
When “21st-Century Schooling” Just Isn’t Good Enough: A Modest Proposal

By Alfie Kohn

Many school administrators, and even more people who aren’t educators but are kind enough to offer their advice about how our field can be improved, have emphasized the need for “21st-century schools” that teach “21st-century skills.” But is this really enough, particularly now that our adversaries (in other words, people who live in other countries) may be thinking along the same lines? Unfortunately, no. Beginning immediately, therefore, we must begin to implement 22nd-century education.

What does that phrase mean? How can we possibly know what skills will be needed so far in the future? Such challenges from skeptics – the same kind of people who ask annoying questions about other cutting-edge ideas, including “brain-based education” — are to be expected. But if we’re confident enough to describe what education should be like throughout the 21st century – that is, what will be needed over the next 90 years or so — it’s not much of a stretch to reach a few decades beyond that.

Essentially, we can take whatever objectives or teaching strategies we happen to favor and, merely by attaching a label that designates a future time period, endow them (and ourselves) with an aura of novelty and significance. Better yet, we instantly define our critics as impediments to progress. If this trick works for the adjective “21st-century,” imagine the payoff from ratcheting it up by a hundred years.

To describe schooling as 22nd-century, however, does suggest a somewhat specific agenda. First, it signifies an emphasis on competitiveness. Even those who talk about 21st-century schools invariably follow that phrase with a reference to “the need to compete in a global economy.” The goal isn’t excellence, in other words; it’s victory. Education is first and foremost about being first and foremost. Therefore, we might as well trump the 21st-century folks by peering even further into the future.

You may have noticed the connection between this conception of education and the practice of continually ranking students on the basis of their scores on standardized tests. This is a promising start, but it doesn’t go nearly far enough. Twenty-second-century schooling means that just about everything should be evaluated in terms of who’s beating whom. Thus, newspapers might feature headlines like: “U.S. Schools Now in 4th Place in Number of Hall Monitors” or “Gates Funds \$50-Billion Effort to Manufacture World-Class Cafeteria Trays.” Whatever the criterion, our challenge is to make sure that people who don’t live in the United States will always be inferior to us.

This need to be number one also explains why we can no longer settle for teaching to the “whole

child.” The trouble is that if you have a whole of something, you have only one of it. From now on, therefore, you can expect to see conferences devoted to educating a “child-and-a-half” (CAAH). Nothing less will do in a 22nd-century global - or possibly interplanetary - economy. To cite the title of a forthcoming best-seller that educators will be reading in place of dusty tomes about pedagogy, *The Solar System Is Flat*.

In addition to competitiveness, those who specify an entire century to frame their objectives tend not to be distracted by all the fretting about what’s good for children. Instead, they ask, “What do our corporations need?” and work backwards from there. We must never forget the primary reason that children attend school - namely, to be trained in the skills that will maximize the profits earned by their future employers. Indeed, we have already made great strides in shifting the conversation about education to what will prove useful in workplaces rather than wasting time discussing what might support “democracy” (an 18th-century notion, isn’t it?) or what might promote self development as an intrinsic good (a concept that goes back thousands of years and is therefore antiquated by definition).

How can we redouble our commitment to business-oriented schooling? If necessary, we can outsource some of the learning to students in Asia, who will memorize more facts for lower grades. And we can complete the process, already begun in spirit, of making universities’ education departments subsidiaries of their business schools. More generally, we must put an end to pointless talk about students’ “interest” in learning and instead focus on skills that will contribute to the bottom line. Again, we’re delighted to report that this shift is already underway, thanks to those who keep reminding us about the importance of 21st-century schooling.

This is no time for complacency, though. Not everyone is on board yet, and that means we’ll have to weed out teachers whose stubborn attachment to less efficient educational strategies threatens to slow down the engine of our future economy. How can we rid our schools of those who refuse to be team players? Well, we can insist that all classroom instruction be rigorously aligned to state standards - a very effective technique since most of those standards documents were drafted by people steeped in the models, methods, and metaphors of corporations. We can also use merit pay to enforce compliance by stigmatizing anyone who doesn’t play by the new rules. (Come to think of it, here, too, we’re already well on our way to creating 22nd-century classrooms.)

The final distinguishing feature of education that’s geared to the next century is its worshipful attitude toward mathematics and technology. “If you can’t quantify it or plug it in, who needs it?” Of course, the reason we will continue to redirect resources toward the STEM subjects (and away from literature and the arts) isn’t because the former are inherently more important but simply because they’re more useful from an economic standpoint. And that standpoint is the only one that matters for schools with a proper 22nd-century mindset.

One last point. We will of course continue to talk earnestly about the need for a curriculum that features “critical thinking” skills - by which we mean the specific proficiencies acceptable to CEOs. But you will appreciate the need to delicately discourage real critical thinking on the part of students, since this might lead them to pose inconvenient questions about the entire enterprise and the ideology on which it’s based. There’s certainly no room for that in the global competitive economy of the future. Or the present.

Alfie Kohn has recently completed a book called *Crime and Punishment*. He expects to begin reading another one shortly.

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