

## Using Trend Data to Create a Successful Future for Our Students, Our Schools, and Our Communities

Gary Marx

In a fast-changing world, looking at tomorrow and seeing it only as a little bit more or a little bit less of today won't cut it as we move into the future. As educators and community leaders, we need to use powerful trends data, coupled with imagination, as we plan ahead. A challenge will be to not only develop a plan but to turn it into a living strategy—a strategic vision that will help us lead our students, schools, and communities into an even more successful future.

All of us are in a constant, unrelenting, and exciting race to lay the groundwork for an even brighter future for our children and ourselves. Much of what happens as we shape the road ahead, however, will come at us out of the blue. That's why we need to stay in touch with a fast-moving society. We need to be ready to deal with what some people aptly call "discontinuities." In essence, all of us need to be environmentalists, adapting the organization to the needs of the environment at the same time we're adapting the environment to the needs of the organization.

This article discusses the general necessity of studying trend data and identifies 16 major trends that are already having an impact on our society, and thus our education system. Studying these trends and considering their overall implications will put us in the best possible position to prepare our students today for what can be an even more promising tomorrow.

All organizations, especially education systems, are *of* this world, not separate from it. To earn their legitimacy, they need to be connected with the communities, countries, and world they serve. Unless they are constantly scanning the environment, educators will soon find themselves isolated . . . and out of touch.

Getting a bead on political, economic, social, technological, environmental, educational, and other forces that are sweeping across the landscape is essential. Understanding these forces is the key to unlocking rigidity and reshaping our schools, colleges, and other institutions for the future.

How can we maintain a 24/7 connection with the environment? One way is to constantly identify local, statewide/provincial, national, and international issues and sort them according to their probability and potential impact. If an issue is high in probability and high in possible impact, we'd better figure out how to manage it, or it will manage us.

There are other ways to scan. Engaging the wisdom of staff, community, and other constituents, we can pinpoint gaps between where we are today and where we'd like to be tomorrow. We can develop statements describing an organization that is capable of adjusting to a fast-changing world and then use the descriptions as part of a scale to rate our flexibility—our ability to innovate.

Frequently, in looking to the future, organizations are eager to explore strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. We can also involve diverse groups of people in envisioning the characteristics of the organization we want to become, in weighing

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our assumptions, and in exploring possible scenarios that describe alternative futures. Bottom line: One of the most far-reaching and effective ways of staying in touch with the environment is to identify and consider the possible implications of trends.

### What are trends?

Howard Chase, the father of issue management, described trends as “detectable changes which precede issues.”<sup>1</sup> *Webster’s Dictionary* has another take. This venerable definer of words refers to them as “a line of general direction or movement, a prevailing tendency or inclination.”<sup>2</sup>

A free and open discussion of these societal forces is a first step in tapping the ingenuity of people around us. While we’re listening, we might come across fresh ideas. We’ll also be able to identify possible wildcards and reveal both intended and unintended consequences of our actions.

### Seismic Shifts that Are Shaping the Future

As we scan the environment, nothing stands out more than massive, unrelenting trends. Like the movement of tectonic plates beneath the surface of the earth, they are a signal of seismic shifts.

This article identifies 16 of those landscape-shaping trends. Each has implications for schools, school systems, colleges, universities, and other institutions, including communities, nations, and the world. Studying and considering the implications of these and other trends enable us to, among other things:

- Get connected to forces affecting the whole of society.
- Keep our organization fresh, energized, and open to new ideas.
- Encourage creativity and imagination.
- Give us the tools to identify problems or crises far enough in advance that they don’t become catastrophes.
- Offer an opportunity for us to stay in tune with possible tipping points.<sup>3</sup>
- Identify opportunities we otherwise might not have considered.
- Provide us with an indication that far-reaching trends go beyond today’s issues, such as class

size, standards, accountability, and testing, but also may have a direct impact on all of them.

- Overcome the isolation of our disciplines, disagreements, and other differences to find the connective tissue that unifies us.<sup>4</sup>
- Help us and those we serve forecast possible futures and even become trendsetters.
- Turn our institution into an even more indispensable, relevant force.

### Connected Leadership

Anyone involved in education is, or should be, a leader, by virtue of the crucial role they play in society.

*Connected leadership is in. Isolation is out.* Just as we ask students to learn across disciplines, we also need to *lead* across disciplines. That means, if we’re specialists, we should try to be the very best specialists we can become. As desperately as we need depth, it is not a substitute for breadth. Context is crucial. Everything we do affects everything else. The program that guarantees unprecedented benefits for some might bring devastating side-effects for others.<sup>5</sup> The expansive needs of our community and the world should guide us as we strive to serve.

How can we connect people? How can we bring them together in common purpose? How can we tap the diversity and richness of thinking in an organization? How can we create a rallying point and ultimately a sense of ownership for what we want to accomplish? How can we stir a sense that “We’re all in this together”?

The answer is not that complicated. We simply need to acknowledge the political, economic, social, technological, environmental, demographic, and other forces that are affecting the whole of society. Then, we need to ask key questions, such as:

- What are the implications of these trends for our education system?
- What are the implications of the trends for what students need to know and be able to do—their academic knowledge, skills, behaviors, and attitudes?
- What are the implications of the trends for economic growth and development and quality of life in our community, state, or nation?

In the process, we might ask some additional questions, such as:

- Do we have a short-range view or a long-range perspective?

Figure 1

### Sixteen Trends . . . that Will Profoundly Affect U.S. Education and the Whole of Society

- For the first time in history, the old will outnumber the young. (Note: This aging trend generally applies to developed nations. In underdeveloped nations, just is opposite is true: the young will substantially outnumber the old.)
- Majorities will become minorities, creating ongoing challenges for social cohesion.
- Social and intellectual capital will become economic drivers, intensifying competition for well-educated people.
- Technology will increase the speed of communication and the pace of advancement or decline.
- The Millennial Generation will insist on solutions to accumulated problems and injustices, while an emerging Generation E will call for equilibrium.
- Standards and high-stakes tests will fuel a demand for personalization in an education system increasingly committed to lifelong human development.
- Release of human ingenuity will become a primary responsibility of education and society.
- Continuous improvement will replace quick fixes and defense of the status quo.
- Scientific discoveries and societal realities will force widespread ethical choices.
- Common opportunities and threats will intensify a worldwide demand for planetary security.
- Polarization and narrowness will bend toward reasoned discussion, evidence, and consideration of varying points of view.
- International learning, including diplomatic skills, will become basic, as nations vie for understanding and respect in an interdependent world.
- Greater numbers of people will seek personal meaning in their lives in response to an intense, high-tech, always-on, fast-moving society.
- Understanding will grow that sustained poverty is expensive, debilitating, and unsettling.
- Pressure will grow for society to prepare people for jobs and careers that may not currently exist.
- Competition will increase to attract and keep qualified educators.

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- Are we so intently focused on the bottom line that we've taken our eye off the future?
- Do we accept the status quo, or do we challenge it?<sup>6</sup>
- Are we doing things well?
- Are we doing the right things?
- What even greater benefit could result from our efforts?
- Do we have the right answers?
- Are we asking the right questions?

Richard Feynman, a fellow educator who won the 1965 Nobel Prize for Physics, said in his own challenging way, "I can live with doubt and uncertainty

and not knowing. I think it is much more interesting to live not knowing than to have answers that might be wrong."<sup>7</sup>

This philosophy should not be confused with herd mentality or "groupthink". In *The Wisdom of Crowds*, James Surowiecki warned against giving "too much credence to recent and high profile news while underestimating the importance of longer-lasting trends and less dramatic events."<sup>8</sup> Instead, we need to open our minds to the knowledge, experience, and ideas of diverse groups of people, turning them loose to consider possibilities, to learn from each other, and to help us, across all disciplines, as we think about and plan for the future. (See "12 Guiding Principles for Leaders Capable of Creating a Future" in figure 2.)

### Thriving in an Age of Renewal

The world is changing at warp speed. Education systems are expected to prepare their students for the future. They answered the call to get students ready for an agricultural society. Schools and colleges were transformed again as we moved into an industrial age. Today, we are entering what seems like the rarified atmosphere of the global knowledge/information age.

Our education systems, often working against great odds, have traditionally been among the most consistently successful institutions in our society. While schools and colleges continue their heroic efforts, often against a backdrop of higher expectations and limited resources, a sense of urgency is growing. An exhibit at the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C., carried this caption, "Companies come and go with the lightning speed of a computer's delete button."<sup>9</sup> That could apply to more than companies—all the more incentive for us to stay ahead of the curve.

Many schools and colleges are discovering that industrial-age schools are fighting an uphill battle in trying to prepare students for life in a whole new era. "Change" can be a nasty word to some. Say it, and someone is likely to respond, "Are you telling me I'm not doing a good job? Change makes me uncomfortable."

Rather than talk about change, then, let's focus our energies on developing descriptions of the system we need to help create an even more effective future for our schools and our students. It's one of the most uplifting things we could ever do and will become a part of our legacy.

Considering the 16 trends and 12 guiding principles for leaders mentioned in this article is just the tip of an iceberg. There are many other trends that will have an impact on education and society. Our hope is that this list will stimulate an expansive discussion and get us on a superhighway toward creating an even brighter future. □

Figure 2

### 12 Guiding Principles for Leaders Capable of Creating a Future

*Sixteen Trends . . . Their Profound Impact on Our Future*, published by ERS, and *Future-Focused Leadership: Preparing Schools, Students, and Communities for Tomorrow's Realities*, published by the American Society for Curriculum Development (ASCD), are companion publications. In *Sixteen Trends*, we directly address massive trends and consider their implications for education and the whole of society. In *Future-Focused Leadership: Preparing Schools, Students, and Communities for Tomorrow's Realities*, we zero in on future-focused leadership and communication and provide an in-depth look at the many ways we can scan the environment and develop a vision for the future. In that book is a chapter devoted to "12 Guiding Principles for Leaders Capable of Creating a Future." Here is a brief listing of those items.

- Curiosity, persistence, and genuine interest are the main power sources for futures thinking.
- Breadth and depth are both important.
- Leaders connect the dots and seek common ground.
- There are more than two sides to most issues.
- The future is not necessarily a straight-line projection of the present.
- Enlightenment and isolation are becoming opposites.
- Peripheral vision can help us avoid being blind-sided.
- A belief in synergy can spark knowledge creation and breakthrough thinking.
- Collateral opportunity and collateral damage both deserve our attention.
- Bringing out the best in others is basic.
- Courage and personal responsibility need to overcome fear and self-pity.
- The role of strategic futurist is part of everybody's job.

(Source: *Future-Focused Leadership: Preparing Schools, Students, and Communities for Tomorrow's Realities*, Gary Marx, published by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2006.)

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Chase, H. (1984). *Issue management . . . Origin of the future*. Stamford, CT: Issue Action Publications, 38.
- <sup>2</sup> Merriam-Webster Inc. (1983). *Webster's new collegiate dictionary*. Springfield, MA : Author, 1,258.
- <sup>3</sup> Gladwell, M. (2002). *The tipping point . . . How little things can make a big difference*. (First Back Bay paperback ed.) Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 7-9.
- <sup>4</sup> Wilson, E.O. (1998). *Consilience . . . The unity of knowledge*. New York: Borzoi Book, Alfred A. Knopf, 8-12.
- <sup>5</sup> Marx, G. (2006). *Future-Focused Leadership: Preparing Schools, Students, and Communities for Tomorrow's Realities*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- <sup>6</sup> Bennis, W., & Goldsmith, J. (2003). *Learning to lead*. New York: Basic Books, 8-9.
- <sup>7</sup> Feynman, R. (2004). Other Feynman quotes. *The Feynman Webring*. Retrieved from the Bill Beaty Science Hobbyist Web Site, <http://www.amasci.com/feynman.html>
- <sup>8</sup> Surowiecki, J. (2004). *The wisdom of crowds*. New York: Doubleday, a division of Random House, 229.
- <sup>9</sup> Caption at an exhibit devoted to "The History of the American Office" at the National Building Museum in Washington, DC, opened 2000.