Changing the way we measure success isn’t reserved for Montessori schools or hyper funded STEM programs. It lies in taking a step back and creating space for students to teach themselves. Or, as we say in our Jewish tradition: “chanoch l’naar al pi darko” (educate a child according to their nature).

By Brian Cohen

If you were to walk into a typical classroom today in the United States and observe a typical student who is actively engaged in a typical lesson, you would likely see a number of indicators that are reflective of a school in the 21st century. As opposed to a school in the past, you would hear updated language, witness technology incorporated on the individual and collective levels, and see more up-to-date textbooks and learning materials.

But with all the 21st century “updates” in schools are we truly preparing young learners for the demands of existing in the 21st century? On the whole, we fall short. Nationally, we have had a formula that is predicated on individuals successfully finishing high school and going on to college. But the demands of young adult life—good grades don’t make happy adults—are navigating the workforce, interpersonal relationships, rapidly changing geo-political dynamics, and the ever-increasingly complicated demands for innovative thinking—don’t lie in a standard math lesson—or even a scripted play about the importance of being a good friend. They lie in the ability to succeed when the playbook is not provided.

It is our responsibility to prepare children to face a yet unknown world primarily on their own, and if we have built and sustained an educational system that is now outdated and ineffective, then it is incumbent upon us as the adults to change it now. Of the critical skills needed to succeed in this day and age, I would argue the most important are:

• The confidence to approach a new situation with an open mind, making sure to take in a good deal of information and perspectives prior to attempting a full analysis
• The ability to communicate effectively to express a perspective
• The capacity to actively listen, and to step back and create space when quieter or dissenting voices might need to be heard
• The ability to generate a design or theory of action to solve a challenge, and to identify which tools are needed and how to use them effectively
• The ability to thrive (or at least withstand) in work or with personal objectives without clear structure or direction

The late Richard Elmore, who spent 24 years as a Professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, a former professor of mine, held the contention that the truest marker of quality in education lies not in what students are being “taught,” but what they are actually doing—and how what they are gleaning from any exercise will impact their development both academically and in life outside of an institutional environment. In accordance with this line of thinking we decided to focus intensely on what we had our students doing during the school day, and realized that we needed to create direct pathways to the acquisition of these aforementioned traits.
We created the “Design & Build” program. At MetroWest Jewish Day School, each student participates for no less than one and a half hours each week (preferably more, with plans to increase the saturation in years to come) in STEAM activities. “Lessons” are structured as challenges - but the “how” is up to a collaborative team. Disorganization is not punished; messy spaces are celebrated as markers for creativity; and an emphasis on how students interact with one another is paramount and explicitly practiced. In a challenge, students are given a brief overview of an open-ended problem or dilemma humans face. They have to ask clarifying questions, conduct research, share ideas, create a design for what they will build to solve or improve the situation presented, and then go about building their vision using a multitude of materials, such as wood, metal, plastic, cardboard, paints, string, tape, hardware, and handheld and even power tools. The desired outcome has only two real requirements - to be of the student group’s own ideation - and to create and present a design and prototype based on the group’s theorized solution. When working with teachers, I impress the central importance of celebrating process over product. Most of the prototypes presented are completely original, and often discarded following the presentation as the importance was on what the group was able to convey, and not on what they might have created.

One of my favorite experiences with the Design and Build program happened when I was observing one such challenge lesson in a lower school grade level. One team followed a common pattern of human behavior wherein the few most vocal students decided on what the group should do, and did not make space for other perspectives. In the end, their project failed. But upon careful reflection of their process with a teacher they were able to realize how they should have operated differently. They ended up presenting to the class their “keys to effective idea sharing in the design process.” It was a very important moment for the class; just as important as succeeding with the proposed challenge of the day.

Creating impactful educational experiences takes work - but not the kind we’re used to. Let’s drop the standardized, formulaic approach to academics - and empower our students to have powerful learning experiences that will allow them to develop and practice the most critical mindsets and skills needed to succeed in life. Sometimes, that simply means we need to light the way and step aside. Brian Cohen is the Head of School at MetroWest Jewish Day School in Framingham. He received his Masters in School Leadership from the Harvard Graduate School of Education in 2009. Photos: MetroWest Jewish Day School.