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COVER STORY

EDUCATION

5 ways to see if a high school is preparing for future jobs

By Laurel Skurko

Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's CEO, and Bill Gates, Microsoft's CEO, are both college dropouts, yet they managed to create enormously successful companies. While both men were graced with high intelligence, they also attended exceptional high schools that prepared them very well for a future job market.

If some high schools are so distinguished as to produce graduates such as these, then how could a student fail? This question forces a look at the state of education in our community, how it can support an evolving job market and how, as parents, we should be evaluating high schools.

For a while now, educators have been talking about a so-called 21st century education, which includes the Common Core curriculum that's being introduced in public schools in California and across the nation. Common Core is designed to update the U.S. educational system for the realities of the modern workplace. Aside from the reading, writing and arithmetic, some schools now focus on creativity, collaboration, communication and critical thinking. Some also include life and career skills along with information technology, media and engineering skills.

If any of you were like me when my children applied to high school, then you hadn't developed a strong sense of how you were going to evaluate whether the schools were simply good at "selling" their school, or whether they were truly going to provide what your children needed for the future. I found this daunting, too, and have developed a checklist to determine whether your child's school is preparing him for a future job. You should see that:

1. Your child spends time each day on group work and group projects.

Today, companies need people who can work together in the same room or with teams scattered around the globe. The ability to collaborate is crucial. Francisco Delgadillo, the senior creative director at Oracle says that a large percent of the company's work is done collaboratively, between his teams and their clients, and he relies on staff



Lance Iversen / The Chronicle 2009

High school students should, according to the author, have access to computers and the software behind them.

members who can work well in teams. If a school can demonstrate how students work together, both in person during the school day, and, hopefully, using e-mail and other online collaborative tools, then they are preparing their students for a future with a demand for collaboration.

2. Your child is taught to focus on the process of thinking versus finding the correct answer.

What distinguishes a professional today is the ability to take on new types of problems every day. According to Dr. David Avrin, interventional radiologist and vice chair for radiology of informatics at UCSF Medical School, "As we become more reliant on technology to address some of our most challenging health care issues, the pace of change is much higher.

We are looking for critical thinkers who are equipped to solve new problems." How does a school approach an issue like critical thinking? The school should be focusing on the process that the student used to arrive at an answer and less on whether the answer was correct.

Ask your own child, "How did you get this answer?" and see what he or

she says. This is the same question the teacher should be asking.

3. Creativity is rewarded.

If you have spent time in different cultures, you realize America is considered a leader in creativity and innovation. I have spoken with government leaders in Singapore and other Asian countries who lament that their educational system sometimes makes their citizens too literal and prevents them from "thinking outside of the box." According to Kazuhiro Asakawa, management professor and specialist in innovation at Keio University in Japan, "America is widely recognized as a world leader when it comes to innovation, but this reputation comes from American universities, graduate schools and corporate research centers, and not necessarily from their high schools."

Do we see the creativity in our own children being nurtured — or stamped out — in the schools they are attending? In order for a school to promote creative thinking, school leaders need to start by articulating an openness to new ideas and approaches. Acceptance of new ideas and nonlinear thinking is not always easy. Try asking someone in

the school a question from a new angle or perspective. His or her ability to engage with the question and respond will demonstrate the caliber of the school's approach to fostering creativity.

4. Excellent communication is being promoted vigorously at all levels.

In an era of Twitter-size sentences and sometimes diminished expectations for students, we parents hope that our schools are the place that preserve and promote the exchange of thoughts at a much higher level. According to Dr. Jennifer Brokaw, founder of Good Medicine, "Communicating effectively and respectfully is a vanishing skill set even though it is essential for success in almost any field; be it health care, public service or the arts." One way to assess a school's communication standards is to listen to student presentations and conversations. (One parent swears by the conversations she overhears by different teams at soccer games as a true "benchmark" of the communications culture of a school.)

5. Your child is becoming familiar with software and an engineering mind-set.

More than ever, companies are using software to win customers, make decisions and conduct much of their operations. According to Jonathan Schwartz, CEO of CareZone and formerly CEO of Sun Microsystems, "Running a startup in San Francisco, you quickly realize that success is gated by the availability of software engineers. Marketing (as Facebook proves) has become a technical skill. Hailing a cab (as Uber proves) is a technology business. Even caring for a parent (as CareZone proves) is made easier via software. Those are the skills that will continue to transform industries everywhere."

No longer are books or teachers holding the keys to our children's future. Students are now required to navigate between their educational lives and their professional lives with an approach to knowledge instead of simply accessing the information. As our educational system adapts to this new reality, we should consider exactly what our schools are offering and whether they are truly meeting the needs of our children and our job market.

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