

Let's transform schools into entrepreneurial hubs for the real world



By Peter Hutton

There are many critics of our current education system and I would certainly be amongst the strongest of them.



We have mass student disengagement, approximately half of all newly qualified teachers leaving the profession within the first five years and international benchmark testing that seems to get worse every time it is measured.

Whilst there are those that would have us return to the 'good old days' by imposing tougher classroom standards to increase rigour, accountability and discipline, fortunately most seem to acknowledge them for the Luddite 'backwards by design' thinkers that they are.

Ironically all schools teach history, yet none teach futures!

We are in times of exponential change and in spite of the fear mongering, we can feel the need for a new solution that genuinely prepares students for the future.

This intuition is not misguided.

Rather than patch a hopelessly outdated system, we need to re-imagine a secondary education system that actually adds considerable value to students' lives.

What if, rather than being a net consumer of resources, schools (let's keep calling them that for now) became producers of goods and services?

They could be problem-solving hubs, environments of creativity whose innovative outlooks were looked to by industry.

The young people applied themselves in a hands-on approach to solve genuine community problems.

Not labouring over some ridiculous theoretical assignment, seen only by the teacher, and possibly a parent, but actually doing things that matter.

What if schools stopped just spending money with little tangible outcomes and became mini economies, offering real products and services to supportive families and the wider community?

Think about schools providing nutritious take-home meals, car detailing, car servicing, day care, the sale of cleaning and other household products,

hairdressing, IT support, English language instruction, personal training, business services, pet care, provision of co-working spaces, video and media production, to name just a few.

A number of these services would require qualified supervision, but the real-world possibilities are endless.

Schools would only need to generate \$47 per student per school day to be completely cost neutral.

Any more than that and the students could decide what the proceeds were to be spent on, they could even draw a wage.

We are not talking sweat shops here, but genuine entrepreneurial microeconomies.

What better way to learn about society and 'the real world' than to operate within it on a daily basis.

This may all sound farfetched, but I am consulting with a remote community that has around 90 per cent unemployment in the local town.

Essentially it is a welfare state of around 2000 people.

How do you convince a student that it makes sense to come inside, sit down and learn about science that is not connected directly to her world, or mathematics that even students in major cities cannot see a genuine application for and English through the study of novels set in places they will never visit?

What could be a potential answer to the 60 per cent truancy?

Pay the students to do real work, learning real skills that have economic value.

No show, no pay. No effort, no pay. Over time students could be supported to take increasing responsibility for the leadership and planning of these businesses and social ventures.

Which is the crazier idea, paying marginalised students to work and learn, or thinking we can entice them to sit down and engage with a curriculum that has almost no relevance to their daily lives.

This idea is not about the money. It is about giving the students a real-world context in which to develop employability skills, which obviously includes literacy, numeracy and all of the general capabilities.

Enterprise does not have to be 100 per cent of the focus just a significant part of it.

Enough to get them to school and give purpose to the rest of their learning.

Education is a behemoth, and change will not be quick, but what do we need to make this happen?

Imagination is required, and professional trust, deep involvement and integration with industry, dramatic changes to teacher training, and most importantly, flexibility in what schools are permitted to do.

Does it need oversight? Yes.

Could there be problems? Yes.

Might it be an answer...