

14 things that are obsolete in 21st century schools

Saying that it has always been this way, doesn't count as a legitimate justification as to why it should stay that way. Teachers and administrators all over the world are doing amazing things, but some of the things we are still doing, despite all the new solutions, research and ideas out there are, to put it mildly, incredible.

I'm not saying we should just make the current system better... we should change it into something else.

I have compiled a list of 14 things that are obsolete in 21st-century schools and it is my hope that this will inspire lively discussions about the future of education.

1. Computer Rooms

The idea of taking a whole class to a computer room with outdated equipment, once a week to practice their typewriting skills and sending them back to the classroom 40 minutes later, is obsolete.

Computers or technology shouldn't just be a specific subject, that's not sufficient anymore but rather it should be an integral part of all the subjects and built into the curriculum.

2. Isolated classrooms

Classrooms can be isolated in two ways. One where parents, teachers or guests are not welcome because the door and drapes are always shut... which has the words "Don't come in here" written all over it. The other way is being isolated to all the knowledge outside the 4 walls. For example from the internet, videos, blogs, websites, and visits from authors or scientists through Skype, to name a few.

Tony Wagner, the author of the Global Achievement Gap says: "Isolation is the enemy of improvement". The classroom should be open, teachers should be able to walk in and learn from each other, parents should visit often, f.x. with so-called Extra Open Schooldays (where all parents are encouraged to visit classrooms anytime during the day). Isolated classrooms are therefore obsolete.

3. Schools that don't have WiFi

Schools that don't have a robust WiFi network for staff and students are not only missing a big change for teaching and learning but robbing the students of access to knowledge and also limiting their chances to learn about the internet and using technology in a safe way.

21st-century schools make it possible for students and staff to learn anywhere, anytime and schools that don't allow that are obsolete.

4. Banning phones and tablets

Taking phones and tablets from students instead of using them to enhance learning is obsolete. We should celebrate the technology students bring and use them as learning tools.

Phones are no longer just devices to text and make phone calls... when they were, then banning them was OK. Today there is more processing power in the average cellular telephone than NASA had access to when they sent a man to the moon in 1969. Yet most students only know how to use these devices for social media and playing games.

Today you can edit a movie, make a radio show, take pictures, make posters, websites, blog, tweet as a character from a book, have class conversations over TodaysMeet and Google most answers on a test with the device in your pocket. We should show our students the learning possibilities & turn these distractions into learning opportunities that will reach far outside the classroom.

5. Tech director with an administrator access

Having one person responsible for the computer system, working from a windowless office in the school basement, surrounded by old computers, updates the programs and tells the staff what tech tools they can and cannot use... is obsolete.

Today we need technology co-ordinators that know what teachers and students need to be successful and solve problems instead of creating barriers. Someone who helps people to help themselves by giving them responsibility and finds better and cheaper ways to do things.

6. Teachers that don't share what they do

Teachers who work silently, don't tweet, blog and discuss ideas with people around the world are obsolete. Teachers are no longer working locally but globally and it's our job to share what we do and see what others are doing. If a teacher is no longer learning then he shouldn't be teaching other people.

We should all be tweeting, blogging and sharing what works and doesn't work, get and give advice to and from co-workers around the world. We should constantly be improving our craft because professional development isn't a 3-hour workshop once a month but a lifelong process.

“We do not learn from experience...we learn from reflecting on experience.” – John Dewey

7. Schools that don't have Facebook or Twitter

Schools that think putting a news article on the school website every other week and publish a monthly newsletter is enough to keep parents informed are obsolete.

The school should have a Facebook page, share news and information with parents, have a Twitter account and their own hashtag, run their own online TV channel where students film, edit and publish things about school events. If you don't tell your story, someone else will.

8. Unhealthy cafeteria food

School cafeterias that look and operate almost like fast food restaurants where staff and students get a cheap, fast and unhealthy meals are obsolete.

A few schools in Iceland and Sweden have turned almost completely to organic foods and given thought into the long term benefit of healthy food rather than the short term savings of the unhealthy. For example at Stora Hammar school in Sweden, 90% of the food served is organic.

Children should put the food on their own plate, clean up after themselves and even do the dishes. Not because it saves the school money on the workforce but because it is a part of growing up and learning about responsibility. What 21st-century schools should be doing as well is growing their own fruits and vegetables where students water them and learn about nature. Setting up a farm to feed students would be optimal, but if that is not an option (for example in big city schools) then they can at last set up a window farm in some of the school windows.

The goal of providing students a healthy meal is not only to give them enough nutrition to last the school day but to make healthy food a normal part of their daily life and get them to think about nutrition which is something that will benefit them for the rest of their lives.

9. Starting school at 8 o'clock for teenagers

Research has shown over and over again that teenagers do better and feel better in schools that start later. Often parents or administrators get in the way of that change. Research (f.x. from the *The Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics* and University of Minnesota – video) show that delaying

school start as little as 50 minutes and making it longer by 30 minutes instead has a positive effect both on learning and activities after school. Schools that don't do this are obsolete.

Starting later is easy and teachers could use the extra time in the morning to prepare class... it's a win-win situation.

10. Buying poster-, website- and pamphlet design for the school

When your school needs a poster, pamphlet or a new website they shouldn't buy the service from somewhere else (although that can sometimes be the case) and have students do it instead. In the best schools of the future, they will be the ones doing it as a real project that has meaning and as a collaborative project in language and art...using technology.

11. Traditional libraries

Libraries that only contain books and chess tables are obsolete.

A 21st-century library should be at the heart of the school and a place where both students and staff can come in to relax, read, get advice, access powerful devices, edit videos, music, print in 3D and learn how to code to name a few. This 21st-century learning space should give people an equal chance to use these devices and access information. Otherwise, these libraries will turn into museums where people go to look at all the things we used to use.

12. All students get the same

Putting kids in the same class because they are born in the same year is obsolete. School systems were originally set up to meet the needs of industrialism. Back then we needed people to work in factories, conformity was good and nobody was meant to excel or be different in that environment. That doesn't fit our needs today, let alone the future but many schools are still set up like the factories they were meant to serve 100 years ago.

We should increase choice, give children support to flourish in what interests them and not only give them extra attention to the things they're bad at. In most schools, if you are good at art but bad in German you get German lessons to get to par with the other students instead of excelling at art... All even, all the same!

Education should be individualized, students should work in groups regardless of age and their education should be built around their needs.

13. One-Professional development-workshop-fits-all

A school that just sends the entire staff to a workshop once a month where everyone gets the same is obsolete. Professional development is usually top-down instead of the ground up where everyone gets what they want and need. This is because giving everyone (including students) what they need and want takes time & money.

With things like Twitter, Pinterest, articles online, books, videos, co-operation & conversations employees can personalize their professional development. (Read about my article on Personalized Professional Development here)

14. Standardized tests to measure the quality of education

Looking at standardized tests to evaluate whether or not children are educated or not is the dumbest thing we can do and gives us a shallow view of learning. The outcomes, although moderately important, measure only a small part of what we want our kids to learn and by focusing on these exams we are narrowing the curriculum. Alfie Kohn even pointed out a statistically significant correlation between high grades on standardized tests and a shallow approach to learning.

The world today and the needs of society are completely different from what they used to be. We are not only training people to work locally but globally. With standardized tests, like PISA, we are narrowing the curriculum, and all the OECD countries are teaching the same thing. Because of that, we all produce the same kind of workers, outdated workers, to work in factories. People who can comply, behave and be like everybody else.

In the global world today it is easy to outsource jobs to someone who is willing to do the same job, just as fast for less money. Therefore we need creative people that can do something else and think differently.

Andreas Schleicher (2010) said: “Schools have to prepare students for jobs that have not yet been created, technologies that have not yet been invented and problems that we don’t know will arise.”

Standardized education might have been the answer once but saying that it’s obsolete is putting it mildly and is only a way to try to repair the broken system. The results of those tests are, according to Daniel Pink (A Whole New Mind, 2005) in direct contradiction to the skills we need today. Those skills are for example design, story, symphony, empathy, play, and meaning.

We should be solving real problems, asking questions that matter instead of remembering and repeating facts. Adults’ accomplishments are linked far more strongly to their creativity than IQ (source) and we should be celebrating diverse knowledge and interest instead of trying to standardize knowledge and skills.

I wonder if schools would finally change their direction if we designed a new standardize test that wouldn’t measure numeracy, science, and literacy but empathy, creative thinking and communication skills... Maybe that is all we need.

Final thoughts

All the education systems on the planet are being reformed, but I don’t think reform is what we need. We need a revolution and change the education system into something else. It isn’t an easy task, but as S.E. Phillips once said: “Anything worth having is worth fighting for.”

Doing something new and getting poor results on the old test shouldn’t surprise anyone. What is the point of doing something new and different if we get the same results on standardized tests... then we might as well just do factory schooling, conform and comply.

“If I had asked the people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses” – Henry Ford

That is exactly what we are doing today. We are asking our students to remember more, write better and repeat faster than before... just like we wanted the faster horse when really we should be asking for the car. Sure the car wasn’t better than the horse in the beginning and our education system won’t be perfect either. It will never be perfect, it should be constantly evolving and we should strive to make it better every day.

I don’t know what a perfect education system looks like, and don’t think it even exists. But I believe that if we talk, try something different, fail forward, investigate and share what we do, not only locally but globally, we can get a lot closer.

If you want to see a change in education, you should start in your own classroom.

“Education can be encouraged from the top-down but can only be improved from the ground up”

– Sir Ken Robinson

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