

Most Likely to Succeed

DISCUSSION GUIDE



OUR SCHOOL SYSTEM WAS DESIGNED IN 1893.



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Thank You

Thank you for bringing our documentary to your community! We have seen that when a broad cross-section of a school community sees the film together, everyone is encouraged and excited about making progress, with emerging consensus on the direction of change. This guide provides you with the background information you'll need to organize a successful screening, ideas for discussion, and suggestions for inspiring your community to take action. Please direct any questions by e-mail to info@mltsfilm.org.

- *The Most Likely to Succeed Team*

Synopsis

For most of the last century, entry-level jobs were plentiful, and college was an affordable path to a fulfilling career. That world no longer exists. The feature-length documentary *Most Likely to Succeed* examines the history of education, revealing the growing shortcomings of our school model in today's innovative world. Directed by acclaimed documentarian Greg Whiteley, the film has been named "among the best edu-documentaries ever produced" by Education Week. The Huffington Post stated that *Most Likely to Succeed* "delivers a message Americans need to hear, and desperately." Film Threat said, "This film should be a required course for all parents and educators."

There are a few things that distinguish the film from other documentaries on education. First, its artistic quality is extraordinary, and the story it tells will hold the attention of your audience. Second, it points to the critical issues affecting education today and conveys the urgency for moving our school into the 21st century . . . but in an inspiring way. Finally, the film poses questions rather than attempts to shove a point of view down the throats of the audience. As a result, we find people across a wide range of audiences engaged and inspired by the film, with lots of energy and commitment to a future of possibility.

Run Time: 89 Minutes

From The Film Team

From Greg Whiteley, Director, Writer, Producer:

“Two years ago, if you’d asked my wife and me to describe the ideal school for our two kids, I’d have probably said, ‘the school that will get them into the best college.’ If you pressed me to get more specific about the curriculum or what the teachers would be like, I would have probably cited some school with the highest test scores. I knew our nation’s schools were less than ideal, but I attributed their shortcomings to a general laziness, which caused us to trail China and India in math and science scores. As a result, I was sympathetic to the notion that the school day ought to be lengthened, more homework ought to be required, and teachers and administrators ought to be held accountable for poor test scores.

Three years ago, I met Ted Dintersmith, who in turn sent me a copy of Tony Wagner’s book *The Global Achievement Gap*. Over time, I started to realize that our school system, and the ways we assess it, have become obsolete. But after filming in well over one hundred classrooms across the U.S. and speaking extensively with people like Ted, Tony, Thomas Friedman of the NY Times, Sal Khan of Khan Academy, Laszlo Bock of Google and Sir Ken Robinson, my eyes began to open to what school could and should be. I wanted to curse all of them as I can’t express what a helpless feeling it was to be making this movie and then dropping my own kids off at a school I was now convinced was wasting their time. I can’t think of an issue more pressing or more personal than education.”

From Ted Dintersmith, Executive Producer:

“I spent my career in the world of innovation. And now I’m immersed in education, having visited hundreds of schools in the past five years. Innovation is the proverbial two-edged sword. On the one hand, it will create many opportunities for innovative young adults. But it will eliminate millions of standard, routine jobs -- and the 21st Century will be brutal for anyone leaving school trained to follow instructions and memorize content. I feel acute urgency in getting the message to students, parents, teachers, and school leaders that millions of futures are on the line. I hope the film conveys this urgency, while offering an inspiring view of what our students, and teachers, can do under the right conditions.

I’m passionate about this in part because I grew up in a family that struggled from week to week to make ends meet. I benefited from an education system that made sense for the times, and that helped level the playing field. That education system no longer exists. We owe it to future generations to provide them with an education that elevates their potential. And for those who might wonder if I’m doing this for personal gain, I’m donating any proceeds I get from the film to The Future Project, a non-profit transforming high schools in our inner cities.”

Host Talking Points

Education has long been hampered by inertia, and the best way to effect change is through broad community support. So please, please, please encourage your audience to join our community! At your event, ask them to visit our website to connect with us or use the sign-up sheets we provide to collect email addresses. This ongoing dialogue will help you to rally your community to move your school forward.

- The film premiered in January, 2015, at the Sundance Film Festival, which this past year accepted 1% of the 12,000 submissions it received.
- *Most Likely to Succeed* has gone on to be selected by numerous exceptional film festivals (Tribeca, Cleveland, Dallas, Sarasota, SxSWedu, Seattle, AFI, and more) and has been the opening night feature at top education conferences (ASU / GSV, Deeper Learning, Learn Capital, New Schools Venture Fund Summit, and Goldman Sachs / Harvard).
- The film has been seen by several likely 2016 Presidential candidates.
- The director of the film, Greg Whiteley, is one of America's top documentarians, with multiple Sundance premieres.
- The idea and funding for the film came from Ted Dintersmith, a venture capitalist who is an expert on innovation and education, with a forthcoming book co-authored with Tony Wagner.
- The team tapped into many leading education experts in the course of making the film, including Dr. Wagner, author of top-selling books *The Global Achievement Gap* and *Creating Innovators*.
- The film's website -- www.mltsfilm.org -- has resources to help your school. Whether you're a student, parent, teacher, or school leader, the site offers resources to help you, in big and little ways, align education with important life skills.

Noteworthy Statistics

- **53%** of recent college graduates are under—or unemployed.
- Student engagement in school plummets as they get to higher grades—from **80%** in elementary school to just **40%** by the beginning of high school.
- Just **11%** of employers—yet **96%** of academic provosts—believe colleges are effective in preparing graduates for the workplace.
- A Lego Foundation study reports that students lose more than **90%** of their creative capacity during their school years.
- Gallup found that college grads who had opportunities to apply classroom learning to internships, jobs, or ambitious projects are twice as likely to be engaged in work later in life.
- **65%** of today's grade-school children will end up in jobs that haven't been invented yet.
- The current length of a job for a millennial is an average of **2.6 years**, and millennials will have **15-20 jobs** over the course of their working lives.
- **By 2020, 40% to 50%** of all income-producing work will be short-term contracts, freelance work and so-called SuperTemps.
- **45%** of recent college graduates return home to live with their parents.

Discussion Questions

These are questions you can pose to your audience to facilitate a discussion about the need for transformation in your community's schools. They are designed to encourage people to personally reflect on the issues raised by the film and contemplate how they apply to the everyday reality of your community's students.

- The film makes the case that the world is changing rapidly, and that your students need a different set of skills to do well in a world of innovation. Do you agree with this premise, or is the traditional education model just fine? If it's problematic, how urgent is the need to change it?
- When you think back on your own time in school, what experiences had the biggest positive impact on you? How important were lectures and multiple-choice questions? For you, what were the "right conditions" for real learning and personal development? [Perhaps take a couple of minutes to reflect on this question, then discuss with a few neighbors.]
- What skills and characteristics do you see being promoted at High Tech High? What skills and characteristics do you see valued by the "Ace The Test" kids in Denver? Where does your school fall on the High Tech High <- ->Denver spectrum?
- What are some important differences between the school experience you see in the film and the school experience your students have? Where is this type of learning already happening in your school? What do you feel are the biggest gaps? Would you like your school to be more along the lines of HTH? Are there things they're doing there that you could implement tomorrow? [If no one can point to anything, remind them that the play is entirely student-led and directed. That the class taught by the big burly guy (Mark Aguirre) has students doing all of the talking. That students are encouraged to make decisions, take chances, experience failure, and be given the chance to rebound.]
- How many of you regularly review student assignments and tests to determine how much of what we have students do is memorization vs. real thinking? Is this something you could do? Should do?
- Do you feel it's easy or hard to make changes at your school? When it's hard, what makes it hard? Are you changing and moving forward at a pace that serves the best interests of your students? If not, what could you do to make innovation easier?
- What are some past success stories of innovative initiatives at your school? Can you point to new initiatives that failed, and do you know why? What can you do to encourage teachers to try new and innovative things, even at the risk of having some of them fail?
- Would you be in favor of your school placing more emphasis on cross-discipline, student-directed learning, at the expense of test preparation or AP courses?
- How much of an opportunity do your students have for independent study? Pursuing their own interests? Free time for exploration?
- How much of a role do your students have in creating and defining projects or big initiatives for themselves? What are great examples? Are initiatives like student plays and after-school clubs run mostly by students, or by adults? Are your students encouraged to take chances, risk failure, and learn how to deal with setbacks and recover? If not, how important do you think that is for your students? Are your students given the opportunity to make decisions on their own?

Frequently Asked Questions

This section includes the questions we find our audiences consistently asking and how we like to answer them. These questions primarily address the obstacles people perceive in transforming education in their own schools and communities.

Note: In our Q&A's we get lots of questions about High Tech High, many of which we cover below. Their website also contains a lot of background information, and is a great place to direct people who are interested in learning more -- <http://www.hightechhigh.org/about/>. Audiences frequently ask about the HTH budget (less than \$8,000 per student-year, well below California or national averages), demographic (45% free/reduced lunch), and student-teacher ratio (more than 20:1). In many ways, HTH counters many of the things we hear about what's required to have a great school.

Q. HTH was designed entirely as a new school. How can we change schools that already exist?

A. HTH was designed from scratch to prepare students for a world of innovation. Their approach is inspiring, but it doesn't tell us how to change existing schools with embedded practices. We wanted to showcase a compelling view of what education needs to be in the 21st Century, and ended up focusing on HTH. However, we have lots of complementary footage we'll be making available on changes made in existing schools, and strategies for effecting these changes. Also, we're investing deeply in our community outreach and change initiative to help any school make progress in equipping students for the innovation era.

Even though HTH was designed from scratch, there are lessons to be learned that can be applied in any school — about student engagement, how students learn, and how teachers collaborate and innovate. Also, any school or teacher can make sure the work assigned to students is authentic and challenging, that their learning reflects their passions and interests, and that the priority is on developing essential skills, not memorizing facts and low-level procedures.

Q. HTH is a charter school without unions or tenure. Does this film underscore the importance of eliminating the hold unions have over our school system?

A. Actually, we filmed at about twenty schools, including traditional public schools in a wide range of demographic circumstances. We found that schools, teachers, and students are capable of amazing accomplishments if we just give them the latitude to work on things of consequence. We found this to be true irrespective of union presence or tenure guidelines. The common denominator across these amazing schools is:

- the students have a sense of purpose for the work they're doing
- the school doesn't teach to the test
- students work on assignments that help them develop essential skills (instead of memorizing content and low-level procedures)
- students are engaged and eager to be at school
- students are learning how to learn

Q. Teaching at HTH looks really different. We have a teaching shortage in this country, and many teachers are reluctant to change their approach. What do we do to prepare teachers? What do we do if teachers can't or are unwilling to learn new methods?

A. Teachers need to learn and grow professionally by practicing their work with others – collaborating and receiving feedback and support in real time. You will notice in the film that teachers teach in teams. New teachers, like Scott, are paired with veteran teachers who offer guidance and support. In turn, new teachers bring fresh approaches and ideas, and stimulate creativity. Everyone learns, and this professional collegiality serves as a powerful model for what we want our students to experience.

Teachers enter their profession because they want to help kids learn. Changes in practice need to be in the context of why the changes matter, and how they foster deeper learning. When we start with what we want for kids, and then show teachers examples of student engagement, along with exemplars (schools and teachers) like we do in the film, we can help many teachers improve the learning outcomes for their students.

Finally, we need to encourage teachers to take chances and experiment -- risking a failure or two along the way. If we encourage our teachers to be innovative, we reinforce the goal of teaching students to be innovative and creative problem solvers.

It's easy to observe the film and focus on the class building the wheel. A class like that is substantially different from most current classrooms. However, it's helpful to consider what lessons can be drawn from the class producing the play. There are many aspects of the way that class is handled that can be readily implemented in any classroom tomorrow. If teachers express skepticism about the leap required to emulate the experiences of the film, have them focus on Mark Aguirre and what lessons they can take away from his approach.

High Tech High is one of two K-12 schools in the country to offer a graduate school of education. If you have teachers interested in learning more about how HTH helps teachers with professional development, have them check out the HTH online offering at <http://gse.hightechhigh.org/> or their course on Coursera at <https://www.coursera.org/learn/how-to-teach-us>.

Q. It seems like parents are a big part of the success of a school like HTH? What about schools where parents are not involved, or unable to be involved? What then?

A. Because students are generally highly engaged at a school like HTH, parental involvement is less essential — students direct themselves. However, as students become increasingly engaged in their education, they tend to lead their parents to be more involved as well (for example, the public exhibitions at HTH create a natural way to engage parents beyond that of a typical public school).

Q. One of our big challenges in US education today is social equity. Kids in well-off neighborhoods go to schools with more resources, often have above-and-beyond support from parents, and get the kind of attention we see these kids at HTH getting. How can we ensure that our education system gives every kid their fair chance?

A. First, some 45% of HTH's student community are eligible for free or reduced lunch, and the annual per student budget is just \$7,200. So we're not talking about an elite private school pondering where to invest its endowment.

But more important is the relationship between the student's school experience and their demographic background. Today, to a very large extent, the figures of merit in schools revolve around breadth of vocabulary (eighth graders memorize words most adults never use) and esoteric low-level math procedures (things no adult in the U.S., including our scientists and engineers, ever use). With these criteria, a kid from a wealthy neighborhood with well-educated parents -- especially when armed with tutors and out-of-school test prep courses -- is at a huge advantage over a kid from disadvantaged circumstances.

But the kids at HTH are being evaluated on the basis of their resourcefulness, creativity, collaboration, and determination. What we find in many, many different settings is that the well-groomed affluent kids fall short on these criteria, and the "disadvantaged" kids excel. We believe, emphatically, that shifting education's focus away from abstract and irrelevant material on timed standardized tests, and toward meaningful accomplishment in the face of adversity, is our most effective way to level the playing field.

Q. It seems like the film is advocating for a skills-oriented education. But I think content still matters and that knowledge for knowledge's sake is a good thing. This film seems to ignore that point.

A. We're not discounting the importance of content. The point of the film is that kids may benefit from learning content differently -- in order to build skills and develop their interests for learning. As a result, the HTH school year will cover fewer facts, formulas, and definitions. But the students will develop essential skills (communication, creative problem solving, critical analysis, and collaboration), learn how to learn, and really master and retain the content they absorb. We think this is better than learning more content that is then quickly forgotten and/or never used. Sadly, much of U.S. education policy confuses covering content with retaining content. For example, while every U.S. citizen has studied the Constitution at some point in their education, a whopping 94% of adults have no idea what role the constitution plays in our democracy. And for a real wake-up call, watch this short video -- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yRZZpk_9k8E.

Q. What about the common core standards? Does a school like HTH even consider those? How do they help or hurt this work?

A. The Common Core Standards are standards for what students should know or be able to do. They do not prescribe curriculum or pedagogy (teaching methods). Many of the schools like HTH that we visited have been able to incorporate these standards into their work.

Q. It sounds like standardized testing is the problem. Is that true? Don't we need some way of measuring at the national or global level? Should we be opting out for this kind of learning? Should we opt out of standardized testing altogether?

A. The film team wants to be crystal clear on this issue. It's important to hold students and teachers to high standards, and to assess their progress and achievement carefully. But we need to have an education system that puts priority on having kids learn what's important in life, not on what's easy to test. And we need to give teachers the trust and latitude to engage and inspire their students.

Standardized tests do not adequately measure the kinds of knowledge and skills students need to thrive in today's world. Many stress rote memorization of facts, mastery of low-level procedures, and in-the-box thinking. A test designed to be administered and scored in bulk can't deal with creativity or nuance, and can't get at important character traits. Things get that much worse when teaching and curricula are designed to serve the test, and kids learn for the purpose of taking the test. This precludes deeper learning, and the development of other important social and metacognitive skills students need to thrive.

Q. It seems like the film pushes Project Based Learning as the solution. Is it suggesting that this is the only way to learn?

A. Project Based Learning is a learning tool, not the defining element of learning. The film's primary message is that kids need and want to learn through work that is relevant, meaningful, and hands on. Deeply engaged learning can happen in a wide range of classroom experiences (many without any tie to projects), as well as through internships, after-school activities, or good old-fashioned jobs. The common thread is authentic work tied to a real sense of purpose.

Q. How can we change K-12 if higher education doesn't change? We live in a society that places lots of importance on a college degree, and at times obsesses over the "brand name" of someone's alma mater. How can we reimagine school if college admissions offices still want grades, standardized tests, and the current narrow measures of academic achievement?

A. We've found, somewhat counter-intuitively, that schools with well-thought-out, innovative programs experience advantages when it comes to college placement. Scarsdale High School, for instance, eliminated AP courses several years ago, and many parents were convinced that it would hurt their kids' college prospects. They actually experienced the opposite. Students had more time for independent projects, which strengthened college applications. Also, more and more colleges are looking for tangible evidence of achievement, instead of GPA's and SAT's. But, as the film recognizes, each family has to think through this issue for themselves to reach their own conclusion about what is in the best long-term interests of a young adult.

Q. What about school boards and state policymakers and leaders? How can we engage them in this?

A. Showing the film is a great way to start the conversation, leading naturally to a conversation about outcomes. What do we need students to be able to do in this new world? Asking leadership to ponder these questions helps shape a new vision for education – and sets the stage for real innovation in our schools.

We are finding, over and over, that the film is most powerful when seen by an audience that includes students, parents, teachers, and school leaders. When everyone sees that everyone else is excited about a re-imagined school experience, the discussion about change shifts from "Why should we do anything different?" to "What are some of the changes we can make, and how quickly can we implement them?"

Concluding Points

How kids learn best can't be a political issue. The whole issue of school has been caught up in a tangled, unproductive web of political or organizational controversy. That has to end.

We need to focus on the creation of authentic and meaningful work that develops important intellectual, creative and social skills, instead of pushing students through a school day tied almost entirely to content and skills that are easy to test.

Inspired, empowered and engaged students and teachers are the essential ingredients in great learning. You can get a posse of adults to try to push a kid through boring material that they don't believe they'll ever use (and are generally right about that), and it will always be painfully slow going. But if a kid wants to learn, and sees how it will help them achieve goals of importance, there's no stopping them.

There is no one "right" school model. But it's essential for any school to be a place that engages and inspires students and teachers, and produces the outcomes that matter most for students.

We need to let our schools, our teachers, and our students be innovative and creative, to engage in meaningful learning, and to develop the skills that will be essential to making their way forward in a world of innovation, not last century's world of manufacturing.

Calls to Action

Spread the word! Our website, www.mltsfilm.org, has compelling resources that you can share with colleagues to get them energized. Use these as a jumping off point to start discussing and implementing 21st century learning in your community.

Engage with us on social media: facebook.com/mltsfilm, Twitter and Instagram: [@mltsfilm](https://twitter.com/mltsfilm). Share the experience of your screening live over social media. Tag us in pictures and tweets as [#MLTSfilm](https://twitter.com/MLTSfilm).

Sign up for our mailing list: Stay updated on upcoming film festivals, community screenings, conferences, and press by signing up at www.mltsfilm.org

Do one small thing now! Have a conversation with students about what and how they want to learn. Talk to your school leader about trying out new after-school programs. Ask your school to give all students internet access on a few upcoming tests -- and see how much impact ready access to content has on your school experience. Get a group of parents together for an engaged discussion around 21st century learning. Check out [School Retool](#). You can start small, and grow together as a community.

Volunteer as an Ambassador: Have a special set of skills you think would be useful for our campaign? We'd love your help! To get involved, email our Community Outreach Manager at info@mltsfilm.org.

Host a Thought Leader Screening: We can help you bring together top thought leaders in your region from the fields of education, business, and politics. Galvanize a community-wide initiative and accelerate progress.

Thank you again for your support!