



What School
Could Be
Discussion Guide

The Big Questions (to be covered after reading the book)

What are the most important innovations your school has tried? In what ways was each effective? Have they spread? How can you encourage others to try them?

Which innovations in WSCB might benefit your school? Why? How could your school take this forward?

WSCB suggests that students thrive in peak classrooms where they develop:

Purpose: Students believe in the importance of their work.

Essential Skills and mindsets: Learning experiences foster competencies that are essential to adults (e.g., creative problem solving, critical analysis, communication, collaboration, citizenship, character).

Agency: Students create their learning experiences, set their goals, manage their progress, and evaluate their work.

Deep, retained Knowledge: Students develop real mastery of the topics they study. They can apply it, ask thoughtful questions about it, and teach others.

How well is your school doing in helping your students develop these four cornerstones? How might you improve this coming school year?

For suggested resources for online discussion and polling, check out the Resources page at the end of this discussion guide.

Chapter 1: Conventional Schools and Their Contexts

How did the high school you attend compare to Eisenhower High? How well did your high school prepare you for college? For life? Which experiences from your K12 years had the biggest positive impact on you?

The author argues that students in schools like Eisenhower excel by memorizing content, replicating low-level procedures, writing formulaically, and following instructions — a winning formula to make the Honor Roll, but a focus that diminishes life prospects in a world of innovation. What do you think? How would these students do at your school? In what ways do you think your school is preparing students for their future?

The author believes that our nation could have 50-100 million unemployed adults two decades from now. Watch this short video on The Future of Work (<https://youtu.be/HF-a-UmoRt4>). Could our democracy withstand that? What role could education play to make the future the best of times for today's children?

On a scale of 1 to 10, what level of urgency does your school community place on innovating to keep pace with the fast-changing demands of career and citizenship? How could you create a higher sense of urgency?

What holds your school back from innovating? Are these factors simply obstacles, or absolute barriers? How can you mitigate these factors?

Chapter 2: Real Gold amid Fool's Gold

In what ways is your school helping students develop a genuine sense of purpose? Or is their sense of purpose being hollowed out? If you ask students why they're doing their schoolwork, how would they respond?

What skill sets and mindsets are essential for young adults in their futures? In what ways are your students developing these essential competencies? In what ways are these essentials being diminished? Consider using EdLeader21's resources (<https://portraitofagraduate.org/>) to help your school community build consensus on the profile of your graduate.

During a typical school week, how much agency do your students have? Does student agency increase or decrease as they move from early grades to high school? How much agency do you feel your teachers have each week? What are small steps your school could take to afford students and teachers more agency?

What would convince you that someone has really learned something? What are things you've really learned? How can you ensure your students master what they study? Would you be willing to gauge retention and mastery by re-testing students on material they studied a few months ago?

This coming school year, what small steps could you take to help your students improve in developing purpose, essential skill sets and mindsets, agency, and deep, retained knowledge? What would convince you to take these steps? What can you do the first week of school to get started? Consider using this innovation playlist (<http://innovationplaylist.org>) as a resource.

Consider using a free online poll with GoogleForms or SurveyMonkey to gauge whether your teachers feel trusted. How could your school deepen this sense of trust?

Chapter 3: Prepared for What?

How would your school change if college admissions and standardized tests disappeared? The author argues that a singular focus on college-ready curriculum leaves students ill-prepared for life, career, and citizenship. Do you agree?

The author argues that hands-on, or applied, learning (e.g., vocational education/CTE) is a powerful path to understanding core principles, and would benefit all students – irrespective of college plans. Do you agree? How important is hands-on learning in your school? What could you do to elevate it? Does this video (<https://youtu.be/aIhk9eKOLzQ>) shake your faith in how much even our top students learn?

In what ways is your school preparing students for citizenship? Does this study (<https://stanford.io/2gGjag7>) concern you? How could you improve your graduates' citizenship skills? Would you be willing to ask your high-school seniors to conduct an impromptu teaching session on the U.S. Constitution to see whether they understand its role?

While some view the liberal arts as a distraction from career preparation, the author argues that they can be excellent career preparation. What do you think? How have liberal arts courses shaped your career? Does this article (<https://wapo.st/2KB2Ds8>) make you rethink the relative importance of STEM in preparing students for careers?

What would happen if the main goal of a course were to get students excited about the topic? This coming school year, would you be willing to ask students at the beginning and end of each course, “How interested are you in this subject?”

Should our schools strive to equip all high-school graduates with distinctive proficiencies that enable them to earn considerably more than the minimum wage? How would you do this? What are the drawbacks, and do they outweigh the advantages?

Chapter 4: The Ivory Tower

When you meet someone new, how much does their college pedigree influence how you regard them?

If you went to college, what experiences stood out? How much did you learn in your lecture courses? In a world where college lecture courses are available online for free, why do you think so many pay so much to attend college? Is higher education leveling America's playing field, or further tilting it?

Under what circumstances should a high-school student consider taking a gap year? A few years off? Even foregoing four-year college altogether?

What role can certificate programs and community colleges play in creating affordable, meaningful career pathways? Do you encourage your students to consider this path? Why or why not? All kids or some kids? Would you consider inviting speakers to your school who have achieved success and fulfillment through certificate programs, community college, and entrepreneurship? If you have college pennants and posters visible in your school, would you consider celebrating students who had pursued alternative paths to a fulfilling career?

Chapter 5: Letting Go

Are the parents in your school community on balance too involved, not involved enough, or appropriately involved?

If parents aren't involved enough, what steps (e.g., student-led parent/teacher conferences, public exhibitions of student work) might increase their engagement?

If parents are too involved, how can we help them realize that a micro-managed child isn't prepared to thrive as an adult?

If a student approaches you with a well-thought out plan for year-long independent study initiative, under what circumstances would you approve it? Award credit for it?

Consider encouraging your parent community to read Sir Ken Robinson's new book *You, Your Child, and School*.

Chapter 6: Social Equity

Investigate the variations in funding levels for public school districts in your state. If these allocations are inequitable, how important is it to level the playing field? Who should be responsible?

The author argues that standardized tests (e.g. state-mandated, SAT, ACT) reflect the motivation and resources of the parent, more than the child's motivation and competencies. Do you agree? What impact did these tests have on your self-image? On your students? Review some practice questions (readily found online). Do these get at essential competencies?

What are your state's high-school graduation requirements, and are they tied to competencies essential for adults? How would you change them? About 20% of U.S. K12 students don't get a high-school diploma. Given the challenges of any adult in America today lacking a high-school degree, do you feel the requirements to graduate are acceptable?

What is the role of culture-based and place-based learning in your school? The author argues that our goal in language arts should be to foster a love of language in our students, and start with what engages the child. How would you view a school that prioritized hip hop over Shakespeare?

Ask your students to organize a session about how relevant they find their schoolwork. With help from the "Try A Project" album on the Innovation Playlist (<http://innovationplaylist.org>), engage your students in telling you what they want to learn, and take action accordingly.

Chapter 7: Human Potential

The author argues that NCLB and standardized policies have pushed our schools to focus on ranking human potential, not developing it. What should the balance be? What is the balance at your school? How can you better help your students to develop their distinctive potential?

What should be the role of work-based experiences (e.g., internships, real-world projects, job shadowing) in a child's education? Is this something for 'some' kids or all kids? How important is this in your school? What are small steps you could take this coming school year to help your students connect their learning to the real world?

Chapter 8: Doing (Obsolete) Things Better

What is your view of education reform policies that push for higher test scores and more high-school graduates going to four-year college? Do you agree with Arne Duncan's defense (<https://wapo.st/2NvgwGd>)? Or more with these teachers (<https://youtu.be/iBs2doKgaCs>)? What has been gained and lost with this focus? Do you agree with the author that this reform-agenda focus threatens our democracy?

Chapter 9: Doing Better Things

If you were trusted to design an accountability framework for your district, what would it look like? How could you ensure outsiders that your accountability approach is authentic?

On balance, are the schools in your community “doing obsolete things better,” or “doing better things”?

Chapter 10: It Takes a Village

How can you energize your community to support your innovations?

How could local businesses and non-profits enhance the learning of your students? What initial steps could you take this school year to help make this happen?

Could your school organize its own “Billy Madison Project”? Invite representatives of your community to spend a day in the shoes of a student — either by shadowing a student (shadowastudent.org) or participating in a special day you organize.

Could you engage your entire community in a celebration of reimagined education, as they’re doing with Remake Learning (remakelearning.org) in Pittsburgh?

The Big Questions

Let's revisit the questions about the alignment of student learning with peak principles. Consider having your summer reading group respond to the questions below. In the fall, consider having your entire community (faculty, administration, parents, and students) respond.

What are the most important innovations your school has tried? In what ways was each effective? Have they spread? How can you encourage others to try them?

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How well is your school doing in helping your students develop these four cornerstones? How might you improve this coming school year?

To enhance peak in your classrooms this coming school year, consider:

1. A back-to-school welcome note that includes Sir Ken Robinson's TED Talk (https://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity),
2. An autumn community screening of Most Likely to Succeed (mltsfilm.org), followed by
3. A thoughtful community process to define your profile of a graduate (<https://portraitofagraduate.org/>)
4. Exploring WSCB's Innovation Playlist (innovationplaylist.org) – small steps leading to big change

Most Likely to Succeed Discussion Guide

After your community watches MLTS, discuss these questions:

Do you agree with the film's assertion that our country needs to re-imagine education, as we did in 1893, or is the status quo more-or-less satisfactory?

What do you admire about the challenges faced by these students? Are these more-or-less similar to, or quite different from, the challenges faced by children in your school?

In what ways is your school better than the school featured in the film (HTH), and what aspects of HTH would be beneficial to your school?

Do you think this is an optimistic or pessimistic film?

The perfect time for your community to collaborate to build consensus on which skills and mindsets are essential for your students is in a discussion immediately after viewing MLTS. Consider using EdLeader21's resources (portraitofagraduate.org) to define your north star.

Additional Resources

Book Club/Online Discussion Tools

1. Our Own Book Club: This allows members to create a private group, take notes on books, and have private discussions about them. The dashboard will always show the latest comments on the discussion thread so members will be kept up to date, and it's also possible to set custom reminders. <https://www.ourownbookclub.com>

2. Slack: This is another option for book clubbing. Some are starting to use Slack to create “bookclub channels” and have organized book studies. Slack is a web-based tool that brings conversations together in one place. There are potentially more options with Slack, but it might be a touch less user-friendly. www.slack.com

3. WhatsApp: WhatsApp is fantastic for discussions threads, and may be easier to keep track of than Facebook (though this is also very popular). WhatsApp allows people to scroll up to see messages they've missed, and reply to specific messages at any time. Works around the globe. With WhatsApp, it's also possible to record voice messages as part of the discussion, even several minutes long. Also allows for photos and video. <https://www.whatsapp.com>

4. Twitter (Slow Chat): This is probably the easiest and most popular. Just create your own hashtag and then do the Q and A the same as a Twitter Chat. Rather than a real-time chat with participants interacting at the same time, the slow chat is asynchronous so people can respond at their leisure.

5. Voxer: This is also a popular option and another asynchronous format. The moderator creates a Voxer Group and coordinates a weekly discussion. The handy thing about this is that up to 500 people can be a part of the discussion. <https://voxer.com/index.html>

Polling Tools

6. GoogleForms: GoogleForms is a free tool offered by Google for creating polls, surveys and other simple shareable forms. You must have a Google account to create a form, but you can have an unlimited number of people respond to your poll or survey, and you can set it up so the respondents can see the percentages after they answer. <https://www.google.com/forms/about/>

7. SurveyMonkey: With a free account, you can create a poll or survey of up to 10 questions, with unlimited responses. <https://www.surveymonkey.com/>