



Changing the Schools Can Change the World...

Patricia Kokinos
Author, speaker, school change activist

The Greening of Education

April 09

**The Rust Belt
Looks a Lot
Like School**



Overwhelmed by the corruption and rigid bureaucracy that undermine and govern her job as a school administrator, Connie, the protagonist of [Angel Park](#), decides to escape into nature, driving north into the woods and the small towns that once housed mammoth factories, now standing in ruins from disuse:

"So this was part of the Rust Belt, Connie thought, viewing the skeletons of the factories and wondering why a hundred years of progress had not happened here The shocking part was how much they resembled bombed-out versions of Cornwall High School--and thousands of other high schools around the country She visualized teenagers bouncing along a conveyor belt, dropping into their assigned bins according to predetermined specifications, the unfinished pieces dropping into the waste bin at the end marked 'substandard,' all of it perfectly synchronized to keep

Does anybody else remember when "columbine" meant a beautiful mountain flower (Omgosh, was that in *The Sound of Music*?) and life was simpler and less fraught and we knew much less about the world but ignorance was bliss? No, I don't want to go back there either, but I just had to think about it for a few moments last week when the tenth anniversary brought the heinous and [tragic events of Columbine High School](#) to the attention of the media, and we chewed over, once again, the grisly details. Schools were tightened up after that, but, alas, not much else changed, nor has it since, despite all we learned about disaffected youth. That same week also observed, quite coincidentally, both **Earth Day and Arbor Day**, and I couldn't help imagining how much better life--and school--would be if we gave that same generous, uplifting concern to providing healthy, nurturing, and supportive environments for every one of our kids

Leaving the "Factory" Behind

It wasn't until the Columbine disaster that the nation sat up sharply to note that things had changed dramatically. This was not an inner city school overrun by gangs, where fences and metal detectors had long been the norm, but an upper middle-class school in an earnestly involved suburban community. If it could happen there, it could happen anywhere. We locked down our schools and practiced emergency procedures and hired School Resource Officers and painted building numbers on the roof to help the SWAT teams coming in by helicopter. But did we hear what the investigators and sociologists were actually saying?

[Katherine Newman](#), a Princeton University professor of sociology who did extensive studies of school shootings, said schools must make it easy for students to report the threats they hear or troubling behavior they see: "I emphasize making it possible for kids to do something that's difficult for them in adolescence--crossing the demilitarized zone between adults and kids." At Columbine, and in nearly all other cases of school shootings, the perpetrators signaled their intent in many ways. Yet, what is most stunning is that other students and apparently some teachers, as well, ignored or at least failed to report what they read, saw, or heard.

the whole busy factory clanking smoothly along."

A vacation in the soothing greenness of nature is Connie's antidote for the mechanical world of school . . . but what about the kids? Find out how Connie resolves this dilemma by ordering the novel on [Amazon](#), and thanks for spreading the word!

Smartville, USA Recognizes Unique Talents

This one is going to blow you away: Remember when we said there ought to be charter districts where the entire system can be redesigned? Well, the [city school district of Gainesville, Georgia](#) has achieved just that, and in the process has created themed, open access academies where elementary students discover that learning to be smart is cool!

Please take a moment to read the inspiring article about the Enota Multiple Intelligences Academy in [Edutopia](#) (click it!) because the simple genius of the school design will make you want to print out the article and run down to your local school board meeting right now! In the "greenest" of all possible worlds (see article at right), kids take part in real-world activities that allow them the flexibility to discover and express multiple ways of being smart. **"Changing the definition of smart needed to happen for a long time,"** said one teacher on the collaborative teaching team. Their goal--just as we've all been saying--is "to give kids the feeling that the school belongs to them, and that they want to come here every day." Imagine!

Not only is the school based on integrating the concepts of Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences--that everyone has a way of learning and a way of being "smart"--but it uses the **village**

Studies conducted jointly by the Secret Service and the Department of Education over the past decade continued to corroborate what the sociologists reported. **Student after student told the researchers that they did not feel attached to their school, did not feel there was anyone they could talk to, and did not feel the adults in their school communities respected them.** "To me, these interviews were a wake-up call," says DOE researcher [William Modzeleski](#). "What is significant, doesn't cost a thing, and can help prevent a school shooting is forging connections between schools and kids. This is a must for every school."

Yet, scared as everyone was then, and as much as everyone within schools became reporters of weirdness in all its forms, the fear dissipated in a few years, and schools went right back to being better fortified but still hopelessly mechanical, the idea of forging connections with students relegated to that same eternal "to-do" list as more time for teacher collaboration, more parental involvement, and more technology. In the everyday life of a typical school, grinding along as it always has--one teacher standing up in front of an often too-large class; the defensive us-versus-them mentality between staff and students/parents; a schedule that marches kids from room to room in 50-minute intervals, all day, every day; and the usual insider peer groups that go out of their way to exclude "outsiders"--nothing has changed at all.

We are still operating the kinds of schools that the early 20th century devised to implement mass education, the assembly-line factory-style schools where kids flow in and out of classrooms right on schedule, have information attached to them, and are shunted on to the next station. All right, I'm exaggerating, but truly, isn't it about time we figured out that Henry Ford's Model T manufacturing plan cannot any longer be our model for school design? Do we really want a public education system that shoves kids through the system as if they were products on a fast conveyor belt to the shrink-wrap machine?

I hope I'm not popping anyone's bubble when I tell you that the Industrial Revolution has been over and done with for a long time, and even the Information Revolution has been running full-tilt for decades. Now we're swinging into a full-fledged Green Revolution as people all over the world come together to take action for a healthy and sustainable environment, as the recent celebration of Earth Day demonstrated. The **"Green Generation" is the theme** for the fortieth anniversary (I kid you not!) of Earth Day in 2010, and one of the principles of the international movement is this: **Creation of a new green economy that lifts people out of poverty by creating millions of quality green jobs and transforms the global education system into a green one.** This is about the same length of time we've been fooling around with school reform, and yet the Green Movement has built an international consortium and the School Reform Movement is still splintered into about a million groups

concept of Smartville to give purpose to the wide range of hands-on, creative learning activities. What's more, **students not only know and feel that they're learning, but they know how they're learning.**

The designer of the innovative approach, multiple intelligences expert Sally Meadors, was disturbed by the way "academic hierarchies" were causing problems for students who had many other talents that may not have been traditionally "academic." "To motivate and teach a child, you have to find out where their strengths are and what they're passionate about, and use that to move them in the direction of learning new skills," she says.

An exciting way of creating a new future, to be sure, and I hope the whole district is gearing up for the ways this elementary academy has the potential to push forth a transformation of middle and high schools for every student. Go, Georgia!

ClassWish Brings Supplies to Teachers

Know a teacher who would love to have some new supplies that he or she doesn't have to buy out of pocket? At this moment of underfunded schools and economic crisis, a new non-profit called [ClassWish](#) is bringing that Cinderella scenario to teachers in schools across the country. They are **matching teachers' wish lists with donors and providing ways for parent groups to raise funds** for all of those special projects that teachers would love to do but have no way of financing.

The new site is one of the projects of [Wellgood LLC](#), an innovative consulting firm designed to help nonprofits fulfill their missions. Now there's a business plan solidly

(check out Google), each with their separate agendas, political affiliations, theories of education (of course, everyone is an expert--I know, including me!), and mysterious sources of funding.

So, the obvious thing is to hop onto that Green Revolution express and use our own knowledge and expertise to expand the definition of what transforming "the global education system into a green one" might actually mean. **It's a whole new metaphor for the kinds of schools we have always known in our hearts would be the healthiest for kids, teachers, parents and other living things: natural, interconnected and interdependent, growing, nurturing, supple, fresh, organic.** Yes, organic and natural, and I'm not some throwback tree-hugger from an Oregon hippie commune (although they still have some ideas that the rest of us could use!). Translated into School-Speak, that means something as simple as "growing naturally out of the child's curiosity and intense need to know how things work." In elementary schools, I am sure the question most asked by kids is "Why?" but by the time they get to high school, it has become "Do I have to?" What untold gigabytes of childhood brainspace are we losing every minute to what one grandmother who wrote to me described as our "hopelessly outdated" system?

So, here's the deal: Think about that "greening" metaphor in terms of our schools and imagine the breath of fresh air that would waft into everyone's life if we were all to agree on some simple, common sense approaches to changing the schools:

- **Moving our schools from "factory" to "family"** in concept and design, away from mechanical models and toward human-friendly models of interacting.
- **Flattening the bureaucratic hierarchy** and moving more people into direct contact with kids every day.
- Creating **small, personalized, supportive learning environments** for every child, at every age.
- Creating **flexibility for collaborative teams** of teachers to work interchangeably with teams of kids.
- Providing time, training and opportunity for teachers to reimagine their roles as **professional leaders and coaches for academic learning.**
- Providing new approaches to learning that build on **higher order thinking skills, creativity, collaboration, and entrepreneurship**--for students and teachers.

If this sounds like an impossible dream, consider this: The disconnection, isolation, and rigid bureaucratic approach of our factory schools have produced the failures of the present moment. Suicides, drop-outs, and stone-cold killers are the by-products of our system, along with gang-bangers, pregnant teenagers, drop-outs, drug addicts, and runaways. **Schools are the petri dish where we grow our future. What do you want to see growing there? I vote for smart, supportive, human-friendly schools to grow the**

centered in the new economy that is growing up all around us! Their current focus is another brilliant idea--a new way of donating and gift-giving that helps people express and share their values with others--at their [Change The Present](#) donation portal.

That's an enterprising background for ClassWish and a good enough reason to pass on the message of their service to all the teachers you know. Just another way of Greening Education and transforming the system into the uplifting and human-friendly interaction that we want to see happening all over the country!



hopeful future that can change the world for all of us

I invite you to use this information to take one small action today, right now, as you're reading this. Our new leadership in Washington has completed its first 100 days just this week, to [glowing reviews from the press](#). The nation is believing a little more each day that change is possible, *especially* in the midst of crisis. President Obama appears determined to live up to his campaign promises, a breath of fresh air in itself, and he keeps asking for our input. Here is [an opportunity to tell your story](#) with a very good chance that an actual person will read it. The Obama team is, once again, asking for real people to respond, so please click on the link above, select EDUCATION from the list on the left side of the page, and follow the prompts to write your own comments about changing the schools. I'm going to send the list I offered in this column and urge the administration to take an even more radical approach to school reform than they have already offered. Please feel free to cut and paste this list for your own message, as well!

While it may seem counter-intuitive to think that the federal government can make an impact on what happens to our local schools, remember that we have wasted forty years and an untold number of student lives at the local level, tinkering with piecemeal reforms that never really happened. **Remember how the federal mandates of No Child Left Behind have hammered kids, teachers, and schools, and profoundly narrowed both the knowledge base and methods of teaching. With that much demonstrated clout, it's up to us to urge the Obama administration to use federal money and law-making power to leverage a renewal for schools and, indeed, the Greening of Education, as we have defined it here.**

Thanks to those of you who took the time last month to send our message to your representatives in Congress, and to forward this newsletter to your friends and colleagues. This time when you forward the newsletter, please urge your contacts to **press the little green Join Our Mailing List button** at the bottom of this newsletter. When we can gather the numbers to give our new, human-friendly agenda some clout, that same grassroots energy that propelled Barack Obama into the White House will work for us, for our kids, and for the future of our country, too.

Thanks for joining me in our growing **grassroots (surely the "greenest" of metaphors)** movement to Change the Schools!

With all best wishes,
Patricia Kokinos
www.ChangeTheSchools.com