

It's Time to Change the "Currency of Education:" A High School Transcript *of* the Future, *for* the Future

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The Problem

For decades, high schools across the world have reduced students to the grades and test scores reported on their transcripts. The grades and test scores represent student performance on a narrow set of indicators that measure traditionally valued subjects. They assume that mastery of content knowledge is the most important indicator of likely success in further education and career.

With information available at our fingertips, 24/7, accessible just-in-time, we must question the degree to which our historical values remain the right ones for the future. Abundant research encourages us to think differently. In our world today, there is a premium placed on an individual's ability to collaborate, solve complex problems, think critically and creatively, display curiosity and be inquisitive, act ethically and responsibly, embrace sustainability, innovate, assume leadership, take initiative, be critical consumers of information, and exercise emotional intelligence. The current transcript provides little, if any, information about these skills. And worse, the misguided focus on grades, standardized tests, and admission to selective universities does little, if anything, to encourage teachers and schools to foster these qualities and skills among our youth.

The *high school transcript* is the official documentation of a student's achievement through his/her tenure in high school. Students rely on it to demonstrate their performance. Parents refer to it to validate their child's achievement. High schools value it to rank students and select valedictorians. Scholarship sponsors access it to assess qualifications and grant awards. Universities and colleges depend on it to determine eligibility and admissions. In many ways, the content of a high school diploma grants or denies access to future opportunity. In many ways, it is the "*currency of education.*"

This form of educational currency is outdated and arguably detrimental. It is preventing us – as individuals, school leaders, and nations – from shifting the focus of learning away from discipline-specific content knowledge and toward demonstration of qualities and skills necessary for advancement toward an increasingly global economy and sustainable world. We are stuck in the past. There is a great need to identify a critical leverage point that has the potential to propel us into the future.

The Solution

The world would be better served with a new kind of high school transcript – a transcript *of* the future and *for* the future, one that reports on the qualities, skills, and competencies that matter most. It's time to revamp our form of educational currency, which will serve as a powerful lever to drive the evolution in educational that our youth deserve and our society needs.

The Opportunity

The world our children will inherit is changing faster than any time in history. For our children to prosper and humankind to flourish, we need a new kind of education.

Several primary drivers currently maintain the status quo of educational systems around the world, among them: (1) standardized tests (or board exams), (2) admissions to selective universities, and (3) educational financing incentives. Very few, progressive governments (e.g., Finland) are willing to make aggressive, wholesale changes in education. Most governments have been very slow to consider changes in their systems of assessment and accountability, so we can expect that shifts in standardized tests / board exams are unlikely in the near future. On the other hand, while universities also are slow to change, in large numbers, they have acknowledged that their traditional admissions processes have limited ability to predict student success. More and more colleges and universities are experimenting with alternative paths to admissions, based less on grades and test scores, and more on demonstration of skills.

Since the high school transcript is the *currency of education*, modifying it would serve as a strategic lever to force a shift in the way students present themselves, and correspondingly, the way in which colleges and universities assess their qualifications. If we subscribe to the adage, “what gets tested, gets taught,” then we can rest assured that, over time, a change in the content and format of the high school transcript will have a *domino* effect that eventually shifts priorities of the education system, the approaches to student assessment and school accountability, the instructional methods used by teachers to promote powerful learning, the professional growth for current teachers, and pre-service training of new teachers.

Best of all, as these shifts happen, teachers will be obliged to apply pedagogical approaches that promote the kinds of skills being fostered in students – i.e., project-based learning, problem-based learning, experiential learning, entrepreneurial learning, and student-guided learning. These approaches require critical skills, such as collaboration, resource management, project planning, critical inquiry and analysis, creativity and innovation, and more. Over time, the educational community will realize that *how* students learn is more important than *what* they learn, if we want to achieve a different set of learning outcomes.

The argument is not to do away with content knowledge, but rather to prioritize skill development and let students’ projects, entrepreneurial ventures, and other learning experiences determine the content. That is to say, to become effective collaborators, students must collaborate on something; that “something” becomes the content. To become critical thinkers, students must apply critical inquiry and analysis to some issue or challenge. That issue or challenge becomes the content. It becomes the teachers’ role to skillfully facilitate learning experiences that cater to just-in-time content mastery while students simultaneously develop essential qualities, skills, and competencies.

A new kind of high school transcript – one that is *of* the future and *for* the future – would report on the qualities, skills, and competencies that the local community and larger society value most. See Appendix A for an example. Ideally, the transcript would link to a digital portfolio of student work that demonstrates the level of proficiency reported.

We need pioneering schools willing to take a stand and say “enough, already.” “We know what our community and the world demand of our children if they not only are going to survive, but thrive and lead in a global economy and sustainable world. We are committed to preparing our children for their future by presenting a transcript that reflects the qualities, skills, and competencies that matter most. We will not continue to allow our children’s education to be molded by outdated measures. The time is now!”

Taking Action

Many will agree conceptually with the ideas presented here, but for good reason may doubt that they can be implemented without inviting huge resistance from the holders of the status quo. However, there are ways by which this shift can occur without completely “upsetting the apple cart.” Below are a few strategies worth trying:

- **BUILD A NETWORK OF HIGH SCHOOLS:** Recruit high schools that
 - Agree that an alternative transcript would better serve their students and society
 - Pilot the use of an alternative transcript based on skills, competencies, and qualities
 - Devise or adapt a system of assessment and accountability that reflects the skills, competencies, and qualities represented in the new transcript
 - Train teachers on both (a) how to assess students’ skills, competencies, and qualities; and (b) how to use project-based learning and other pedagogical approaches to foster the intentional development of reported skills, competencies, and qualities
 - Participate in a longitudinal research study to evaluate student persistence, performance, and completion in postsecondary institutions, as well as relative success in the workplace
 - Agree to continue to generate traditional transcripts for those students who may need them for college admissions (until we reach a tipping point of postsecondary institutions that accept an alternative transcript – see next item)

- **BUILD A NETWORK OF POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS:** Recruit colleges and universities that
 - Acknowledge that their current methods for determining eligibility and admitting students are not yielding a cohort of students with desired skills, competencies, and qualities
 - Agree to admit at least a percentage of students based on an alternative transcript
 - Participate in a longitudinal research study to evaluate student persistence, performance, and completion – see next item

- **RESEARCH AGENDA:** Conduct longitudinal research on students who graduate from the high schools in the network to ascertain
 - Their persistence, performance, and completion at colleges and universities
 - Their relative success in the workforce

- **POLICY AGENDA:** Examine the policy landscape to
 - Recruit state and federal agencies, business associations, labor unions, and non-profit organizations interested in joining a coalition supporting use of an alternative transcript, and the many associated positive benefits
 - Identify state and federal advocates who will include support for the alternative transcript networks as a component of their ongoing awareness and advocacy campaigns
 - Approach political leaders to request the introduction of policies that will allow for waivers to current state and federal accountability systems in order to test the viability of an alternative transcript

Conclusion

Students deserve an education that fully prepares them for the demands they will face in the future. Society needs young people who possess the personal qualities and professional skills necessary to lead

in increasingly challenging times. The current education system is not meeting either of these expectations. Unfortunately, an abundance of policies, doctrines, funding mechanisms, and other forms of institutionalization protect the status quo in a way that is difficult to change.

Our history is filled with examples of innovative approaches taken by dedicated individuals and groups to break through institutionalized systems that no longer serve societal needs and open the door for a better way forward. By changing the traditional high school transcript – the currency of education – we can free ourselves from one of the codified remnants of an outdated education system and launch a new era of learning that better serves our students and society.

Appendix A:

Example of New High School Transcript

Appendix A represents an example of a new kind of high school transcript. It is fictitious, merely an invention of the author¹, but based upon a set of *Core Skills & Competencies* created collaboratively by teachers at [Green School](#) in Bali, Indonesia, during the 2015-16 academic year (and updated in December 2016 to become the [Green School Skills](#)). The *Core Skills & Competencies* initially were developed as a defined set of 12 critical skills and 50 core competencies designed to:

- Mirror the qualities, skills and competencies described in the Green School [Learning and Living Ambitions](#)
- Serve as a guide from which teachers design and plan projects, thematics, and other learning experiences
- Be developmental in nature
- Span grades K-12 in order to promote vertical alignment schoolwide
- Be cross-disciplinary to promote an integrated approach to learning

This new format for a high school transcript reports student progress on the skills, competencies, and qualities that more accurately reflect a student's readiness for future success. The indicators represent the skills, competencies, and qualities identified and valued most by community stakeholders.

About Green School:

Founded by John & Cynthia Hardy in 2008, Green School is in the jungle of Bali, Indonesia and has a vision (newly updated) to *make our world sustainable*. The campus sprawls across rolling hills with a river running through it. All of the beautifully designed structures are made of bamboo. The school is off the electrical grid, with solar- and vortex-generated power. The school gardens provide more than ample produce for lunches for students and staff. Nearly 70% of families move to Bali for the opportunity to attend Green School. The learning is predominantly project-based and increasingly student-guided, with a focus on students taking on projects with potential to *make a difference* in our families, school, community, island, and broader society. It is astounding what youth can achieve given permission and support, when needed.

¹ The author of this piece, Roman Stearns, served as a consultant to Green School in Bali, Indonesia, from April 2015 through June 2016. Prior to April 2015, as a parent volunteer, he facilitated a collaborative community-wide process (with input from 300+ stakeholders) to create the [Learning and Living Ambitions](#). Later, as a consultant to the school, he facilitated the faculty Curriculum & Pedagogy Committee to create a set of *Core Skills and Competencies* (later revised to become the [Green School Skills](#)) that are mapped to the *Living and Learning Ambitions*, but are more operational in nature than the flowery language of the *Learning and Living Ambitions*. Finally, the committee created a set of [Learning Principles](#) to guide how teachers would foster the development of the *Core Skills and Competencies* among Green School students.

Example of Alternative High School Transcript

Biographical Information

Student Name		Parent/Guardian #1	
ID Number		Email	
Gender		Phone	
Date of Birth (DOB)		Parent/Guardian #2	
Nationality		Email	
Passport #		Phone	
School Entrance Date		Home Address	
Projected Grad Date			
Grade Point Average		Total Credits	

Core Skills & Competencies

Based on 7-point scale: 1 = Beginning; 2 = Emerging; 3 = Developing; 4 = Advancing; 5 = Excelling; 6 = Professional; 7 = Expert

SKILL	DESCRIPTOR / ITEMIZED COMPETENCIES	PERFORMANCE LEVEL
Awareness	Adapt and adjust to unfamiliar circumstances, tools, and processes	5
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Be flexible and willing to try new strategies and processes 2. Try both existing and emerging technologies 3. Work effectively in a climate of ambiguity and changing priorities 4. Deal positively with praise, setbacks and criticism 	Portfolio artifacts
Adaptability	Reflect, connect, and be aware of one's self in relation to others and the world	4
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Understand how one learns best and sustain a passion for lifelong learning 6. Be mindful and stay present 7. Observe and connect with the natural world 8. Explore and understand relationships among countries, peoples, and cultures in the past, present, and future 9. Move from awareness to action 	Portfolio artifacts
Collaboration	Apply interpersonal skills to work with diverse teams, value individual contributions, and share responsibility for collaborative efforts and decisions	6
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. Be open to diverse perspectives and incorporate input into discussions and decisions 11. Contribute to, invest in, and share responsibility for accomplishing common goals 12. Resolve conflict by seeking common ground; exercise flexibility and willingness to compromise 	Portfolio artifacts
Communication	Process, organize and coherently express ideas	4
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 13. Read, listen, and view a variety of media and demonstrate understanding 14. Write / produce for a variety of purposes (style) 15. Use effective composition, literary devices, and vocabulary (quality) 16. Listen, consider, discuss, and express points of view respectfully, confidently, and passionately 17. Plan and deliver presentations and productions 	Portfolio artifacts
Creativity	Exercise creativity and inventiveness by embracing one's imagination, exploring natural curiosity, being open-minded, and considering multiple perspectives	3
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 18. Appreciate, respond to, and make judgments about works 	

	<p>19. Think divergently to explore, generate and improve upon fresh and original ideas</p> <p>20. Create, produce, perform and/or present original works</p> <p>21. Pursue passions, innovate, and convert ideas into products and services</p> <p>22. Apply examples from nature to projects and new problems that arise</p>	Portfolio artifacts
Critical Thinking	<p>Improve the quality of thinking by assessing, analyzing, and reconstructing ideas in order to inform belief and action</p>	5
	<p>23. Exercise curiosity: Inquire, ask questions that expand and deepen understanding, desire to learn more, remain open to new ideas, seek evidence</p> <p>24. Exercise skepticism: Question, evaluate credibility of sources of information</p> <p>25. Exercise humility: acknowledge and be willing to test assumptions, admit that one's opinions/ideas are wrong when faced with new convincing evidence</p> <p>26. Exercise self-directed, -disciplined, -monitored, and -corrective thinking</p>	Portfolio artifacts
Decision-Making	<p>Participate in the process, consider all inputs and alternatives, draw conclusions, and seek consensus and/or take decisive action</p>	6
	<p>27. Collect and be a responsible consumer of information from varied sources</p> <p>28. Analyze and evaluate evidence, data, and arguments</p> <p>29. Weigh pros and cons of possibilities, assess risks, and take action</p> <p>30. Make informed daily choices compatible with a healthy lifestyle</p> <p>31. Take responsibility for the consequences of one's decisions; apply lessons learned to future decisions</p>	Portfolio artifacts
Grit	<p>Persevere through physical and mental challenges, finding learning and laughter in the journey</p>	3
	<p>32. Pursue passions, overcome obstacles, stay positive, and persevere</p> <p>33. Accept and learn from failure, adjust, and carry on</p> <p>34. Feel strong and vibrant by challenging one's body and mind</p>	Portfolio artifacts
Leadership	<p>Inspire, influence and empower others toward the achievement of a goal</p>	5
	<p>35. Model positive and ethical behavior - honesty, empathy, and optimism</p> <p>36. Make decisions confidently by trusting one's instincts and intuitions</p> <p>37. Build trust and empower others to achieve goals</p> <p>38. Inspire others to action by taking a stand, taking initiative, taking risks, and taking responsibility</p>	Portfolio artifacts
Management	<p>Manage tasks, coordinate resources, and facilitate processes to complete a project</p>	4
	<p>39. Set goals, plan, and prioritize</p> <p>40. Manage and organize time and resources (natural, financial, human, and technological) to complete tasks and projects</p> <p>41. Establish, facilitate, monitor, and adjust processes to meet goals</p>	Portfolio artifacts
Problem-Solving	<p>Identify problems, look for and consider a wide range of solutions</p>	4
	<p>42. Identify problems</p> <p>43. Interpret and express ideas graphically, verbally, and numerically</p> <p>44. Apply logic to investigations and scenarios</p> <p>45. Apply spatial, proportionate and geometric reasoning to scenarios</p> <p>46. Use mathematical calculations to solve real-world problems</p> <p>47. Use the scientific method to do investigations</p>	Portfolio artifacts
Systems Thinking	<p>Step back and see the big picture; use our understanding of complex systems to impact sustainable change</p>	6
	<p>48. See whole systems as more than a collection of parts --i.e., an intertwined web of relationships, connections and patterns</p> <p>49. Identify how human and natural systems interact with and impact one another</p> <p>50. Understand leverage points and apply systems thinking to impact and sustain personal, social, economic and environmental change</p>	Portfolio artifacts