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# How to Bring Our Schools Out of the 20th Century

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American schools aren't exactly frozen in time, but considering the pace of change in other areas of life, our public schools tend to feel like throwbacks. Kids spend much of the day as their great-grandparents once did: sitting in rows, listening to teachers lecture, scribbling notes by hand, reading from textbooks that are out of date by the time they are printed. A yawning chasm (with an emphasis on yawning) separates the world inside the schoolhouse from the world outside.

For the past five years, the national conversation on education has focused on reading scores, math tests and closing the "achievement gap" between social classes. This is not a story about that conversation. This is a story about the big public conversation the nation is *not* having about education, the one that will ultimately determine not merely whether some fraction of our children get "left behind" but also whether an entire generation of kids will fail to make the grade in the global economy because they can't think their way through abstract problems, work in teams, distinguish good information from bad or speak a language other than English.

This week the conversation will burst onto the front page, when the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, a high-powered, bipartisan assembly of Education Secretaries, business leaders and a former Governor releases a blueprint for rethinking American education from pre-K to 12 and beyond to better prepare students to thrive in the global economy. While that report includes some controversial proposals, there is nonetheless a remarkable consensus among educators and business and policy leaders on one key conclusion: we need to bring what we teach and how we teach into the 21st century. Right now we're aiming too low. Competency in reading and math—the focus of so much No Child Left Behind testing—is the meager minimum. Scientific and technical skills are, likewise, utterly necessary but insufficient. Today's economy demands not only a high-level competence in the traditional academic disciplines but also what might be called 21st century skills. Here's what they are:

**Knowing more about the world.** Kids are global citizens now, whether they know it or not, and they need to behave that way. Mike Eskew, CEO of UPS, talks about needing workers who are "global trade literate, sensitive to foreign cultures, conversant in different languages"—not exactly strong points in the U.S., where fewer than half of high school students are enrolled in a foreign-language class and where the social-studies curriculum tends to fixate on U.S. history.

**Thinking outside the box.** Jobs in the new economy—the ones that won't get outsourced or automated— "put an enormous premium on creative and innovative skills, seeing patterns where other people see only chaos," says Marc Tucker, a lead author of the skills-commission report and president of the National Center on Education and the Economy. That's a problem for U.S. schools, which have become less daring in the back-to-basics climate of No Child Left Behind. Kids also must learn to think across disciplines, since that's where most new breakthroughs are made. It's interdisciplinary combinations—design and technology, mathematics and art—"that produce YouTube and Google," says Thomas Friedman, the best-selling author of *The World Is Flat*.

**Becoming smarter about new sources of information.** In an age of overflowing information and proliferating media, kids need to rapidly process what's coming at them and distinguish between what's reliable and what isn't. "It's important that students know how to manage it, interpret it, validate it, and how to act on it," says Dell executive Karen Bruett, who serves on the board of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, a group of corporate and education leaders focused on upgrading American education.

**Developing good people skills.** EQ, or emotional intelligence, is as important as IQ for success in today's workplace. "Most innovations today involve large teams of people," says former Lockheed Martin CEO Norman Augustine. "We have to emphasize communication skills, the ability to work in teams and with people from different cultures."

Can our public schools, originally designed to educate workers for agrarian life and industrial-age factories, make the necessary shifts? The skills commission will argue that it's possible only if we add new depth and rigor to our curriculum and standardized exams, redeploy the dollars we spend on education, reshape the teaching force and reorganize who runs the schools. But without waiting for such a revolution, enterprising administrators around the country have begun to update their schools, often with ideas and support from local businesses. The state of Michigan, conceding that it can no longer count on the ailing auto industry to absorb its poorly educated and low-skilled workers, is retooling its high schools, instituting what are among the most rigorous graduation requirements in the nation. Elsewhere, organizations like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Asia Society are pouring money and expertise into model programs to show the way.

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