Innovation
Let's Find Out

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Educators and students have been measured, bogged down, and increasingly distracted by one word for far too long: achievement.

Valuable resources, countless initiatives, and a super storm's worth of waves of education reform efforts have been devoted to fixing the persistent achievement problem in our schools.

Achievement has not only been the problem, it has also been the assumed answer.

Educators and students have been prodding through what I refer to as the "Achievement Cycle."

There are three main stages of the Achievement Cycle: new standards, new tests, and new evaluation systems.

The stages are predictable.

Just when progress is made, elusive new standards are rolled out accompanied by new standardized tests soon thereafter. The new batch of tests, in turn, spawns new headlines regarding accountability and inevitable new evaluation systems.

Carrots and sticks are changed frequently during each Achievement Cycle. Some educators and students get closer to the carrot than others but – make no mistake – none of them ever get it. The educators and students who are close are lauded. The ones who are not so close are scorned.

The Achievement Cycle identifies gaps between the educators and students who are close and the ones who are not so close and all learners in between. The gaps foster a variety of nifty sorting and ranking schemes, even among the highest of achievers.

The cycle repeats.

Over the years, the new standards, new standardized assessments, and new evaluation systems have demonstrated that educators and students have mostly lacked significant, sustained, or inclusive breakthroughs in achievement.

Prisoners of the cycle, educators and students are perpetually left standing under the umbrella of achievement.

What would happen in classrooms and schools if educators and students were not racing to achieve for achievement sake?

What if achievement was no longer the problem or the solution?

What if standards, tests, and evaluation systems targeted *critical thinking and problem-solving* instead of achievement?

What if we discovered that the problem all of this time has been an absence of collaboration among educators and students and the solution is to find new methodologies to encourage and support *collaboration across networks and leading by influence*?

What if *agility and adaptability* became prominent tenets of a new kind of cycle?

What if a new batch of assessments were designed to assess one's *initiative and entrepreneurialism*?

What if the latest wave of education reform began and ended with *effective oral and written communication*?

What if the carrot was the ability to *access and analyze information* and was cultivated from the ground-up rather than dangled above educators and students?

What if educators and students were ranked and sorted based on *curiosity and imagination*?

The seven skills italicized above are outlined in Tony Wagner's book, The Global Achievement Gap, as the survival skills for success in a knowledge economy. (Oh no, there's that word again in Wagner's title!)

I am growing convinced that the word "achievement" and its traditional connotations may be the problem.

In this world of ours, educators and students need a new word with nontraditional connotations.

What if "innovation" became the new "achievement"?

Imagine if educators and students operated under the umbrella of innovation. Imagine if the goal were to raise educator and student innovation. Imagine if the objective were to enhance and support teaching and learning in order to raise educator and student capacity to spawn innovation.

What kinds of resources, initiatives, and education reform efforts would facilitate significant, sustained, and inclusive breakthroughs in innovation?

Tony Wagner's new book is titled Creating Innovators: The Making of Young People Who Will Change The World. The title is not Creating Achievers. At last, could we finally be on the cusp of a new problem as well as a new solution?

Innovation.

From Wagner's mouth to education reformers' ears!

How could we foster innovation? A step in the right direction would be to ensure that every educator and student has plenty of opportunities to fail and are encouraged to do so. We need to reframe failure.

Are we ready to offer educators and students the opportunity to fail?

If educators and students do not begin taking risks and have an opportunity to learn from their mistakes, education is destined to be on the cusp of extinction (even if they master the standards, score advanced proficient on the latest tests, and are rated highly effective in the new evaluation system.)

It is time to send the donkey, carrot, and stick packing and create schools immersed in R&D (research and development) and iteration. (For more thoughts on failure, R&D, iteration and more, I encourage you to view Tony Wagner's keynote at the Rowland Foundation Conference on School Transformation here http://vimeo.com/52757300!)

Classrooms and schools need to break free from the harness attached to the edu-cart and transform into hubs of innovation.

More than ever before, educators and students need to be in the future business.

I love the following quote from Walt Disney: "In this volatile business of ours, we can ill afford to rest on our laurels, even to pause in retrospect. Times and conditions change so rapidly that we must keep our aim constantly on the future."

In this volatile world of ours, is the design and culture of our education system keeping an aim constantly on the future? (Take a second and review the secondary graduation requirements prior to submitting your final answer.)

With the future in mind, ask yourself: Is achievement really the problem? Is achievement the solution?

How would an "Innovation Cycle" differ from the Achievement Cycle?

What would constitute a student's GPA if innovation trumped achievement in a new era of education?

What would admissions officials at higher education institutions look for in prospective students if innovation became education's new focus?

What would rigor be in an Innovation Cycle?

How might standards, assessments, and evaluation systems change to align with and support an Innovation Cycle?

What would happen in classrooms and schools if educators and students were measured, bogged down, and increasingly distracted by one word: innovation?

I think it is about time that we find out.