The Future Is Now

Ten realities for educators and communities.

By Gary Marx

Around the world, as humanity moves at warp speed through the second decade of the 21st century, powerful trends are triggering seismic shifts in every institution, including education. As educators, it's up to us to understand and take on these persistent, real-world challenges. That type of future-forward leadership sends a clear message that our schools are of this world, not separate from it. Compelling education unfolds in the here and now, but it's focused on the future and the world our students will inherit.

Take a look at these 10 big-picture realities shaping our communities, our world, our schools, and our students' future. We can ignore them, but these realities aren't going away anytime soon.

Reality 1:
Every institution is going through a reset.

In today's world, we need to get beyond simply asking ourselves, "When will things get back to normal?" The question should be, "What will the new normal look like?"

Just a few years ago, as we moved into the Great Recession, Jeff Immelt, chief executive officer of General Electric, said this: "The economic crisis doesn't represent a cycle. It represents a reset. It's an emotional, social, and economic reset."

Today, we are moving into the early stages of critical mass in a Global Knowledge/Information Age. The status quo is fast becoming unsustainable. It may even be a ticket to obsolescence. In a world morphing before our eyes, our education system needs to confidently, thoughtfully orchestrate learning, stay ahead of the curve, and help students become knowledgeable, resilient, and adaptable lifelong learners.

Reality 2:
Lifelong learning is available anytime, anyplace, any way, and at any pace.

Educators often dance between taking research-based approaches and of-the-moment solutions to meet immediate classroom needs. To keep our schools viable, we need to pay attention to that longer-term research but, to keep up with our information-rich world, we also have to be flexible and adaptable. In short, we need to be nimble enough to be both data-driven and sensor-driven.

As orchestrators of active, project-based, learning through inquiry, educators curate, create, and procure content that's aligned with learning goals. Ideally, we should tap the internet and social media plus the genius of our own talent pool to create lessons day-to-day and minute-to-minute.

Reality 3:
Everything that happens in the world has implications for education.

In turn, everything that happens in education has implications for the world. What's happening on this third planet from the sun is stunning. Consider that the world population is expected to increase from 6 billion in 2000 to 9.7 billion in 2050—more than a 50 percent increase in 50 years. Mandarin Chinese and Spanish join English as our planet's three most popular languages.

If it hasn't already, international learning should be among our basics. We can embrace the accelerating need for global education or deny it, but it isn't going away. If, as a nation, community, or education system, we don't stay ahead of the curve, we will surely be left behind. We'd better pay attention to the importance of international relationships, world history and politics, cultural understanding, languages, and diplomatic skills.

Reality 4:
The future is in school today.

Want to see the future? Just walk into a school. Kindergarteners who started school in the fall of 2016 will turn 65 in about 2076 and 89 in about 2100. High school seniors, the class of 2017, will hit 65 in about 2064.

Because people are living longer, on average, we now have about six generations coexisting in our communities, each with a tendency toward certain values, expectations, and shared life experiences. Millennials, who will be between 47 and 68 years of age in 2050, will be in prime time. Expect them to have a profound impact on leadership and lifestyles. As parents, Millennials will have exponentially increasing expectations for their students and their schools. They'll insist on instant communication and an opportunity to voice ideas, opinions, and concerns. They'll want to hear loud and clear that we're all in this together.

Reality 5:
People entering the workforce today can expect to hold up to 11 jobs and go through several career changes during their working lives.

About 60 percent of jobs 10 years from now haven't been created yet, according to Thomas Frey, longtime jobs editor for The Futurist.

Employability skills are an innate part of education. Career awareness starts at an early age. Yet, seeing education solely as a route to a job in the current economy comes up short. We're also producing what we hope will be contributing members of a civil society who live interesting and fulfilling lives.

During the lifetimes of our students, many jobs, careers, even industries will be replaced. Lifelong learning, continuing education, and personal adaptability and resilience could be the best guarantee that if a job becomes obsolete, we don't.

Reality 6:
If we don't constantly take the initiative to create the education system we need, someone else will.

Too often, as educators, we've become accustomed to compliance, waiting for the next decision to come down from federal or state government. Now is the time for initiative. The Common Core is under construction. The federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has been pushing greater decision-making authority to state and local levels. Let's take the opportunity to help shape how education policy works in practice. Rather than waiting for someone else to tell us how we'll be held accountable, let's pull together as educators and communities to suggest how we would prefer to be responsible for the education of our students.

Reality 7:
If we manage our diversity well, it will enrich us.
If we don't manage it well, it will divide us.

By 2043, fewer than half of all people living in the United States will be non-Hispanic white.

Since the fall of 2014, Latino, African-American, Native, and Asian students in public K-12 classrooms have surpassed the number who are non-Hispanic white. Beyond these demographic shifts, the notion of diversity has stretched to include social and economic factors, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, political and religious affiliation, neural diversity, and more.

As we face escalating demographic change, a major challenge for any community is maintaining social cohesion, the glue that holds us together. Our students will need to be ready to thrive in a highly diverse nation and world.

Reality 8:
Gross inequity will be increasingly seen as unfair, unconscionable, and unsustainable.

More than 20 percent of children live in poverty and 40 to 50 percent live in low-income families. Teachers and administrators are among the first to see the impact of poverty on students' ability to learn and thrive. We need to strive for equal opportunity and maintain high expectations for all of our students. In a fast-changing, interconnected world, all of us need to embrace an understanding of languages, cultures, and multiple other differences. We can't afford the cost of neglect. When we neglect children, we all pay for it. Morally and economically, that cost is invariably greater than the up-front investment.

Reality 9:
Polarization is standing in the way of progress.

Shouting matches have too often replaced civil discourse. To be good citizens, our students (and all of us) need to exercise empathy and ethics, respect others despite differences, resolve conflict peacefully, and listen to others' ideas.

Let's face it: We can produce students who go on to be great politicians, business people, mathematicians, scientists, or physicians. But, if they breach a code of ethics or can't respect differences, all bets are off. If we want to produce good role models, we simply must build students' understanding of ethical principles. We can reinforce those lessons with real-life stories, case studies, role-playing, and current events. The very process is a ticket to real-world education.

Reality 10:
Future-focused leadership will be essential if we hope to prepare students for life in a fast-changing world.

Great organizations have at least two things in common: first, they are always trying to get better; second, they always have an eye on the future.

In my never-ending research as I write books and speak worldwide, I have asked hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people how they would describe "future-focused leaders." Here are some of those descriptions: creative, imaginative, a definer, curious and optimistic, visionary, passionate, active listener, nurturer, trend-spotter and trendsetter, conceptual and brainy, teacher, mobilizer, intellectual leader, implementer, manager, and a problem-solver.

Future-focused leadership doesn't just begin and end with us. As leaders for the future, students will need to be intellectual entrepreneurs, driven by curiosity and persistence. Our students should welcome paradox, controversy, complexity, and disruption, fully understanding that they are all part of a day's work. We're depending on today's students to conceive of new knowledge, engage in breakthrough thinking, and create an even more promising and sustainable future. Many of today's students will become entrepreneurs. What do they need to know and be able to do to be successful? Baseline, they will need to know how to manage their time and a budget plus be able to work as a member of a team. All of us can start asking questions that are basic for entrepreneurs: "What problems need to be solved?" and "What would make life better?"

Today is the promise of tomorrow, and how bright that future will be depends on our pulling together in common purpose. The starting line is here and now. **P**

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