with proper guidance, to vastly improve the world, personally, locally, and globally. We must learn to educate these young people for that future world.

### A New Mindset: Moving Beyond the MESS

We already have the tools we need to do this, but we lack the mindset. Education, everywhere in the world, is stuck in an "academic" mindset of "learn first, act in the world later." With only minor exceptions, this academic mindset is the *only* formal education the world offers, and the one most parents now want their kids to have.

Most of the world's academic education is based on a narrow "basic" curriculum of math, local language, science, and social studies. The acronym for these subjects in the English-speaking world - **MESS** (**M**ath, **E**nglish, **S**cience, **S**ocial Studies) - is apt. Our education is based on the premise that students should learn the MESS

first so they can accomplish later. Just about everything that today goes on in the name of education reform is about doing academic education and the MESS better - by serving more under-served kids, by adding new types of schools (e.g., charters), by adding so-called "21st-century skills," by adding STEM and the arts, or by adding more and more technology.



### "Education to Better Their World" vs. Incremental Improvements

But incremental improvements on academic education is not what today's and tomorrow's empowered kids want, need, or deserve. Rather, they need a fundamentally different K-12 education, an "Education to Better Their World." Fortunately, that education is now beginning to emerge.

What we are now starting to ask our future, empowered kids is to become educated *by actually improving the world*, in whatever way inspires them, by fully utilizing and actualizing their unique passions and skills - not *someday*, when they become adults, but now, while they are still in school, and still students. This - except perhaps for the kids who have gamed the old system and like to "play school" - is what most kids also want and prefer.

### Applied Passion, or "Apprenticeship to the World"

Educators have recently begun to focus more on student passion. But it is not our young people's passion in itself that we need to encourage through education; rather, it is their "applied passion" - i.e., what they can do with their passion that is positive. Better Their World education is precisely about helping kids apply their passion, whatever it may be, to solving world problems and becoming the people they want to be and that we want them to be. It is an education that helps kids identify their areas of interest early (with, of course, possibilities for change) and truly understand their own unique passions and capabilities, as well as connect their interests, capabilities, and passions to real-world projects.

That is precisely what today's young people *want to do* and what they *can learn to do*, and it is certainly what the world needs.

This new educational paradigm is a third-millennium combination of our academic and accomplishment traditions. It is about students serving, in their formative years, an "apprenticeship to the world," if you will. That is what kids want, it is what the world needs, and it is what K-12 education should be. A Better Their World education is a far better education both for our kids and for the rest of us. It is better for our kids because it offers them independence, applied passion, and a strong sense of accomplishment, along with an understanding of how they fit into the future world. It is far better for all of us because it liberates huge amounts of unused potential - the potential of our students - to improve our communities and our planet. We all need, and deserve, this kind of education.

### **Never Before Feasible**

Better Their World education, as I conceive it here, was not feasible in the past. Our kids were too powerless and isolated. But in the new era of empowered kids and extended minds all networked together, it is the best - and perhaps the only - way to take our education forward.

Although the Better Their World paradigm is not, as yet, fully implemented anywhere, we see its elements and prototypes now emerging at all levels, in scattered places and pockets around the globe. Education through real-world projects is already happening in professional schools such as medicine and business schools, in the workplace, in colleges, and in some in K-12 schools, both private and public. The world is entering a transition period from one education paradigm to another, with both plans likely to be side-by-side for a time. And the future is arriving at an accelerating rate.

### **New Ends, New Means, New Support**

To summarize, the big differentiators between today's academic education and tomorrow's Better Their World education are:

- **NEW ENDS.** The "ends" of today's academic education are individual achievement, typically expressed as grades, scores, and rankings. The ends of tomorrow's Better Their World education are improving the world, and in so doing, teaching students to become good, effective, world-improving people. Imagine if any country, large or small, declared that "henceforth our education will not be for improving individuals, but for improving our country, in as many ways as possible." Would we see a difference in a year? Over a decade?

- **NEW MEANS:** The means of academic education are proscribed courses of study, completed successfully in some number and sequence. The means of Better Their World education are real-world local and global projects, completed in teams, in ways that apply each student's passions and increase students' overall ability to accomplish effectively. We must help our kids recognize potentially solvable problems in their world and make them addressable through real-world projects. With so many issues and opportunities in our world, such projects will never be in short supply.
- **A BROADER SUPPORTING CURRICULUM:** Academic education consists of carefully constructed curricula - mostly MESS-based - that provide, in a sequential order, knowledge and skills to be absorbed now to be used later. Better Their World education has a far wider, almost entirely skills-based curriculum in a "support as needed" role, consisting of all the component skills that make up the needed-by-all abilities of Effective Thinking, Effective Action, and Effective Relationships that lead, with application, to Effective Accomplishment:



EFFECTIVE THINKING	EFFECTIVE ACTION	EFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIPS
Understanding Communication	Habits of Highly	Communication &
Quantitative & Pattern Thinking	Effective People	Collaboration
Scientific Thinking	Body & Health optimization	• One-to-one
Historical Perspective	Agility	• In teams
Problem-Solving	Adaptability	• In families
• Individual	Leadership & Followership	• In communities
• Collaborative	Decision Making	• At work
Curiosity & Questioning	Under Uncertainty	• Online
Creative Thinking	Experimentation	• In virtual worlds
Design Thinking	Research	Listening
Integrative Thinking	Prudent Risk-taking	Networking
Systems Thinking	Reality Testing/Feedback	Relationship-building
Financial Thinking	Patience	Empathy
Inquiry & Argument	Resilience & "Grit"	Courage
Judgment	Entrepreneurship	Compassion
Transfer	Innovation	Tolerance
Aesthetics	Improvisation	Ethics
Habits of Mind	Ingenuity	Politics
Growth Mindset	Strategy & Tactics	Citizenship
Self-knowledge of one's:	Breaking Barriers	Conflict Resolution
• Passions	Project Management	Negotiation
• Strengths & weaknesses	Programming Machines	Coaching
Stress Control	Making Effective Videos	Being Coached
Focus	Innovating with Current &	Peer-to-peer
Contemplation & Meditation	Future Technologies	Mentoring

In the Better Their World curriculum, these abilities are acquired not in any pre-ordered sequence of courses, but rather from teachers, peers, curated applications, and the Internet, *as needed to accomplish projects.*

- **A BETTER WAY OF TEACHING:** In our academic K-12 education, teachers are primarily "content deliverers." In Better Their World education, teachers are "empowerers" and coaches, whose job is to guide students to get better and better at applying their unique personal passions and interests to effective, real-world accomplishment.
- **A BETTER USE OF TECHNOLOGY:** Almost all of academic education's in-school use of technology today is applied to doing things we could do before, but in new ways - i.e., computer-based Search, research, writing, watching, analyzing, and administrating. These uses of technology bring nothing new to our kids' education and mostly ignore the powerful ways in

which technology can now help our kids. A Better Their World education would help kids apply new technologies for connecting in real time with others around the globe, for simulating populations and machines, for working in virtual worlds, for building apps and robotics - and directly apply these and other emerging technologies, such as AI, to resolving real-world problems and bettering their world.

### How to Get There

The matrix describing the new Education to Better Their World looks like this:



Real, world-improving projects are the core, and the skills that all students need - Effective Thinking, Action, Relationships, and Global and Local Awareness - plus the skills that different kids need in different amounts (e.g., in STEM, humanities, and the arts), are all available to support those projects.

"In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity," Saint Augustine is reputed to have said. The "essentials," in this case, are making education no longer about students' academic achievement, but about Bettering Their World. The "liberty" comes in the great multitude of implementations that are already emerging and will continue to arise in a variety of forms all over the globe, as individual teachers, schools, and school systems figure out how to do Better Their World education in ways that work for their local students and communities. The "charity" - hugely important - is the fresh and more respectful way that we are, slowly, beginning to view our newly empowered kids.

We can and should all help one another in this process, using our connectivity and the global databases and other tools already emerging. We must be sure to utilize, and rely on, our young people to help us in our evolution to this new paradigm, because in our new age, education is no longer just a top-down process, but rather a far stronger combination of top-down and bottom-up.

The move to Better Their World education has already begun, in scattered schools, classrooms, after-school programs, and individual and team student projects

around the world - although not yet in a massive or unified way. To make that happen, what is needed now more than anything is a change of mindset on the part of educators, parents, politicians, and other adults. (While the broad outlines and map of the new educational paradigm education are clear, the details of how to get there need to be worked out in each of the highly diverse individual situations around the world.)

We must acknowledge that academic education alone - despite the fact that it got all of us adults to the place we are - is no longer right for our kids and for the future. Those who maintain their allegiance to the old academic education, and who devote their efforts to improving it incrementally - whether through technology, 21st-century skills, STEM, STEAM, or anything else besides real-world projects - do so in vain and are bound, long-term, to fail.

### Finding Real-World Projects

A key need of a Better Their World education is to identify addressable real-world problems and create and connect student teams to solve them with adult (e.g., teacher) guidance and coaching. We need to create ways to identify related real-world projects at every level, in a wide variety of areas, and to create a methodology (or series of methodologies) for addressing them.

I am currently building a global reference database of real-world projects completed by students - projects in government, environment, technology, peer-to-peer help, historical preservation, and others - along with means for individuals, teachers, companies, and government to input new project ideas. The technology mechanisms that will allow companies, governments, and others to propose problems for students to solve already exist; they need only be repurposed. Because Problem-Based Learning (PBL) has now been around for some time, and many are familiar with it, we have already made progress down the methodology path as well, making far easier the necessary next step of moving from the fake, made-up problems of today to true, real-world problems.

Once the databases and methodologies are in place, we will create a mechanism to help students identify their passions and strengths, and a dedicated "recommendation engine" - something we already know how to build, and that I am working on - to connect students to projects and roles of appropriate scope and level, to help them advance.

### The Benefits

Imagine if kids, after leaving K-12, entered college or a job recruiter's office not as they do today - with a transcript of grades and (at best) a vague idea of what they would like to accomplish - but rather, with an actual resumé of accomplishments, with scores of projects completed over a K-12 career, in multiple areas and roles,

and a clear idea of the kinds of roles and projects that suit them best and that excite their passions. This alone would be a reason to change to a Better Their World education paradigm. But we can add to that the benefits of thousands, or even millions, of projects actually completed during the K-12 years - projects that would be adding, potentially, billions of dollars of value to the world.

Any school or class that now offers kids *only* academic education is failing its students, no matter how many bells and whistles - iPads, critical-thinking seminars, Mandarin - it may be adding to its program. Some schools are already moving to mixed plans, with academics at some times and real-world projects at other times. Many schools with long-standing "service projects" are adding more of them and granting them more importance.

Former "capstone" projects are now becoming the actual "building stones" of an education. The era of the "learn first, achieve later" academic model of education is ending. It may have been useful in the past, but it no longer works. Today more and more people - both kids and adults - are realizing we must move to something new.

What I've tried to do here is to give that "something new" a name: Education to Better Their World. That will not be its final name, perhaps. But whatever we call it, this new kind of education is clearly coming. Now is the time to start to make it happen, universally.

*Marc Prensky is an internationally acclaimed speaker and author in the field of education. He is the founder and Executive Director of the **Global Future Education Foundation and Institute**, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to promoting Education to Better Their World. Marc has spoken in 40 countries. He has authored seven books and over 100 essays, and his writings have been translated into 11 languages. His previous book is **The World Needs a New Curriculum**. His new book: **Education to Better Their World: Unleashing the Power of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Kids** will be published in August 2016. Marc's 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).*