

# Education to Better Their World

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Unleashing the Power  
of 21st-Century Kids

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## What's Happened

**JUST AT A TIME** when “academic” education has spread around the globe, and we are struggling mightily to bring every kid into it, our world—and the things our kids are capable of doing in it—are changing radically.

Because the capabilities of our present and future kids are now so different, the education that we have universally been offering them throughout the world is no longer appropriate for the times in which they and their posterity will live. To succeed in the future, today's and tomorrow's young people require a different kind of start in the world—a different primary and secondary (K–12) education than the world now offers them.

Our kids now need an education that is far more connected and real than in the past—an education that gives them not only knowledge, but also provides them with empowerment and agency. They need an education whose ends are not just to improve themselves, but rather to improve the world they live in.

The outlines of this new and better education are now in the process of emerging in the world. At its core, it is *an education whose ends are to empower kids to improve their own world, starting when they are students*. Although this new education does not yet exist anywhere in its entirety—and will continue to emerge and evolve—its main elements are now showing up around the globe in more and more places in the ideas and practice of a growing number of individuals and groups. This book's purpose is to describe and highlight this new educational paradigm.

This emerging education benefits all of us—far more than the education of today. It benefits our kids more by enabling them to think more effectively (and far more practically) than our current education does, and, in addition, it empowers our kids to act, relate, and accomplish effectively in the world. It offers young people not just the pride and joy of real-world accomplishment, but all the self-confidence that comes with it. It arms kids who walk in an employer's door, or who apply to college, not just with a transcript of grades, but with a résumé of completed, real-world accomplishments.

It's also an education that benefits the world far more than the academic K–12 education of today. It benefits employers because they will get better prepared workers from the start. It benefits local and global society by unleashing a huge, as-yet-untapped potential world-improving force, as it elicits from our school-age kids real, implemented solutions to the existing problems and needs of our world.

Most important, it's an education that creates adults—future citizens—who already have experience, from their education, in finding and implementing real solutions to real problems. This is something that our current education not only does not do, but doesn't even *try* to do.

In this book, I offer my readers—who I hope will include a wide variety of people interested in education, from government leaders and politicians to educational policymakers, to parents, educational innovators, current and aspiring superintendents, school administrators and principals, graduate students of urban government and educational policy, teachers and teacher educators, members of the general public interested in and invested in providing children with the right education for our present and their future, and most importantly, many young people themselves—a new and alternate vision and perspective on how we can and should educate our offspring in their early (i.e., K–12) years. My goal is to convince you that a different kind of education is needed, that the vision and implementations of that vision are emerging, and that there is, in fact, a real and starkly different alternative—a far better one—to our current academic K–12 education. So much so that the two alternatives deserve very different names: the “Academic Model” of individual achievement in a narrow range of subjects (which is what we currently have) and the “Empowerment to Better the World Model” of liberating the newly acquired power of students to accomplish projects that improve their world (which is what is needed and where I believe we are going). Whether, as a world, we stick to academics for our students, or move to empower our kids to better their world, will have a profound impact on our future.

### **A BETTER APPROACH TO WORLD IMPROVEMENT**

Improving the world has always been, of course, an *indirect* goal of education; but for some time it has become more of a by-product.

In the academic paradigm of education, we begin by putting students together with “content,” hopefully producing some learning. Those students who learn become “better” people (almost entirely in

# Real, World-Improving Projects

## 10 Favorite Examples

**ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL WAYS** in which we can do better for our Globally Empowered Kids is to help them apply their newly acquired powers to projects that better their world. It is important to understand what these world-improving projects are and how they differ from the kinds of projects kids do in school today.

Real, world-improving projects are *projects that produce actual, and hopefully lasting, changes in our kids' local and global communities—changes that they can point to and say, “I—with my team—did that!”*

Today, most of the projects that kids do in class—even those that are called “real”—do not affect the world outside of the classroom at all. Almost all of them are made up, mostly by teachers, to achieve learning goals and meet learning standards. Such projects may, in fact, help the kids learn in more engaging ways. But they make no difference whatsoever in their world. Calling the projects “authentic” doesn’t help at all, because authentic means only “real-like.” Examples of such authentic-but-fake projects include research that leads to never-implemented recommendations, or reports to some group that are never taken seriously, or form-letter-answered letters to politicians, or even publications that only a few ever see. That is not what I mean by a real, world-improving project—even if the recommendations or report get submitted to some official group. It becomes “real-world” *only* if it is done for a real audience *and* leads to action and a difference in the world.

There are already a great many such real, world-improving student projects that have been accomplished around the world, and I am working to create a global database of such projects (at [www.globalempoweredkids.org](http://www.globalempoweredkids.org))

for all to use. If you know of any project(s) that should be included, I hope you will email me at [marcprensky@gmail.com](mailto:marcprensky@gmail.com).

### SOME FAVORITE EXAMPLES

Meanwhile, here are 10 of my favorite real, world-improving projects as I write this. You can see the growing number of these projects at [www.globalempoweredkids.org](http://www.globalempoweredkids.org).

1. When three teenage siblings in Decatur, Georgia, aged 14, 15, and 16, thought that their family had been unfairly harassed by the police, they said to themselves, “Why don’t we create an app to help us solve this problem?” Using coding skills they had developed online, they created a mobile phone app for citizens to use to rate their encounters with the police (and other public servants), allowing people to compare communities. Their Five-O mobile app empowers citizens, according to the Google Play site from which it can be downloaded, ([https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.five\\_o](https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.five_o)), “to record and store data from every encounter with law enforcement.” Those incident reports are then electronically collated and analyzed’ and can be shared and used by communities to rate individual officers and police departments as a whole. Not only has the app received wide publicity, but also numerous suggestions for improving the app have been posted on the Google Play site. A video about the app is at [www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/18/teens-police-brutality-app\\_n\\_5687934.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/18/teens-police-brutality-app_n_5687934.html).<sup>4</sup>
2. Three middle school girls in Columbia, South Carolina, printed prosthetic hands on a 3D printer using files freely available on the website of a nonprofit organization e-NABLE ([www.enablingthefuture.org/](http://www.enablingthefuture.org/)). The girls then used the Internet to find other kids who needed such prosthetics and custom-designed a hand for each of them, distributing the hands at a “hand-a thon” event (a video is at [www.3dprint.com/70224/girl-power/](http://www.3dprint.com/70224/girl-power/)). Similar events have now spread to many schools.<sup>5</sup>
3. A 14-year-old boy in Washington DC noticed that restaurants visited by his family threw away all the crayons that had been given to kids waiting for their meals. Inspired by what he had

## What Kids Could Accomplish

### The Value Kids Can Add by Applying their Passions to Real, World-Improving Projects

**IN ALL OUR DISCUSSIONS** for and against technology in education, one of the biggest and most obvious benefits is being almost completely overlooked—technology’s empowering of our youth to accomplish huge amounts of desperately needed tasks in the world.

Perhaps this is because in the past, before modern technology, kids really couldn’t accomplish much until they were older. Perhaps it is because we are conditioned by our pre-Internet past against exploitative child labor. Or, perhaps it is because for so long we have kept our young people from accomplishing anything we have forgotten what they are capable of.

But now, a great deal has changed. Half the people on the planet are under the age of 25, and they are increasingly, individually and as a group, hugely capable and powerful—and linked to each other in ways that never existed before.

Until we liberate our young people to accomplish for the world all the positive things they now can, we are wasting half the world’s capability—just as for a long time we wasted much of the capability of women.

Not only can today’s youth, often with the help of technology, accomplish much that is truly useful in the world, and in the places they live, but in the process of doing so they will grow into precisely the kind of people we want. Some of this accomplishment and growth will likely happen whether we act, or not—many kids have already started on their own. But if we help our young people to accomplish, rather than hold them back, the process will go much faster.

In the past it was assumed—mostly correctly—that students could not compete with adults for work. We expected our young people to learn first and earn later. Doing it the other way was scorned as either exploitation or “dropping out.”

But those beliefs, like most of the beliefs and attitudes of today's adults, were formed in pre-Internet times. Today, kids are fast becoming far more capable, and this is true everywhere. "Millennials worldwide are more similar to one another than to older generations within their nations," wrote *Time* magazine in 2014.

Today, many adults are dismayed to see elements of their local cultures fading as their kids grow up in a new global world. Many are afraid of the generation that is now growing up, and of their own children. They worry about what they perceive as negative behavior, such as young people communicating through screens rather than face to face. But their fear, unfortunately, also blinds them to the positive side of how much power these young people have to do good for the world.

In today's Internet world, not only can young people compete with adults in many areas, but they can often do the work better, as people in more and more fields are finding out to their dismay. Even today's primary school students can build professional websites.

Our young people are starting early and are flocking especially to the world's newer jobs, such as search engine optimization and social media strategy. It would be a mistake to see the few well-known individuals who have started billion-dollar companies in their dorm rooms as exceptions in their essence—they are exceptional only in the magnitude of their accomplishments. All today's kids are totally capable of accomplishing real things during the years that we used to think were only about "learning."

### **NOT GRADES—ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

Today, when school administrators want to demonstrate what they are doing right, they increasingly point not to test scores, but to accomplishments of their individual students and groups of students in the world. You can watch a video of them doing this at [www.dcsdk12.org/community-relations/job-alike-robotic-students](http://www.dcsdk12.org/community-relations/job-alike-robotic-students).

Huge numbers of such student accomplishments exist. They are sometimes referred to as "volunteer opportunities" or "impact education." At the moment, they are often done outside of school. One can find such opportunities listed on a great many websites such as, for example, [www.lancaster.unl.edu/4h/serviceideas.shtml](http://www.lancaster.unl.edu/4h/serviceideas.shtml) and [www.dillerteenawards.org/past-recipients/](http://www.dillerteenawards.org/past-recipients/).

## Achievement vs. Accomplishment

**WE HAVE SPENT** much time considering real-world accomplishment, but schools and parents are often concerned with student achievement. Are “achievement” and “accomplishment” the same thing?

Many use the terms interchangeably. A student who earns high marks is “achieving,” and we might say that getting a PhD, or even getting through a particular course, or year, is “quite an accomplishment.” But I suggest that we put a finer point on it, because there is an important distinction to be made here—whatever words we use to make it.

The distinction I suggest we make when thinking about accomplishment-based education is between a person’s doing something that benefits only (or principally) him or her (= an achievement), versus a person’s doing something (or being part of doing something) that benefits others and the world outside of that person (= an accomplishment).

Climbing to the top of Mount Everest, for example, is an achievement. Climbing a mountain “because it’s there” as many say, benefits no one but the climber. And often it leaves the world with a trail of debris—and even dead companions. Winning a race is an achievement, but it typically benefits only the winner.

In education, obtaining a 4.0 average, or high marks in an exam, or a special prize, are achievements. Getting elected to school office is an achievement. In fact, most of what we expect from our students today is achievement. Achievement takes effort, often a great deal of it. And that effort, if positive, should be celebrated. We should laud the achievements of our students, teachers, and others.

### ACCOMPLISHMENT

But these achievements are quite different from *accomplishment*, at least in this context. Winning a race, or getting good grades, or getting to the top of a mountain, are achievements but *not* accomplishments as I use



the word here. This is because those things benefit no one but the person who did them. Accomplishments benefit others and the real world.

Helping find a cure for a disease is an accomplishment. Getting that cure into the field and eliminating the disease is an even bigger accomplishment. Starting (or contributing to) a magazine that becomes influential is an accomplishment. Starting a successful company that does something useful is an accomplishment. Helping improve your neighborhood is an accomplishment.

Even the highest achievements are not necessarily accomplishments and we shouldn't, I believe, alternatively describe them as such (despite the fact that in ordinary language we often do). I believe we should reserve the word accomplishment for things we do that help the world, or part of it. We achieve, in fact, so that we *can* accomplish.

School kids may collect achievements. But our students typically have far fewer accomplishments. This is because so little of what kids do in school do affects the real world. But our students could — and should — be accomplishing as well.

Writing a report that is accepted by the government in place of the one consultants used to be paid to do—as happened with the sixth-grade class referenced earlier—is an accomplishment that is far better than the achievement of getting an “A” grade on a paper on the environment. Getting a team’s design for a community water park approved by the local board and built—as that fifth grade class did—is an accomplishment far beyond the achievement of creating a good or winning design.

Accomplishments are things that go in the “experience” section of the résumé, beyond where you went to school, what your grades were, and what extracurricular activities you undertook.

### **WHY THE DISTINCTION MATTERS IN EDUCATION**

The distinction between achievement and accomplishment is important in education because “high achievers” in school, unfortunately, often accomplish little—many studies show that grades are a terrible predictor of success in life. And, at the same time, there are many people who accomplish a great deal for the world but were never high achievers in the academic sense. Winston Churchill is a great example.

What we really want from our students, I believe, is accomplishment and not achievement. We want them not only to understand the distinction between achievement and accomplishment, and what an

## Supporting New Education with Technology

Today's educational technology is almost all geared to supporting our old, academic paradigm; what we need is educational technology for the new paradigm of Bettering Their World.

**TODAY, TECHNOLOGY STILL STRUGGLES** to find its place in an academic educational context that was born, and long survived, without it. Is our modern technology more useful to an Education to Better Their World?

### **BETTERING THE WORLD DOES NOT *REQUIRE* TECHNOLOGY . . .**

An Education to Better Their World does not *require* any technology—it is not just a technology-enabled form of education. Rather, it's an education whose ends are to empower all kids to be able to take action to improve their own world and to see themselves as having agency. No modern technology is necessary for project teams to accomplish many things that are world-improving—from bettering relationships between groups in their communities, to fixing up neighborhoods, to restoring historic artifacts. A Better Their World education is therefore not just useful to or good for only those kids in the world fortunate enough have access to all the latest devices and services. Such an education can be undertaken anywhere—from the most isolated places to the poorest pockets of society—and will benefit that place's kids and community. All that is required is that educators and parents see the ends of education not as just improving individuals in an academic sense but as bettering their world—and that they see their job as empowering kids further to do so.

### **. . . BUT THE MORE KIDS HAVE ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY, THE MORE THEY CAN BETTER THEIR WORLD**

With that understood, we can also say that having access to technology can certainly help kids to Better Their World in major ways. Modern technology is becoming a part of more and more kids' lives in more and more places. As it does, that technology will continue to empower those kids to do more—technology will almost certainly be a big part of almost everything most kids accomplish in the future.

Though not required for everything, technology *is* a big empowering factor. So we need to consider what technology's role can and should be in a Better Their World education. How can new technologies, to the extent kids have access to them, be used in the most fruitful way to support the projects of Better Their World education and to educate the empowered kids of today and tomorrow?

I believe we also need to ask another important question: Is creating dedicated educational technology helping our move to a new educational vision, or is it, in fact, holding us back?

### **TECHNOLOGY AS A MASK**

How, you might ask, could educational technology possibly be holding back our kids and our education? The answer is twofold. First, technology often slows down our traditional academic education as our current teachers struggle to use it. But far more importantly, most of the technology used in schools today is about nothing more than doing "old things in new ways." We use technology only to do things we could do before—like deliver content, or do research, or keep records—in faster and sometimes marginally better ways. We convince ourselves that by introducing these technologies into our schools and by using the technologies in these ways, we are doing something to move our kids' education forward and prepare them for the future. But, educationally, we are not doing anything new or different at all. Introducing technology—something we often do with great fanfare and expense—very often masks our lack of any real educational progress. This—and not just the fact that some technology may be uncomfortable for teachers to use—may be a key reason that technology meets so much resistance from many of our experienced teachers.