

# OLD SCHOOLS, NEW CHALLENGES: 21st century students in 20th century schools

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Anna was asked what she likes about her new school. Her old school, she said, was "BORING! The teachers stood up there all day and talked. I needed more hands on and more individual attention. I get a lot more done now."

Anna is one of an estimated 100,000 students in Minnesota who attend alternative schools full or part time. The strange thing is, these high schools are supposed to be for "at risk" kids – kids who have been chronically truant, have substance abuse problems or don't have enough credits to graduate on time.

Why does nearly a quarter of Minnesota's high school population end up at alternative schools? It seems that many students are finding ways to "opt" in. At the alternative school, they find individualized attention, freedom to help develop their own learning programs, and a schedule that suits their lifestyle needs – such as the need to provide financial support to their family. In short, school becomes relevant to their needs and interests.

The "problem" with public schools has been diagnosed in many ways: Lack of money. Lack of teacher training. Lack of teachers. Lack of good administrators. Lack of parental involvement. Lack of student readiness to learn. No lack of excuses.

Could it be that schooling today has lost relevance for many students?

At first blush, this may sound outlandish. But it is not about learning. Learning will always remain relevant. "Schooling" though – how we deliver teaching and learning – seems increasingly out of touch with the realities of young peoples' lives.

Using that premise, it's no surprise that many students are having trouble linking their schooling to their future. In the inner cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, the Citizens League investigated why only half of high school seniors graduate. It found that students do not see a link between their future job prospects and school.

School completion rates are not just a problem in the inner cities. Across Minnesota, fewer than 80 percent of would-be graduates in 2001 actually graduated. One in five did not complete school! The completion rate was highest for white students, at 82 percent, sinking to a deplorable 38 percent for black students.

The schools our children attend were designed to prepare kids for the "real world" of more than a century ago. We wouldn't expect a 1900s communication system, or national defense strategy, or transportation system to work well for us today. Why should we expect the old delivery systems of teaching and learning to remain effective?

A clear example is computer technology. Many children spend hours a day on a home computer but seldom use computers at school. This is significant because computer technology may be changing the way our children think.

Michael Prensky, CEO of Games2Train.com, believes that young people process information in a manner that is different from their parents' generation. He refers to young people as "digital natives" and the rest of us as "digital immigrants," arguing that assimilating technology is much the same process as assimilating a second language.

Digital Natives are used to receiving information fast. They prefer to multitask. Graphics are best before the text, not after. Instant gratification and frequent rewards help them succeed. The Digital Immigrant typically has little appreciation for such skills and continues to use teaching methods that are slow and step by step.

Prensky even suggests that the Digital Natives' new skills may physically change the brain. If Prensky is right, there is no going back – instructional methods must change to be effective.

The new technology-based economy preaches the need for lifelong learning. This implies, somehow, that learning is integrated into our lifestyles. School, however, is designed to be separate from the rest of our lives and was patterned after mass production models of the emerging industrial age.

We transport our children to large institutional buildings and put them in situations ranging from (occasionally) stimulating to (more often) virtual anonymity. While many older students have tremendous responsibilities outside of school, they are given little decision making over their own learning paths in school.

Their schedules are dependent on the skills and needs of adults and based on farm economy – with summers off and start times that totally ignore medical evidence of when teenagers learn best. And if a student has to work to support his family, too bad; school schedules are fixed.

Many of us cling to the thought that the school that worked for us will work for our kids. How many of us eagerly did our homework? Could we hardly wait to go to school in the morning?

Consider then, how kids today see school, kids who live in a faster-paced environment than we could ever have imagined when we were growing up. Growing up today is not the same as growing up 20 or more years ago. But school has changed little in comparison. How can we expect an educational system built on a society of more than 100 years ago to remain relevant to its students?