

# 20 Billion Hours.

Why students should engage in work that matters beyond the walls of the school.

TIM BREEN, WATERSHED SCHOOL

## WHAT IF?

What if the work students did in school truly mattered beyond the walls of the school? What if instead of having a service learning component in the classroom, learning and service were one and the same? What if the “school work” students did was directly of service to the community?

## THE NUMBERS

In the United States, our 16 million high school students each average roughly 1200 hours of school work per year. That means that collectively, they do a staggering total of 20 billion hours of work for school each year. And almost none of it is geared toward directly improving the communities in which we live. The work they do is, we hope, good for their own learning and growth, but if that is all, is that enough?

## IMPROVING EDUCATION AND IMPROVING OUR COMMUNITIES

Dr. Mmantsetsa Marope, the Director of the International Bureau of Education (a UNESCO organization) challenges us to rethink curriculum in schools. She notes that our task is not simply to respond to the sweeping changes of the 21st century, but to actually drive positive change in our societies. The work our students do in schools should directly improve our world.

This is a step beyond what we commonly think of as community service work. It is not uncommon in schools to have students volunteer, for example, to stock shelves at a local food bank. What if, in addition to this important work, students collaborated with the leaders of the food bank on a research project about food insecurity? Through this work they could learn about economics, science, and history, develop critical thinking and communication skills, and make a tangible contribution to improving the world around them.

*This simple, yet radical, idea flows from five overlapping realities:*

1. Young people have so much untapped potential, so much energy, creativity, and vision. We waste it by focusing their time on work that does not have impact beyond the classroom and the individual.
2. Our human and ecological communities have many needs, and all organizations in the community (including schools) share a responsibility for making things better.
3. Students learn best when there is a true purpose for their work, when there is not only an authentic audience for it, but when it addresses an authentic need.
4. Students too often feel powerless in the face of the world challenges they learn about— we need to show them that they can make a difference. If we don't, they are unlikely to have hope for their future.
5. Because students' school work is really only for their own learning and growth (and not of use to others), we unintentionally send them the message that "it's all about them" — a message of individualism, rather than of commitment to the common good.

This is a simple, but radical idea. It requires administrators, teachers, and students to think differently about school work — why shouldn't the work students produce have an impact in the world? And it requires community leaders to partner with students and schools — to see the value in engaging with young people to make a positive difference in the world.

**Let's imagine, and create, a future where a student's research report doesn't end up in the recycling bin, it ends up on the Senator's desk.**

A future where the city council acts on the findings of a class research project. A future where young people are making real contributions everyday. A future where students know that they matter in their communities.

Now is the time to embrace this work. Because it's better for our communities. And because it's better for our students — better engagement, better skill development, more enduring understandings, and a deeper commitment to the common good.