

Work, Learning, and Citizenship in the 21st Century

A REVIEW OF *THE GLOBAL ACHIEVEMENT GAP* BY TONY WAGNER.

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In *The Global Achievement Gap*, Tony Wagner presents a disruptive and provocative argument that high schools are not only failing, they are obsolete. He questions what it means to be an educated person in the 21st century, what good teaching looks like, and how to assess deep learning. His call to action is based on significant world changes that represent enormous challenges to the education system: (i) the rapid evolution of a knowledge economy that changes the world of work, (ii) the rapid increase in the amount and availability of online information, and (iii) the increased impact of media and technology on how young people learn and relate to the world. Wagner examines the implications of global changes for teaching, testing, schooling, and motivating today's students.

Based on research with business leaders, he proposes seven survival skills for high school students: critical thinking and problem solving; collaboration across networks and leading by influence; agility and adaptability; initiative and entrepreneurialism; effective oral and written communication; accessing and analyzing information; curiosity and imagination. Rich narratives from corporate and educational contexts illustrate these new basic skills for 21st century work, learning and citizenship.

Wagner confronts a perception gap associated with achieving and non-achieving schools by demonstrating how the former are just as broken as the latter. Graduates from top high schools are good at memorizing facts and taking tests, but struggle to apply what they know to new situations. Wagner criticizes high school math, science, and history for bearing little family resemblance to the disciplines of mathematics, the sciences, and the social sciences.

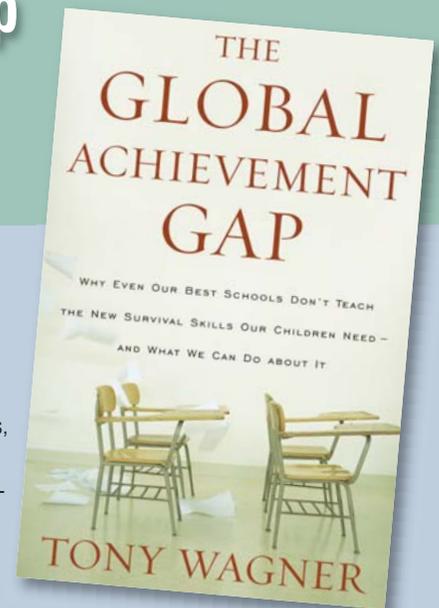
High schools that aim to graduate students who are thoughtful, engaged, and educated citizens cannot achieve this vision via content-delivery, test preparation, and relentless testing. Rather than presenting a philosophical treatise on what schools should be like, Wagner takes us on a learning walk through several effective and successful high schools that employ the principles expressed in his seven survival skills.

He contrasts old and new worlds of schooling. For many young people, high school is a boring wasteland disconnected from the interactive Web 2.0 reality of their lives and interests outside of school. His description of old school is familiar – lectures, textbooks, and memorizing facts for multiple-choice exams. In-depth and engaging classroom discussions about current issues and authentic improvement are overshadowed by test prep that turns our children off of learning.

Arguments about how pervasive use of the Internet and digital technology has transformed the way young people learn beyond the classroom, and how untouched high school teaching has been by these societal changes, are persuasive and well-referenced. Social technologies like del.icio.us, flickr, Skype and YouTube, and desktop tools like iTunes, GarageBand, and iMovie transform how teenagers connect, interact, congregate, contribute, and communicate outside of school. This Net Generation uses wikis, blogs, Facebook, and digital video games for creativity and connectedness with others, but there is little meaningful use of these team building and connectivity tools in high school.

Wagner argues that young people crave interaction and meaningful work; they want to build knowledge and relationships, not memorize information. Twenty-first century work is about asking the right questions, participating in collaborative teams, and creating new knowledge, so high school students require opportunities to develop the seven survival skills in digitally rich and net-connected high school spaces.

The Global Achievement Gap offers a thoughtful critique of standardized achievement tests and acknowledges the negative impacts of the high-stakes testing culture on the teaching profession and school systems. Teachers are just as imprisoned in the cultural legacies of schooling as students. Wagner claims teachers are doing exactly what school jurisdictions have asked them to do, which is to raise achievement scores. The problem arises when teachers merely teach to the test rather



than educating for deep understanding or designing learning opportunities that are applicable to real-life situations.

While assessment strategies vary, most Canadian provinces have invested heavily in regular tests of high school student achievement in literacy and mathematics at the school, district, and provincial levels. Many tests focus on basic cognitive skills, recall, and recognition, as opposed to application, critical thinking, and problem solving. We are valuing memory over knowledge building. Wagner urges us to control our unhealthy appetite for more standardized tests and to rethink our approach. He argues that educational research has an important collaborative role to play in rethinking high schools, designing learning communities, and transforming teaching into a knowledge-building profession. In short, making schools work for students *and* for teachers.

Canadian educators who risk innovation in high schools and question the standardized testing status quo will appreciate Wagner's principled approach to re-designing schools. He poses good questions that offer a fruitful starting point for student teachers, graduate students, practicing teachers, and educational leaders to interrogate current practices in high schools and to begin to make the widespread changes that are needed. |

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