

EDUCATION TO BETTER THEIR WORLD

Chapter 1

By Marc Prensky

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We all want our kids to be educated. What’s changing is what an education is, and what “being educated” means.

— Marc Prensky

THE BOOK’S KEY MESSAGE:

If you take away only one thing from this book, please let it be this thought:

Our current education is wrong for the future *not* because we haven’t added enough technology, or because we haven’t added enough so-called 21st century skills, or because we don’t offer it to everyone equally, or even because we haven’t tried hard to incrementally improve it.

Our current K–12 education is wrong for the future because it has—and we have—the wrong ends or goals, in mind. Up until now, education has been about improving individuals. What education should be about in the future is improving the world—and having individuals improve in that process.

Chapter 1: What's Happened

JUST AT A TIME when “academic” education has spread around the globe, and we are struggling mightily to bring every kid into it, our world—and the things our kids are capable of doing in it—are changing radically.

Because the capabilities of our present and future kids are now so different, the education that we have universally been offering them throughout the world is no longer appropriate for the times in which they and their posterity will live. To succeed in the future, today's and tomorrow's young people require a different kind of start in the world—a different primary and secondary (K–12) education than the world now offers them.

Our kids now need an education that is far more connected and real than in the past—an education that gives them not only knowledge, but also provides them with empowerment and agency. They need an education whose ends are not just to improve themselves, but rather to improve the world they live in.

The outlines of this new and better education are now in the process of emerging in the world. At its core, it is ***an education whose ends are to empower kids to improve their own world, starting when they are students***. Although this new education does not yet exist anywhere in its entirety—and will continue to emerge and evolve—its main elements are now showing up around the globe in more and more places in the ideas and practice of a growing number of individuals and groups. This book's purpose is to describe and highlight this new educational paradigm.

This emerging education benefits all of us—far more than the education of today. It benefits our kids more by enabling them to think more effectively (and far more practically) than our current education does, and, in addition, it empowers our kids to act, relate, and accomplish effectively in the world. It offers young people not just the pride and joy of real-world accomplishment, but all the self-confidence that comes with it. It arms kids who walk in an employer's door, or who apply to college, not just with a transcript of grades, but with a résumé of completed, real-world accomplishments.

It's also an education that benefits the world far more than the academic K–12 education of today. It benefits employers because they will get better prepared workers from the start. It benefits local and global society by unleashing a huge, as-yet-untapped potential world-improving force, as it elicits from our school-age kids real, implemented solutions to the existing problems and needs of our world.

Most important, it's an education that creates adults—future citizens—who already have experience, from their education, in finding and implementing real solutions to

real problems. This is something that our current education not only does not do, but doesn't even *try* to do.

In this book, I offer my readers—who I hope will include a wide variety of people interested in education, from government leaders and politicians to educational policymakers, to parents, educational innovators, current and aspiring superintendents, school administrators and principals, graduate students of urban government and educational policy, teachers and teacher educators, members of the general public interested in and invested in providing children with the right education for our present and their future, and most importantly, many young people themselves—a new and alternate vision and perspective on how we can and should educate our offspring in their early (i.e., K–12) years. My goal is to convince you that a different kind of education is needed, that the vision and implementations of that vision are emerging, and that there is, in fact, a real and starkly different alternative—a far better one—to our current academic K–12 education. So much so that the two alternatives deserve very different names: the “Academic Model” of individual achievement in a narrow range of subjects (which is what we currently have) and the “Empowerment to Better the World Model” of liberating the newly acquired power of students to accomplish projects that improve their world (which is what is needed and where I believe we are going). Whether, as a world, we stick to academics for our students, or move to empower our kids to better their world, will have a profound impact on our future.

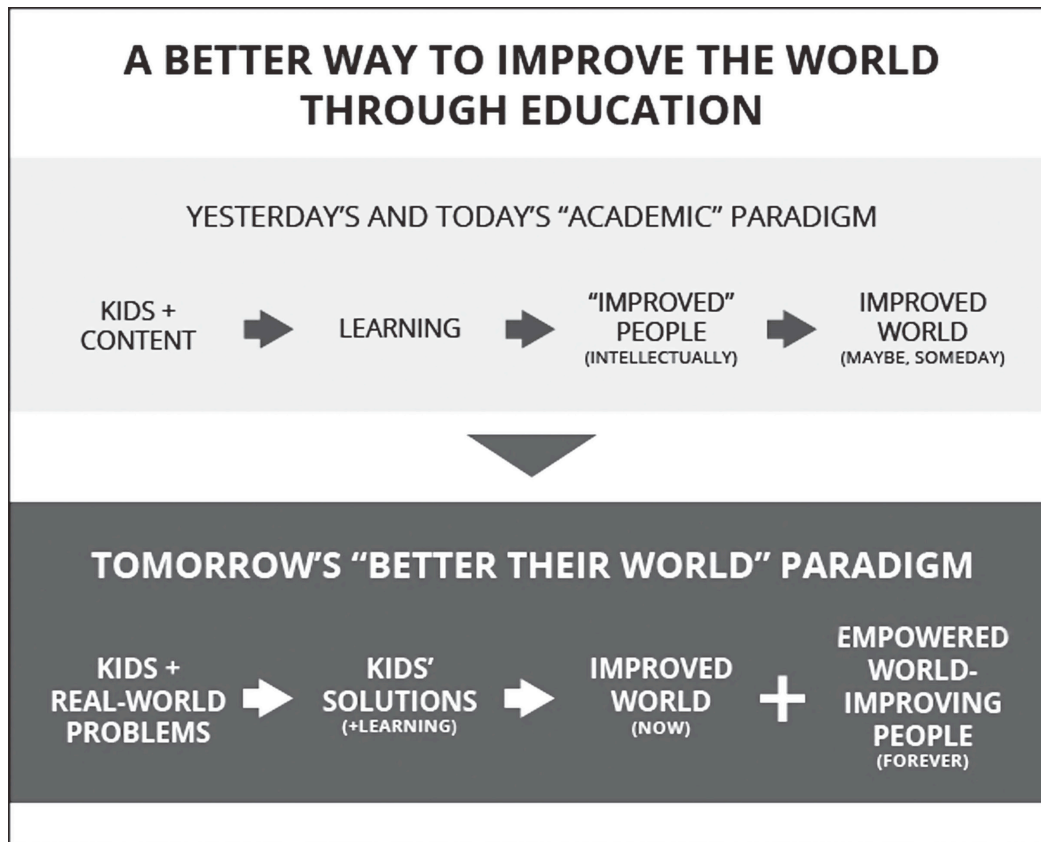
A BETTER APPROACH TO WORLD IMPROVEMENT

Improving the world has always been, of course, an *indirect* goal of education; but for some time it has become more of a by-product.

In the academic paradigm of education, we begin by putting students together with “content,” hopefully producing some learning. Those students who learn become “better” people (almost entirely in an intellectual sense). The big bet of academic education—and our profound hope—is that those improved people will someday—typically long after their education—go out and improve the world.

But now we have available a much more direct means for our young people to reach the goal of improving their world— a goal they increasingly have and articulate. In this new, evolving educational paradigm we begin by putting students together not with content, but with problems. Not with problems educators make up, but with problems that the kids themselves perceive in their own world, both locally and globally. School then becomes about finding and implementing solutions to those real-world problems in ways that fully apply the strengths and passions of each kid—with the “content” being whatever, in a wide variety of realms, is needed along the way. The short-term positive result of this is *a better world immediately*. But the long-term result is far more

powerful: We produce a population of adult citizens who have been empowered, by their education, to actually create solutions to real-world problems. Those adults will therefore go on creating real, world-improving solutions for the rest of their lives: becoming, in the language of educator Zoe Weil, “Solutionaries.”



VISION VS. PRACTICE

This book is primarily about “vision” rather than “practice,” and there is a very particular reason for that—what is needed at this point is a major shift in vision and mindset in the world about what K–12 education should be. It is crucial that all of us understand this need and think carefully about the bigger picture of change in the world, and how education must adapt.

Some people shift their mindset only after seeing numerous examples. This volume offers a number of real-world examples that are paradigmatic and indicative of things to come. It will be followed by a companion volume, describing in more detail the people and places moving toward that vision, and providing practical advice about various ways to get there.

In this book, I want to describe to readers—in all of the groups mentioned above—the vision of just what this better, emerging alternative education is. I hope to convince you *why* the new alternative is better, to briefly introduce to you some of the people who are already thinking and moving in these new directions, and to outline how, despite education’s enormous resistance to change, we can get to this new education—to the immense future benefit of everyone in the world, both young and old.

Whether you are a leader, parent, educator, politician or student reading this, I hope to inspire you to join the movement toward a different and better K–12 education throughout the world.

WHY NOW?

The need for a new model of K–12 education stems, almost entirely, from the new and growing capabilities of our young people in the world, and our need to help our kids direct these new capabilities in positive ways. There are, no doubt, many ways to do this, but one way seems to be naturally emerging “bottom-up” in many places—the accomplishment of real, world-improving projects by school-age kids. The fact that so many of our kids are now capable of doing real, world-improving projects, in so many powerful new ways, is a new phenomenon in the world; one that our current education was not at all designed to encourage or help. So it is time for us to take a new and different approach.

A NEW PERSPECTIVE

A shift in vision and perspective is what lies at the root of any change, and that is what is really needed in K–12. And, of course, it must be followed up by new practices. But since all of us who are educated received the old-model academic education in some form, it is often hard for us to even *conceive* of something very different. We have not just been told, but been shown, from our youth, over many years, what a K–12 education is. When we hear of a different approach, many of us find it hard to see the new alternative as better, or to abandon much of the past. But it is crucial that we do so.

Our current K–12 education takes many forms in different places, but it has, at its core, only one unique proposition—to make individuals more effective at thinking (and not, for example, at action, relationships, or real-world accomplishment). No one disputes the importance of good thinking. But what has been lost over time is not just our success in making thinking happen effectively, but, more importantly, the narrowness of that mission in the scheme of all the things we want and need for our kids. It is also far from all that our kids themselves want—or need to be good at—to succeed in the world and to become the people they desire to be. Effective thinking—important as it is—is only a fraction of what kids need.

Reforms and attempts to improve our K–12 education also take myriad forms. But today too many of these are really only incremental changes to the old academic, “thinking-only”-based vision of education, which itself is no longer enough. Now, fortunately, we see a new path emerging—empowering our kids to better their world. And we see more and more people not only eager to take this new road, but already embarked upon it.

The coming implementations of the “Empowerment to Better Their World” vision will also take myriad forms. But they will all have, I believe, a few basic elements in common, and it is these common elements of the new educational vision that this book is about. Because the only way to tell whether something labeled as “reform” actually is—that is, whether it moves our education to a new and better place or is just an incremental upgrade to the past—is to have in your head the vision of where we should be going.

These are the common elements I believe the new Empowerment to Better Their World vision of K–12 education includes:

1. A shift in *Ends*: From educating individuals so that they can *someday* better their world, to actually bettering their world *as* their education.
2. A shift in *Means*: From academic learning and grades, to applying one’s passion to real-world accomplishment.
3. A shift in *What We Expect All Kids to Become Good At* (i.e., our desired outcomes and essential curriculum for all): Away from math, language, science, and social studies as ends in themselves, to Effective Thinking, Action, Relationships, and Accomplishment in the real world.
4. A shift in *How We Teach*: From an academic approach of providing content and control, to an empowerment approach of coaching kids to accomplish effectively—through trust, respect, independence, collaboration, and kindness—along with powerful, and not just trivial, uses of technology.

I hope readers will leave this book with a better understanding and appreciation of how and why each of these elements is changing, how they fit together into a new vision of where K–12 education is now heading, and of the many benefits this new vision brings.

The structure of my argument, and the book, is as follows: This chapter sets out the underlying reason that we need fundamental change in our education—that our current system is wrong for the future, in ways that incremental improvements won’t fix. Chapter 2 offers a challenge to those who might want to do things differently. Chapters 3 and 4 discuss our newly empowered kids and the kind of accomplishments they are

now capable of (and eager to do). Chapter 5 highlights what has been left out of our education for the past several hundred years—i.e. real-world accomplishment—and how we can get it back by reconnecting our two great historical educational traditions. Chapters 6 through 8 describe what the new education looks like in its broad outlines, and helps distinguish between the “achievements” of the past and the “accomplishments” needed for the future. Chapter 9 lays out a structure for a better and far more comprehensive curriculum—not delivered lesson-by-lesson, as our current curricula mostly are, but a curriculum that underpins, is learned through, and supports real-world projects.

Once we begin to share the vision and understand why it is better, the next task is, of course, to get there. Chapter 10 describes a better and more helpful role for technology in doing this. Chapter 11 outlines an evolutionary path to the future for our teachers. Chapter 12 and the conclusion to this book discuss when change will happen and the benefits that we will all derive when it does.

At its core, this book is about a new, common vision for education, particularly K–12 education. It is about how the fragmented elements of a future vision are now coming together, allowing people who want fundamental change to finally say, “I don’t choose the educational vision of the past (and today); I choose the educational vision of tomorrow.” (Or, “I don’t choose just an old (or updated) academic education for my kid (or for myself). I choose an education that Betters the World.”)

St. Augustine is reputed to have said, “In essentials unity, in all else liberty, and in all things charity.” The essentials, in this case, are the basic elements of the new common vision of K–12 education around which the world is starting to unify. The liberty is in the great multitude of implementations of this new common vision, implementations that are now emerging in a variety of different forms all over the globe. The charity—hugely important—is the fresh and more respectful way that we are, slowly, beginning to view our newly empowered kids.

*Marc Prensky is an internationally acclaimed speaker, author, and “practical visionary” in the field of education. Coiner of the term “Digital Native,” Marc currently promotes “civilization-level change” in global education, championing an emerging paradigm that more directly benefits both students and the world. Marc has spoken in over 40 countries, authored seven books, and published over 100 essays; his writing has been translated into 11 languages. He is currently the founder and Executive Director of the **Global Future Education Foundation and Institute**. Marc’s latest book, **Education to Better Their World: Unleashing the Power of 21st Century Kids** (Columbia TC Press, 2016), was awarded the 2016 Foreword INDIES Book of the Year Awards GOLD PRIZE FOR EDUCATION. Contact Marc at marcprensky@gmail.com.*