

Embrace the alternatives to struggling education system

It had been sitting in my Netflix queue for quite some time, but with the start of school season I finally got around to watching "Waiting for Superman." The documentary holds no punches in painting a blunt picture of our failing educational system. But it's the kind of slap in the face we all need to realize how bad it is. Once you watch this film you'll no longer be able to sit on the couch and do nothing about the direction of education in America.

The premise of this film is that it's all about teachers. Good teachers — good education. Certainly that's a part of it. Good teachers help kids learn. Just ask the students at Green Bay Preble High School who've taken Jeremy Meyer's engineering design class. Meyer gives them plenty of hands-on time building a miniature race car so that all the technical theory becomes relevant. And relevance is the key to all learning.

But, as with most societal problems, our failing education system is a complex, systemic issue with many factors. The good news, however, is that it's not rocket science. Collectively, we already know how to produce high-performance learning. We're just too mired in, and wedded to, the current obsolete system. Two huge roadblocks obstruct attempts to revolutionize education. First is domination of the system by teachers unions. These powerful institutions shelter underperforming teachers, perpetuate the status quo and bureaucratize any action involving teachers. Second is government regulation (federal, state, and local), which assumes we all must approach education in one standardized, government-approved process. Don't you dare color outside the lines!

**Dan
Linszen**
Commentary



If you climb out of the dark, dank cave formed by these two factors, you will find a vibrant universe filled with creative ideas and techniques to foster engaged learning. Here are just a few examples:

Geoffrey Canada, featured prominently in "Waiting for Superman," and named by Time Magazine as among the 100 most influential people in the world, now leads the Harlem Children's Zone. This organization advocates a "cradle-to-college" system of support, integrating the educational system with family, social service programs, and other community organizations so kids from even the most desperate environment receive highly successful college-preparatory education.

Edutopia, a forum and resource sponsored by the George Lucas Educational Foundation, offers a six-step concept to great education:

1. Comprehensive assessment — authentic, individualized, ongoing measurement of what a child is learning as opposed to today's standardized tests.
2. Integrated studies — blending individual subjects together like they are in the real world
3. Project-based learning — so that students apply what they're learning
4. Social and emotional learning — providing the "soft skills" that every employer says are sorely

lacking in today's graduates

5. Teacher development — understanding that certification is only an entry point, and building great teaching ability is an ongoing journey

6. Technological integration — taking learning beyond the limits of the classroom.

Barnett Barry from the Center for Teaching Quality suggests four emerging realities that educators must acknowledge and embrace:

1. A new ecology acknowledging learning as a 24/7 function that occurs best in a Just-In-Time environment — learning what one needs to know, now.

2. The realization that brick and mortar classrooms can be displaced by effective use of Cyber-space.

3. Changing the teaching role from an individual activity to a team process where learning is guided by cross-functional, cross-district people connected to the real world

4. "Teacherpreneurs" — Creating an attitude of innovation and focus on results by transforming unions into professional guilds dedicated to helping members achieve excellence.

If you think education has to be what it is today, you haven't looked very hard for alternatives. To the extent we allow the system to keep us distracted by bogus issues like collective bargaining and well-intentioned, but bureaucratic programs like No Child Left Behind, we are throwing America's kids into the world without the knowledge and skills to lead the next generation.

— Dan Linszen of Green Bay advocates for personal responsibility and thinking outside the box. His book "Who's to Blame?" is available at www.whostoblame.net and other online sources.