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Transition to 21st Century Learning

By: Gary W. Wietgreffe, author of *Learning as it influences the 21st century*.

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Pandemic. Business disruptions. Joblessness. School closures. Frustrated parents, students and teachers experiencing an on-going test of livelihood are looking to you for correct answers. As changes are addressed, I want to thank the Education Standards Board for the opportunity to present a short summary as we Transition to 21st Century Learning.

Like you, for years I have been searching for answers to our changing culture and learning systems. Two years ago, I released two books on those subjects. I wrote over 700 pages observing the present, investigating the past, and determining the future. Yet, it is incomplete. Detailing transition to 21st century family life, business and learning systems is complex. Future of learning is a test of memory.

In tests, we make mistakes or fail to realize the world no longer meets our standards. Are school standards getting the in the way of learning how to succeed in life?

Reading your last few meeting minutes, many school standards were addressed. The last meeting, July 13, never mentioned remote learning. It seemed meeting standards were more important than student learning. Example, page 3, “WIDA ELD Standards are used along with content standards to ensure students engage in the learning of the content standards as they continue to develop English.” Isn’t it more important they learn the language rather than learn the standards?

Interestingly, late twentieth century standards developed a school system in this state, across the country and throughout the world based on twentieth century transportation efficiencies. Motorized vehicles and cheap fuel allowed creation of the standard school system we have now. Even by 1982, “school system” was not defined in Webster’s collegiate dictionary. Now, Merriam-Webster’s on-line source basically defines “school system” as a division of labor under a board of education.

Learning does not require school building attendance, nor transportation. Efficiencies of digital communication have advanced youth learning beyond traveling to brick and mortar.

Historically, family and societal learning utilized itinerant teachers. In ancient Greece, 2,400 years ago, they were called sophists. The U.S. President that banned slavery, Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865), 200 years ago was only trained by itinerant teachers. One of those teachers, William Mentor Graham (1800-1886) spent his final years in Blunt, South Dakota. A guy that passed away when my father was young learned outside of school. Thomas Edison (1847-1931), a hearing impaired guy who developed over 1000 patents (e.g. light bulb, movies, recordings, etc.), only attended school a few months. Reading, writing and math Edison learned from his mother—a former teacher. Hasn’t that happened the past few months?

21st Century digital communication is creating a new generation of highly educated students without attending school. It will continue. The learning goal now is to teach all subjects including personal responsibility when not confined to a brick building.

Developing standards does not require a school. It is easy to confuse “school” and “education” with “learning.” One can be school-educated for two decades and may not have learned enough, including responsibility, to support themselves. Such delayed maturity is out of sync with historical standards. You may want to review my comments submitted to your last meeting July 13 (attached).

In January (2020) you heard from Laura Scheibe, the South Dakota Department of Education’s division director of Career and Technical Education about the “State Plan” being developed (and I quote) “...to help schools provide the best opportunities for their students.” Learning never has been restricted to schools, never will be; and neither should formal education standards be restricted to schools.

As pointed out earlier, the “school system” we currently have is based on efficient transportation. Since efficiency always wins, the 21st century learning will occur based on more efficient digital communications. Transportation is antiquated. Schools are antiquated. Unfortunately, educational standards based on school attendance are antiquated. Your responsibility will be challenging.

As the century develops, it is highly unlikely students will be transported to a brick building with a teacher standing in front of a square room with alert bells, like prison, directing movement to the next room. Some of us learn slower. Bells disrupts thinking through concepts. Personal, self-paced learning should not be driven by time-clock alarms. Digital, geographic freedom to learn will likely exclude brick building attendance. The key question: what drives school attendance?

Unfortunately, school’s social function has replaced education as student’s top priority. Transporting youth to a school using public funds is not the most economical way to socialize youth or use tax dollars. A fellow author, who also happens to be a middle school teacher, recently said she considers socialization, fashion, and puberty to be students’ top reasons for attending school with education slid in their accidently. “Oh darn, I learned something,” mockingly said Canadian teacher and author, Jenna Green. (See Quill & Ink podcast <https://youtu.be/tT0kdEUBa2c> segment 27-30.)

By adulthood (that’s age 18 in the U.S.) education should produce an experienced learner. Learning should produce an adult who can care for themselves, their family, their community, and their country. School attendance is the standard goal of administrators and teachers—learning is assumed. Whereas, learning was the historic goal. Teachers know students—often providing understanding in uncanny ways. When excited, they change the world! When trained in them, it is tough to think of education without schools. Historically, that was the case. Your challenge is to develop standards to use teacher’s talent to expand opportunities without school attendance into adulthood.

How can the Board of Education Standards top priority again make learning an individual responsibility without transporting students and teachers to a school building? As school attendance phases out, please develop standards for remote independent or group digital learning transitioning responsibility to the learner rather than the school or teacher. Result: adulthood will be much more rewarding.

Thank you for your time as we Transition to 21st Century Learning.

Author, Gary W. Wietgreffe, has six patents, numerous peer-reviewed published research and authored seven books. His recent books tie education, school system, parenting, technology, and business with 21st century culture and learning in his **Relating to Ancient** series. *Culture and the mysterious agent changing it*, and *Learning as it influences the 21st century* can be found at <https://www.RelatingtoAncients.com/>, bookch.com, or on-line in hardcover, paperback and as e-books. His latest book, *Destination North Pole--5,000 km by bicycle*, is an exciting, endearing, humorous, dangerous and sometimes quirky travel adventure.

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Public comments offered for the July 13, 2020 meeting of the South Dakota Board of Education Standards.

The Purpose and Trend of Formal Education caused by Covid

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1. What is the ultimate purpose of formal education?

2. Is it not to develop a child to be a responsible adult?

By that I mean isn't the purpose to formally educate a child which grows to a point of being responsible for themselves, their children, spouse, and supporting social order (i.e. youth, aged, infirmed, police, education, organizations, and government)?

3. Has the minimum age of responsibility peaked? If so, why?

Throughout history, the age of responsibility has changed. Four or five generations ago, it was not unusual for teenagers to marry and begin raising families. In fact, it was expected that they would not only take care of their children, but in many cases care was also expected by their parents and grandparents.

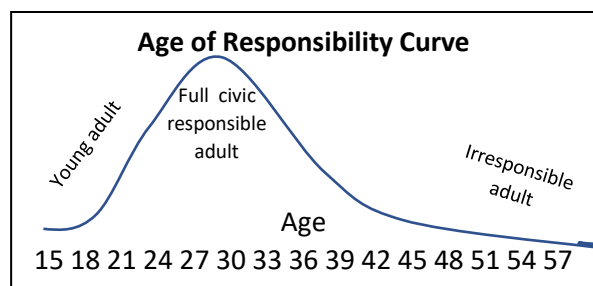
Yet, back then, late teens were not considered old enough, nor responsible enough, to care for society. Proof: They were not allowed to vote until age 21. That changed nationally with the XXVI Amendment as the Vietnam War drug on when soldiers and their supporters said, "If you are old enough to fight, you are old enough to vote." July 1, 1971 the national voting age dropped to eighteen.

However, other restrictions were implemented to delay personal and civic responsibilities of young adults. Since implementation of the 26th Amendment, as a society we have enacted national, state and local laws to restrict drinking, driving, gambling, tobacco use, gun ownership, and even restricted work through safety laws. Secondly, we have reduced young adult responsibility for their health care and education. Such acts have delayed taking on personal and societal obligations.

World War II created a massive societal change. A trend emerged. Teenagers were recruited for war, or to support the war effort forcing the age of marriage to be delayed. The Baby Boom generation was the result. Since then the average age of marriage, having children, and financially supporting society has been pushed later and later.

4. Has the worldwide pandemic reversed the trend?

Societal age of responsibility is like a bell-shaped curve. Some teenage adults have entered the age of responsibility with work and caring for their family – they are the leading edge of the bell. More wait until after completing college pushing the bell peak later.



Others wait until they have finished advanced degrees and are paying student debt which begins the downward side of the bell curve. Meanwhile, society has always had some adults that wait into their thirties and forties before taking on their role in societal support. Some never have which are the tail end of the bell curve.

In my book *Culture and the mysterious agent changing it* I wrote:

“Never in human history have so many lived so long off the efforts of so few.

“After spending the most years in world history being formally educated, more young adults are living off older workers. Never in human history have young adults been structurally blocked from work and a decreasing part of the labor force. It will not last.”

Here is a brief expansion of that historic trend as detailed in my book *Learning as it influences the 21st century*.

“What happens when youth are sheltered? They never seek their own.

“What happens when children are protected? Self-protection is not learned.

“What happens when dependent children become dependent adults? Independence is feared.

“What happens when society has no standard age to accept adult responsibilities? Irresponsibility becomes acceptable.

“What happens when development is delayed waiting for developers? Stagnation.

“What happens when the majority is irresponsible? Work is avoided. What happens when work does not get done? Systems fall apart.

“What happens when progress is not expected? Nothing.”

Although teachers, students and parents have missed the structured academic year the past few months, it did create a welcomed kink to the learning curve in the U.S. and throughout the world. During the past few months, many youth have actually seen their parents juggling schedules and work and working hard (although working remotely—at home). Another noteworthy trend: All children have experienced responsibility for public hygiene.

Trends are hard to reverse.

In many, perhaps most homes, during the day children have recently taken on more household and learning responsibilities. Responsibility is identified by setting the table and clearing it, taking out the garbage, increased care for younger siblings, increased personal and public hygiene, and having more responsibility to start, study, and complete schoolwork. The pandemic appears to have started a worldwide trend toward more responsible youth.

Isn't that the goal of early learning? If so, the Covid pandemic has supported the educational system.

5. How can the South Dakota Board of Education Standards expand on recent gains in educating youth to be responsible citizens? Is it through more remote learning?

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