

The Global Achievement Gap: Why America's Students Are Falling Behind

“Will my child get into a good college?” is a question that keeps high-school parents up at night. But in our new global economy, getting a degree is no longer enough to guarantee success. Now parents must also ask themselves, “Which skills will my child need to get a good job after college?” Thanks to growing competition from around the world, students must work harder than ever to stand out from the crowd.

The good news is that someone has compiled a list of twenty-first century skills that companies look for when hiring. For his book *The Global Achievement Gap*, Tony Wagner interviewed scores of business leaders and discovered seven key abilities that modern employers prize. The bad news is that our schools are outdated – they don’t teach these skills. In a world that runs on innovation and curiosity, our schools still teach to standardized tests. They emphasize memorization and compliance in an era where data is only a smart phone away and today’s cutting edge is tomorrow’s ancient history.



A Professor of Engineering at Stanford summed up this lesson for me when I asked for advice about teaching high school. Which specific math skills, I asked, should I emphasize? Her answer surprised me: “Americans have always been the leaders in my classes. The foreign students might have better math skills, but the American students have had the edge because of their creativity and initiative. But I have to tell you that they’re losing that edge – they’re becoming less innovative, less curious. If I could tell you anything, it would be to promote critical thinking and ingenuity.”

So if our students are falling behind, what can parents do to improve their children’s education? On a larger scale, we can lobby for school reform. But there are also immediate steps you can take at home to enhance your child’s education. Here is the list of Wagner’s seven skills, and what you can do to improve your child’s abilities.

- **Critical Thinking and Problem Solving** Right now, schools are under tremendous pressure to pass the multiple-choice tests required by the No Child Left Behind Act. Teachers spend hours on practice questions, helping students memorize facts and test-taking strategies. But the workplace is more complicated than ever, and solutions to real-life problems aren’t multiple-choice. Students need to be comfortable with complexity, to see past the present, think about the future, and connect the dots. *What you can do:* Have your child help you figure out real-life problems at home. Let him help you assemble a Christmas present, fix a broken light socket, research your summer vacation, or plan a party. When he encounters an obstacle, resist telling him the solution. Instead, help him find ways to analyze the problem and develop solutions. And when the teacher assigns a project, resist the urge to over-help. He may struggle at first, but over time he’ll develop confidence in himself.
- **Leading By Influence** Students today spend most of their time learning alone, but employees are now expected to be involved with multiple team players from various divisions of the company. Students need to learn how to present good ideas to a variety of people. “Kids have an amazing lack of preparedness in general leadership skills and collaborative skills,” according to Mike Summers of Dell Computers. *What you can do:* Let your child join a team or organization, and learn to work with a group. When she has a problem with a teacher, coach or a friend, help her practice what she wants to say, but let her take care of it. Children can’t learn to advocate for themselves if the adults in their lives speak for them all the time.
- **Agility and Adaptability** In school, there is only one right answer. But in the rapidly changing work world, there is no perfect answer, or if there is one, it’s only true for a nanosecond. To survive, says Wagner, you have to be flexible, adaptable, and a lifelong learner. *What you can do:* Model flexibility. When you encounter a change in plans, don’t get upset. Instead, use it as a chance to teach your child how to think on her feet. For instance, if your flight gets cancelled, let her help you find a new one. If you get lost, let her use the map or help ask for directions. If your oven breaks on Thanksgiving, have her help you brainstorm ways to put a turkey on the table. By showing her that the world doesn’t end when plans change, you’ll instill a can-do attitude that will benefit every part of her life.

- **Initiative and Entrepreneurialism** Corporations have changed dramatically in the past twenty years, says Wagner. They are “flattened,” no longer no top-down. Bosses don’t command; employees are expected to figure things out. Schools, however, continue to use the teacher-as-boss model, and students are ill-prepared to think beyond the task that has been assigned. *What you can do:* Let your child develop and follow his own interests. Resist the urge to force him into activities that you choose. Children can endure anything, but they truly blossom when they find an activity they enjoy. Once he’s involved, encourage him to show initiative by taking his activity to the next level: run for an office, manage a fundraiser, or recruit friends. He’ll be more motivated when he’s doing something he loves.
- **Effective Oral and Written Conversation** Because most high schools are pressed for time, teachers use their time to talk and students remain silent. Summers says, “We are routinely surprised at the difficulty some young people have in communication: verbal skills, written skills, presentation skills. They have difficulty being clear and precise.” *What you can do:* Eat dinner together as a family whenever possible. Interact. Bring up hot topics, and have debates. Have your children write thank-you notes. Read their English essays and tell them about sections you really like.
- **Accessing and Analyzing Data** Students are given limited data in a class: a textbook, lecture notes, and perhaps a web site. But in the work world, data gushes like water from a fire hydrant. Computers and smart phones are sources of tremendous information, but require people to learn to separate the gems from the garbage. *What you can do:* When your child asks you a question, don’t just tell him the answer. Go to the computer together, and look things up. Talk to her about what you find – can you trust the source? Is it reliable? Discuss the markers of good information.
- **Curiosity and Imagination** The number one thing employers look for is the ability to ask good questions. It’s the way that bright, inquisitive people show their ability to think fast and keep up in today’s ever-changing world. But teachers don’t have time to encourage a lot of questions, so students learn to keep them to themselves. *What you can do:* Encourage questions, no matter how tired you are. Offer to explore ideas and projects your child is curious about. Let him lead the way. When he finds something he really loves, encourage him to pursue it. Help him do research, get him some supplies, and take him places where he can explore the topic to his heart’s content.

America’s advantage has always been good old Yankee ingenuity, a willingness to make ideas work and figure things out on the fly. But with the rigorous testing that has come to define our classrooms, students are learning that it’s better to stick with the status quo. It’s more important than ever for parents to model the qualities that will serve our children well: critical thinking, creativity, and effective communication. These are the skills that define the new millennium, and this is the generation that will decide whether or not our country will compete.