


4 Non-Negotiables for Schools

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12/17/2016



_more than better students. better people.

As my daughter just passed her fourth month in this world, it is amazing to see how curious she is about the world. Her wide eyes seemingly notice everything around her, and watching her try new things, the notion that children are born curious and learners, has only been re-emphasized in watching her development.

This has made me think a lot about what I want school to be for her, and for all students right now. This post on [“Characteristics of a Great School”](#), inspired me to try my own hand to solidify my thoughts on the topic. Although many people that I know that become parents, change their views on schools, I think mine have been reaffirmed in what I believe is important. Although I have some ideas below, I would love to hear your thoughts as well.

1. They are a welcoming and warm environment. As someone who goes into schools often, I can get a feeling of the culture within a few minutes. Whether it is talking to the secretary, or seeing what is on the walls when I walk into the building, the culture permeates through all pores of the building. In my own experience as a student, one of my favourite people in school was the custodian. He went out of his way every day to talk to the students, learn about them, and have a good relationship. Every adult makes every child feel important, whether it is making connections with them during supervision, or acknowledging them as you pass them in the hallway. I believe this starts with the principal, but it is something that should be expected from all staff. Learn names, make kids feel welcome and valued, and create a space where students want to be. Without this, the other factors don't matter much.

2. They develop students as good people and learners. Building on the above point, it is imperative that we not only develop kids as learners, but as great people. Many would argue that this is the role of the parents/guardians at home, and although I agree it is imperative at home, it is not the responsibility of either home or school, it is that we develop both. It truly takes a village. In this awesome video (below) of students learning to speak english by connecting with seniors in a retirement home in Chicago, it ends beautifully with this quote, “...more than better students. better people”. As I have always said, if schools only teach students the curriculum, we have failed them. This is not to say that people and students will not make mistakes, but that they develop empathy and understanding for others, and learn to become considerate and kind for others as well. As you can see below, both becoming a learner and a better person, can be taught at the same time.

3. They model the learning they expect from their students. One of my favourite quotes that I have heard recently is, “We expect innovation from every organization except the ones we work in.” (Unknown)¹ As many

people discuss, the continuous growth that is expected from all professionals, should be expected from educators as well. I have seen a tremendous growth in schools in the past five years, and I think the biggest reason for this is access to one another. There are no better people to learn from regarding any profession, than those currently working within the profession, and with so many educators at all levels sharing what they are doing, there has been a significant [shift](#) in what is happening in many schools. As teachers expect students to grow and become comfortable with change, this needs to be modelled in what we do everyday. [Harold Jarche](#) shared this quote with me from [David Shaffer](#);

A professional is anyone who does work that cannot be standardized easily and who continuously welcomes challenges at the cutting edge of his or her expertise.¹¹

Educators need to put their own learning at the forefront to ensure that schools go beyond being relevant to students, but immerse students in the reality of their current world, while preparing them for the future.

4. They stoke curiosity, not extinguish it. School should not be the end of learning, but only part of the beginning. Do [our students](#) develop an insatiable curiosity to grow, ask questions, challenge ideas, create, innovate, collaborate, and become the “[problem finders and solvers](#)” now and in the future? When some adults say to me, “young people are just smarter with technology”, I tell them directly, “not at all...they are just more willing to try.” My fear is that willingness to poke around, ask questions, and press buttons to see what happens, eventually is “schooled” out of them. [As Amanda Lang shares in her book, “The Power Of Why: Simple Questions That Lead to Success”](#), curiosity leads to intelligence:

Curiosity is, therefore, strongly correlated with intelligence. For instance, one longitudinal study of 1,795 kids measured intelligence and curiosity when they were three years old, and then again eight years later. Researchers found that kids who had been equally intelligent at age three were, at eleven, no longer equal. The ones who’d been more curious at three were now also more intelligent, which isn’t terribly surprising when you consider how curiosity drives the acquisition of knowledge. The more interested and alert and engaged you are, the more you’re likely to learn and retain. In fact, highly curious kids scored a full twelve points higher on IQ tests than less curious kids did.

We do not need to spark the fire of curiosity of kids in school; they show up curious from day one. We just need to be sure that we fan the flame, and not extinguish it.

As we often talk about “21st Century Schools”, and preparing students for the future, I think the above list is just as applicable today as it was when I went to school. The world just looks different and as the rest of the world changes along with it, schools need to ensure that these foundational ideas do not become obsolete by depending upon the same delivery that has been used years prior. Schools should not only embrace change, but if we are to stay relevant, they must also constantly create it for the sake of students today, and in the future.