

# Future Trends

10 big-picture realities facing school boards

Gary Marx

**S**chool board members and other education leaders have a profound impact on society. Both what they do and don't do are important. They are big-picture people who understand that education touches every aspect of human endeavor. The rate of change happening in our society can make it difficult to focus on the future of education. In doing so, they discover the virtual certainty of uncertainty.

Some of us ignore or refute the approaching avalanche of realities driven by massive political, economic, social, technological, environmental, and demographic forces shaping our future.

A few dig trenches they hope will be deep enough to protect them from the disruption, stimulation, and even the exciting rush of a world in constant motion. Inevitably, this tactic holds back their communities and their schools. While they defend the status quo, the world moves on and leaves them behind.

We stand on the shoulders of yesterday as we get our schools and students ready for tomorrow in a fast-changing world. Nostalgia is wonderful, but the past is not coming back anytime soon.

In decades of working with leaders and organizations on six continents, I've discovered that the great ones have at least two things in common: They are always trying to get better, and they always have at least one eye focused on the big-picture future.

My most recent book, *Twenty-One Trends for the 21st Century*, describes a series of forces that have implications for all of us. Those trends range from aging, diversity, and the flow of generations to personalization, the economy, jobs and careers, energy, the

environment, polarization, poverty, ethics, and work-life balance. This external scan should be a part of planning and making decisions. We protect ourselves from reality at our own peril.

These big-picture realities are drawn from decades of research and work with school boards and their associations. You may accept, question, ponder, or even dismiss the importance of each of these realities. However, whatever we decide, most of these forces will continue to become even greater drivers than they are today.

Consider the following implications of these trends for our schools and the future of our students and communities.

## THE FUTURE IS IN SCHOOL TODAY

If you want a glimpse of the future, stop by your elementary school. Those 5-year-olds who thrilled their parents and grandparents on their first day of kindergarten in the fall of 2016 will turn 65 in about 2076. Then there are the 18-year-old high school seniors, the Class of 2017. They'll turn 65 in about 2064. What we do or don't do in our schools and colleges today will have profound implications for tomorrow.

## WE ARE OF THIS WORLD

Everything that happens in the world has implications for education. It's also true that what happens in our schools has profound implications for the world. Our vision, mission, and policies prohibit, permit, or encourage education that prepares students to become productive, civil, engaged, and responsible citizens of their communities, their countries, and our planet.

## WE ARE EITHER IN TOUCH OR OUT OF TOUCH

If we understand trends and issues, people will likely say we're "in touch." If we *don't* understand trends and issues, they will likely declare that we are "out of touch." It's as simple as that. We sometimes lose our bearings because we only pay attention to those who agree with us. A narrow view can produce a divide that turns into a canyon and bring progress to a halt.

## THE FACE OF OUR NATION CONTINUES TO CHANGE

By 2043, less than half the population of the U.S. will be non-Hispanic white. Beginning with the 2014-15 school year, traditional minority students became more than 50 percent of public school enrollments. As school leaders, we understand that if we manage our diversity well, it will enrich us. If we don't, it will divide us. Our future depends on the best possible education for all students, not just for a few.

## PERSPECTIVE AND CONTEXT ARE BASIC TO UNDERSTANDING

Getting a sense of perspective to see things in context is imperative for school leaders. With a big-picture view and keen insights, we're better able to understand where we are, what is happening, and how we can develop or refine policies that strengthen future-focused strategies. Of course, true perspective depends on open minds. Trying to stuff everything into a narrow point of view doesn't work. That's why we need to make sure we are always absorbing information and ideas that help us form perspective.

## EVERY INSTITUTION IS GOING THROUGH A RESET

Like it or not, we are moving from an industrial age into a global knowledge/information age, an age of knowledge creation and breakthrough thinking. Changes, frequently driven by technology, are often quantum and exponential. With all of that said, we too often dig in our heels, insisting that the way forward is to go backward. Henry Ford democratized the automobile as we moved more deeply into the Industrial

Age. But people had to drive those early cars on bumpy buggy trails. Today, we often are faced with preparing students for a global knowledge/Information Age limited by Industrial Age, factory-style schools and mentalities. Every institution is going through a reset. Expectations will continue to change.

## PERSONALIZATION IS A KEY TO RELATIONSHIPS AND LEARNING

Each of us is a collection of abilities, talents, interests, motivations, hopes, and dreams. Our diversities range from racial and ethnic to socioeconomic, language, gender and gender identity, even neural diversity. Unfortunately, demands driven by high-stakes testing have led to a scoreboard mentality. That's the idea that progress is measured solely by a number, an average, a box score, rather than on fully educated people. (Note to our political colleagues: We need sound education policies but we can only do our very best in getting students ready for the future if we also have sound social and economic policies. We all have to do our part.)

## THE PURPOSES OF EDUCATION SHAPE OUR FUTURE

Let me suggest five purposes for education, only for your consideration. Among those purposes are: **citizenship** (creating good citizens of a family, a school or college, a community, a country, and of the world); **employability** (What will it take to be employable for a lifetime, beyond a few skills for a job that might go away tomorrow?); helping students live **interesting lives** (The more we know and the more experiences we have, the more interesting education and life become.); **releasing ingenuity** that is already there; and **stimulating thinking, reasoning, problem solving, imagination, creativity, and inventiveness**. These purposes encompass all that we teach... and even more.

## SUSTAINABILITY DEPENDS ON ADAPTABILITY AND RESILIENCE

Several words help describe what's happening in the 21st century. One of those words is convergence. For example, it's where trends converge that we discover new products and services, opportunities, and solutions

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to problems. Consider the implication of aging for technology...or energy and the environment for our personal well-being.

Another of those 21st century words is sustainability. Sometimes, sustainability is mistaken for stasis. In fact, in a fast-changing world, sustainability depends on adaptability and resilience. For those who insist on using their energy to defend an unsustainable status quo, here's a suggestion: Use that same energy to work with talented educators and the community to encourage a constant process for creating a future.

### **CHANGE IS INEVITABLE, PROGRESS IS OPTIONAL**

Surrounded by talented educators and administrators, a primary responsibility of school boards is to encourage initiative. Not every idea will work but an education system should be the most connected institution in any community, constantly creating and harvesting ideas. Rather than declaring that the sky is falling when something doesn't work, consider that we are living in an era of paradox, complexity, and constant change. They are all part of a day's work in our fast-changing world.

Many educators very proudly declare that their school system is data driven. That's commendable, but it's not enough. We also need to be sensor driven. We thrive on data but we also need to be nimble enough to solve problems and address opportunities moment-by-moment.

We generally make clear that our curriculum is aligned with our goals. On top of that, we should be sure that our goals are aligned with individual needs of our students and challenges of the 21st century. For board members, that means flexible policies.

### **WHAT CAN WE DO NEXT?**

Consider holding community conversations involving anywhere from 50 to 300 people from all parts of your constituency, including educators and some students, to think through implications of the trends for our education system. They'll consider the possible impact of these trends for what students need to know and be able to do, and be prepared to improve the quality of life in their community, the nation, and the world.

Ask them to describe an education system capable of getting students ready for life in a global knowledge/information age. Right up front, make sure everyone understands that they're focusing on the future, not holding a gripe session or a campaign event for someone's pet idea.

Superintendents and principals could convene futures councils, smaller groups of 12 to 15 community representatives with rotating memberships to involve as many people as possible. Ask participants to be trend-spotters. Harvest the wisdom. Get a sense of trends our neighbors think might have significant implications for our schools, quality of life, and economic progress.

Insist that every member of the team becomes a future-focused leader and make sure they have the tools to make it happen. Keep in mind that the future is where our schools will need to thrive and where our students will live their lives.

In the process, our education system will become known as the crossroads and central convening point for our community. We'll be breathing new life into the idea that "We're all in this together."

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OCTOBER 2016  
VOLUME 203  
NO. 5

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American School Board Journal

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# On the ROAD

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preschool to children in isolated areas



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