

Who should adapt: Kids to schools or schools to kids?

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The discussion about education policy is dominated by people who themselves did well in school and who think as a result that 'school' is all right the way it is and that students should just settle down and do-better in it. The students themselves – especially those who have quit or who have switched over into the 'alternative' programs – give a different view. But nobody much listens to them. The piece below was written as a plea to people in the policy discussion to pause a moment and to "doubt a little of their own infallibility" on this important question.

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A third of Minnesota eighth-graders can't pass a basic reading test and a quarter fail a basic math test. People are now asking why, and what it means. Mostly it's adults talking to each other, mostly guessing.

Why doesn't somebody ask the kids?

Nobody much asks the kids. Certainly not when it comes to deciding what to do with the K-12 system. The kids don't pay, the kids don't vote and (legally, before they're 17) the kids can't quit. So there's no real need to listen to what students think.

Still, it might be a good thing to do. The dominant idea coming through policy now is that (a) school is OK, (b) the kids are the problem and (c) it's time now to make the students learn. Set (high) standards, measure performance and don't let 'em graduate if they don't measure up.

It could be a disaster . . . because 'school' is not OK.

You won't hear that from educators, however, You can hear about that only from the kids. So it's a problem that nobody listens to kids.

Part of the reluctance is because of what kids might say.

It is fascinating to ask kids what you'd see if you could look in, unseen, on a typical class on a typical day – which of course a typical citizen (even a journalist) can't. The answers are pretty standard: You'd see the teacher talking or working with whatever kids are interested, and everybody else either talking or sleeping. It's not as bad as the classroom in *Hoop Dreams*, but it definitely is not the picture the district public relations office wants television and the newspapers to see.

A graduating senior at Saint Paul Central, Beth Fischer, wrote a letter to the Pioneer Press, published June 19. Strongly motivated to learn, she got a good education and she admired her teachers. But the problem is clear in her very revealing letter.

Most of the kids, she wrote, don't want to learn. "I saw plenty of people who did not have goals. They wandered the halls between classes. They disrespected teachers, disrupted classes and refused to do homework." The teachers were always willing to help; "and not just on the fifth floor, either (the high-level math floor). I spent the first four hours on the second floor (the shops, gyms, home-ec, recording studios, etc., signifying the 'dumb jocks' and gangs)." But "too many kids my age simply don't care".

Why not? Whose fault is that? What can/should be changed; the kids or the schools? (See "Arrange school so students *want* to learn", MN Journal, November 16, 1999.)

It's popular these days, especially among educators, to lay the blame on rotten kids, rotten parents and rotten society. And there is truth in this. The unprecedented prosperity after 1945 produced a shift from (per Daniel Yankelovich) "the ethic of self-denial" to "the ethic of self-fulfillment". That generation created a very different set of values – about work and responsibility, about dress and behavior, and a deep cynicism about institutions. All this was powerfully reinforced by the electronic media.

This culture of commercialism, permissiveness, drugs, sex and media puts terrible stress on the kids now in their school years. Misti Snow runs the MindWorks project for the Star Tribune. She asks kids questions; they write answers, which the paper publishes. "Over the last 13 years I've read more than a half-million letters from students, first grade to 12th, she says, "and the picture has grown increasingly dark. Many adults either ignore or don't realize the complexities of children's lives today". Reviving Ophelia, a book about the difficulties facing teen-aged females – many related to the atmosphere in schools – has been on the New York Times bestseller list for more than a year.

The peer pressures of the youth culture work powerfully against doing well in school – especially in the African American community.

Despite this, many students who are motivated do well. But for more and more kids, especially in inner cities, the old methods of traditional school - the teacher filling the student's empty head with knowledge – do not work. Courses and classes, reading and listening, assigned low-grade work that has little visible relation to their real life, given little scope for their own interests or responsibility for their own learning – that is what the system is built to do. And the prevailing notion is that the kids should adapt to the system.

Against this, now, others are arguing the need to adapt the system to the reality of what kids are. They argue the need – as those in 'alternative education' say – to "teach kids, not subjects". And the need to understand that on the job of learning the student must be the worker, the teachers essentially a coach.

If learning were redesigned around kids' interests, would it work? Would kids be interested? Would they learn?

In the spring of 1993 Arthur Harkins at the University of Minnesota College of Education asked 750 students in Minneapolis schools, fourth to 12th grade, to believe the new superintendent needed their ideas about what should be improved in the schools. They wrote him their suggestions.

He found that, regardless of school or social class, students want the school, the teachers and the administrators to treat them respectfully. They want clean buildings and good food. "They want to be treated the way they're treated when they go into Target," Harkins say. Or into McDonalds.

If they are, Harkins found, they will give back quality work and good effort, with good attitudes. Kids want to learn, he is convinced, and are ready for much more challenging experiences than we are giving them. A 1995 report, "What Works? Ask the Students" by the Minnesota Academic Excellence Foundation, came to the same conclusions. (For a copy call 651/297-1875.)

Kids are unmotivated now because they feel they are put down by adults in the school, not treated as customers whose opinions are important to the enterprise. Give people low-grade work to do, William Glasser argues in his book The Quality School, and you will get low-grade

effort. Jack Frymier, who spent all his career in public-school curriculum and instruction, sees the same thing in the high schools in Detroit, where a huge proportion of the students simply quit. The work they are given to do is unutterably boring, Frymier says: It is hard to blame them.

James Lytle, now superintendent in Trenton NJ, saw it in the high schools in Philadelphia. He thinks those kids are worthy of the respect they want: They live very dangerous, difficult lives. He calls (see *Urban Education*, July 1992) for “client-centered, authentic, respectful organizations that build from the needs and interests of the students, not the convenience of the employees or the conventions of traditional schooling”.

But powerful forces work against this kind of reform: the sense that it is inappropriate to begin with what *students* want, the belief that only academics matter, the dominating tradition of teachers talking, the trend toward ever-larger high schools – above all, the preoccupation with ‘test scores’. The notion that passing tests is ‘good education’ can absolutely kill schools that work for kids but are *different*.

(“I’m not going to do that”, the late Gov. Rudy Perpich told associates when pressed to support more testing. “I’ve seen too many people who passed tests and failed life, and too many people who failed tests and passed life. I’m not going to make testing that important”.)

Lytle sees the district caught between what it needs to do for its students and what it needs to do to maintain its own legitimacy with the powerful groups outside that provide its financial and political support: the legislature, the business community, the foundations, the media; adults who grew up in a world so very different from the world in which kids live today. The two imperatives conflict. Required to choose, the district protects its legitimacy, trading off the interests of its students.

As Minnesota heads into a debate driven especially now by concerns about the inner cities, it will be critical to know whether student performance really can be raised within the traditional course-and-class model (in which technology is of little help) or whether success requires a shift to a system of individualized learning (for which technology is imperative).

But, again: Adults whose interests are deeply vested in the traditional system will not raise this issue. We will have to listen to the kids.

Won’t somebody, somewhere, do that soon?

-- Ted Kolderie

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Note: See also [Another Planet](#) by Elinor Burkett; an astonishingly candid report of the author’s year with students, teachers and administrators in the high school at Prior Lake MN. The book appeared late in 2001.