The Goal of Education Is Becoming

By Marc Prensky

As I continue to delve deeper and deeper into the world of education and K-12 schools and how each needs to prepare our children for the 21st century, I find myself focusing on a single word with increasing frustration: learning.

That might seem strange. Pretty much everything you hear and read about education these days assumes that "learning" is the goal for our students. But it's not.

The real goal of education, and of school, is *becoming*—becoming a "good" person and becoming a more capable person than when you started. Learning is nothing but a means of accomplishing that goal, and it is dangerous to confuse the ends with the means.

Learning would be the right aspiration, if we wanted our children to become *learnèd* (in the old sense of "knowing stuff") or scholars, as some parents and teachers still demand. But that's hardly today's ambition for most of us or our kids. Instead, very few educators or parents have learning or scholarship in their hearts as the endgame for their children, except in the sense of their kids' getting good grades. Most of us would prefer our children become the very best people they can be, capable of effective thinking, acting, relating, and accomplishing in whatever field they enjoy and have a passion for.

Yet, with the exception of some independent schools and the small character-based education movement, the only type of *becoming* that our conversation about education and school seems to focus on is the one in which young people "become" a member of a particular college class.

School focuses almost exclusively on kids' learning four basic subjects: math, language arts, science, and social studies. Our tests—big and small—are an attempt to put numbers around that learning and to rank students in their acquisition of it. We ask, ad infinitum: How much are our kids learning? Are they learning enough? What is the best

way to measure their learning? How do they learn best? What gets in the way of their learning? Are their schools making adequate yearly progress?

We might ask our kids, what did you learn in school today? But most of us, I submit, don't really care, nor do I think we should. Why aren't we asking them, what did you become that you weren't before? Have you moved in a positive direction to better yourself and society? That's the information we really want to know as concerned parents, citizens, employers, and taxpayers.

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Rarely do we expect our K-12 kids to become anything besides good test-takers. We certainly don't expect them, by means of their education, to become what the Dalai Lama might call "good" people. Nor do we expect them to become good thinkers, actors, relaters, or particularly effective in our rapidly changing world, except, perhaps, in tiny and often outmoded ways.

Don't misunderstand me. There is nothing wrong with our kids' learning; in fact, there is a great deal to be said in favor of it. But it should be seen as a means to an end.

Learning for its own sake, enjoyable as some may find it, is hollow.

There are probably billions of people in the world who have finished school without becoming what they could have. Some may have acquired knowledge and skills through their education, but have accomplished little or nothing.

Rather than putting so much effort into creating and implementing the common-core standards, we would do far better to design "accomplishment-based education" whereby our kids have the means to become the kinds of people we want them to be. When they leave school, with a strong resume to their credit, they should be creative and effective thinkers, communicators, and doers. Anyone who thinks we've arrived at that goal is fooling himself.

Our kids should be asking themselves: Who am I becoming? Have I become a better thinker? If so, in what ways? Am I able to do things I couldn't before? What is important to me and why? Can I relate comfortably to individuals, in teams and in virtual communities? Can I accomplish bigger, more sophisticated projects to add to my portfolio? What kind of person have I had to become to achieve these accomplishments?

Can I make the world a better place?

We spend so much time and effort looking at test scores, averages, and other petty measurements of "learning" that we have little time or energy left to focus on who our students are (or are not) as individuals, what they love or hate, or what drives them. We shouldn't be surprised, then, if they become people we do not like or respect, or if we have concerns about their potential contributions to society.

Although *becoming* may be harder to quantify than some of the things we measure today, we do not have a hard time recognizing it. Suppose teachers had to sit down a few times a year and write about what they think each of their students is becoming? It would be far more useful and interesting to a parent (or a potential employer) to know how good a student is at thinking, doing, relating, and accomplishing. We should care more about that student's passion than we do about his or her grades in math, language arts, social studies, and science.

Our education and schools should not be so overly focused on learning. It is the wrong aspiration for our students, despite centuries of academic tradition. If we were to focus instead on helping all students be the very best and most capable people they can be (as some of our best independent schools have been consciously doing for some time), our kids' education and our society would be light-years ahead of where they are now. If we had different expectations, who knows what our kids might become?