

Overview: Educational Excellence in an Era 3 World*

The past two hundred plus years of American history can be divided into three eras: Era 1 (the agricultural era), Era 2 (the Industrial era) and now Era 3, characterized by a move towards knowledge and service based jobs and careers, a global economy, an explosion of and easy access to knowledge and data, greater complexity, new discoveries in science and technology, global communication and social networks, frequent life changes, continuing societal and political changes, and general uncertainty over the future. For today's children, the rules of the game have changed in this new Era 3 world. As Tom Friedman says "If you want a decent job that will lead to a decent life today, *you* have to work harder, reinvent yourself, obtain at least some form of post secondary education, make sure that you're engaged in lifelong learning, and play by the rules".¹

Based on an analysis of the changes that have taken place, and a focus on the needs of students in an Era 3 world, we have identified three goals – preparation for continuous, lifelong learning; intelligent, informed citizenship; and "self-development and understanding" – that form a core set of Era 3 educational outcomes. These outcomes suggest a very different paradigm for today's schools. The curriculum emphasizes meaningful learning in *all* subject areas, pre-K to grade 12. It is often integrated and interdisciplinary. Instead of a narrow focus on a few reading and math skills, students learn and practice important lifelong learning skills: ask good questions and define problems and challenges; search for and process information, think deeply and flexibly, apply learning to new and novel situations, and communicate effectively. A portfolio-based assessment system incorporates student work, performance tasks and projects, and self-reflective activities. Instructional approaches focus around inquiry, problem and project based learning, reduce coverage and textbook-based learning, and regularly engage and involve students in the learning process. They have choices, options and electives in the school program and in enrichment and support activities that help them develop their strengths, talents, interests and goals. They have many more opportunities to connect with the outside world through apprenticeships, internships, technology experiences, service learning opportunities, interviews, speakers, and field trips.

Unfortunately, with today's emphasis on standardized, multiple choice tests and a narrow emphasis on language arts, reading and math skills, too many students lack many of these key understandings, skills, behaviors and "self-knowledge" when they graduate from high school, and this hinders their successful transition to college, job, military or other life experiences. Yet in spite of all these limitations, today's best schools have adopted many of these Era 3 outcomes and school characteristics with great success. Will the majority of educational organizations rethink their mission and structures to help all students prepare to live in this qualitatively different Era 3 world? Only time will tell.

¹ Tom Friedman, *New Rules*. Op-Ed Commentary in the New York Times, September 8, 2012.