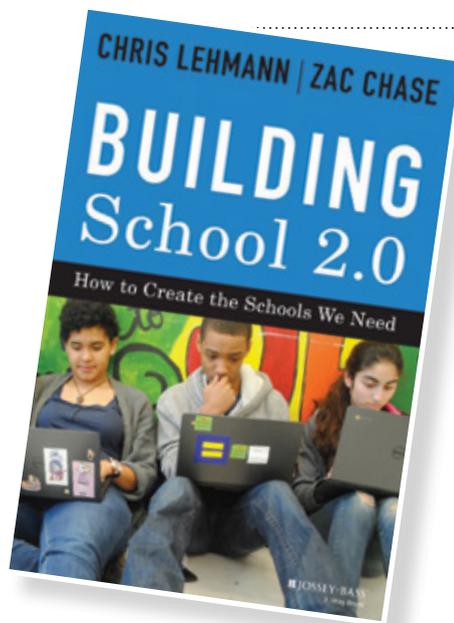


Citizenship is More Important than the Workforce

| Chris Lehmann and Zac Chase



There's a movement afoot that says school should prepare kids for the 21st century workforce. And on its surface, that seems like a good goal. Who could argue against it? Kids are going to need jobs when they graduate, and especially in a time where economic stability seems precarious at best.

But focusing on workforce development sells our students short. It assumes that the most we can hope for our students is a life of work when there is so much more to learn. The purpose of public education is not the creation of the 21st century workforce, but rather, the co-creation — in conjunction with our students — of 21st century citizens. “Worker” is, without question, a subset of “citizen;” and if we aim for “citizen,” we’ll get the workforce we need, but aiming only for creating workers won’t get our society the citizens it needs.

A public education centered primarily on workforce development will put a high premium on following directions and doing what you’re told. A public education centered on citizenship development will still teach rules, but it will teach students to question the underlying

ideas behind those rules. Workforce development will reinforce the hierarchies that we see in most corporate culture, while a citizenship-focus will teach students that their voices matter, regardless of station.

It’s not only about what society needs, it’s also about what students need. We can completely change the lens of “Why do we need to study this?” when the answer deals with being an informed and active citizen as opposed to what we need to know to do our work. Most people don’t need to know calculus, the Periodic Table of Elements, the date of the signing of the Magna Carta or *Hamlet* to be a good worker. But you do need to understand statistical analysis to read websites like FiveThirtyEight.com and make sense of the socio-political conversations there. You do need to understand

basic chemistry to understand how an oil spill from the Exxon Valdez affects the region. Understanding how England evolved from a pure aristocracy to a constitutional monarchy, which helped sow the seeds of American democracy, helps to make sense of our own country’s history. And understanding how *Hamlet* chooses action or inaction in the famous “To be or not to be” soliloquy might help us make better choices in our own lives. The goal of a citizenship-driven education exposes students to ideas that will challenge them, push them, and help them to make sense of a confusing world.

And more to the point — when we do this, we don’t lie to kids when we say that’s what high school is for.

Our society is changing, and there are some serious warning signs that our economy may be fundamentally

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See Chris Lehmann at Convention

International speaker, education consultant and *New York Times* bestselling author, Chris Lehmann will give the keynote address Wednesday, Jan. 20 during the State Education Convention in Milwaukee.

A graduate of UW-Madison, Chris went on to receive his M.A. in Teaching at NYU and his Ed.M. in Education Leadership at Teachers College, Columbia University. He is also the Founding Director of The Educator Collaborative, a think tank and educational consulting organization working to innovate the ways educators learn together.

His books include: *Falling In Love With Close Reading* (with Kate Roberts); *Energize Research Reading and Writing*; *Pathways to the Common Core* (with Lucy Calkins and Mary Ehrenworth); and *A Quick Guide to Reviving Disengaged Writers*.

Chris has been a middle-school teacher; a high-school teacher; a literacy coach; and a Senior Staff Developer with the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project at Columbia University. Now, leading The Educator Collaborative, he and a team of educators support teachers, coaches, and administrators in developing rigorous and passionate instruction that give children agency in our ever-changing world. □



shifting in ways that will make it more and more difficult for education to be “the great equalizer.” Children across the socio-economic spectrum are realizing that the economic “sell” of public education isn’t ringing true. As college costs creep over \$200,000 for private four-year colleges and over \$100,000 for public colleges (Penn State’s costs, for example, with room and board, in 2014 was \$28,000 per year in-state) and as more jobs move to labor markets that do not have the high wages of the United States, the idea that all kids who work hard in high school will go to college and have economic success in life is an uglier and uglier lie.

We’re going to have some deeply challenging problems to solve in the near future, and we think that we’re going to be faced with hard choices about our lives. We want our schools to help students be ready to solve those problems, to weigh in on those problems, and to vote on those problems. It’s why history and science are so important. It’s why kids have to learn how to create and present their ideas in powerful ways. It’s why kids have to become critical consumers and producers of information. And hopefully, along the way, they find the careers that will help them build sustainable, enjoyable, productive lives.

We want to be honest about why we teach what we teach. We’re tired of schools and politicians implicitly promising that the result of successful schooling is high wages. And we’re tired of too many adults forgetting everything else that goes into helping people realize their potential in the process.

Teaching kids that hard work in school will mean more money is a shortcut and an example of the shoddy logic that doesn’t ring true to many kids. Most kids — especially in our cities — know someone who

did everything they were supposed to do but struggled to achieve in their lives after school anyway.

Teaching kids that hard work in school will help them develop skills that will help them be more fully realized citizens and people is — without question — a harder argu-

ment to make, but it stands a much better chance of being true. ■

Chris Lehmann is an international speaker, education consultant and New York Times bestselling author.

Zac Chase is co-author with Chris Lehmann of the forthcoming book Building School 2.0: How to Create the Schools We Need.

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