A few years ago, I told the Relentless documentary series that “we have to move away from the archaic educational process where we build schools on square boxes and kids fill these square boxes. The world isn’t a square box anymore; times have changed, kids have changed, and we have to move with that.”

The more I connect with educators, administrators, and schools across the country through the NAESP Center for Innovation Leadership (CIL), the more I’ve come to realize that it’s not the box that matters so much, but rather what’s happening in the box that makes the difference.

Inside the box, the days when students sit, receive, and regurgitate information are gone. Today’s students live and operate in an entrepreneurial world where they need to take the information they’re taught and apply that new knowledge; the skill set is in the application. Inside the box, learning has shifted from static, whole-group learning to personalized learning experiences for individual students.

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Business leaders tell us that the most important skills students need by the time they graduate are the ability to communicate effectively and skillfully, and to collaborate and connect with people across cultures, languages, communities, and borders.

Today’s students—the next generation of world leaders, problem-solvers, inventors, dreamers, and critical thinkers—face the massive task of overcoming challenges that we once considered to be the province of the far future. That future has come quickly for kids inside the box; they will be tested by issues such as poverty, trauma, hunger, unrest, and diminished natural resources.

Many of these looming challenges can be looked at as global, big-picture, and extreme—and perhaps beyond the scope of what’s happening inside the box. But the reality is that we need to start ensuring that our schools, teachers, and leaders are adequately equipped to assume the challenge of preparing our students to be ready, willing, and able to take them on.

Inside the box, we need to be thinking about how a curriculum is delivered and consumed, as well as rethink what professional development and leadership preparation classes look like and what their output is in terms of career readiness. Are they sufficient preparation to tackle the obstacles that are increasingly more “here now” than “future possibility”?

Inside the box is where we need to be proactive instead of reactive to change, innovation, and progress. Too often in education we are waiting for permission to take risks due to the fear of getting something wrong or upsetting the status quo. But our students are growing up in a world where innovation moves faster than ever before. By the time the latest and greatest new idea is in practice, the next one has already rendered it obsolete.

Many innovations happening inside the box attempt to break down educational silos and create an environment that’s conducive to problem-solving, critical thinking, collaboration, and communication. Innovating in these areas isn’t always sexy or cool; instead, it’s often best represented by simple solutions that include hard work, passion, and teamwork with a focus on children.

While we all hope to be well-paid, young people graduating from college today are driven by the satisfaction of being a part of something special—a movement. What’s great is that in the quest for innovative practices within the box setting, we can own the outcome: We can all be a part of the solution together, creating an environment conducive to change and improvement.

Think about your box and what happens inside it:

- Does it foster innovation and future-readiness?
- Does it ensure students are equipped with the tools they need to lead in the future?
- Does it protect and advocate for students’ individuality and identity?

We can’t control the noise outside the box, but we can control what takes place inside it, and we have a responsibility to explore innovative practices with all staff and children. Let’s lift each other up, make each other better, and ensure that we are the ambassadors of a better education inside the box.

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