

School Reform is Missing a Key Ingredient

The last several decades have seen Americans wake up to the fact that their schools are failing. Nowhere is this more apparent than in student performance on [national](#) and [international](#) tests.

Such results have caused American educators and policy makers to flounder around trying to find a way to set American students back on track; however, these efforts usually take place within the same institutional structure of the classroom. Could this be why American schools are not seeing any progress despite multiple reforms?

A new high school in Somerville, Massachusetts, is attempting to test this theory. According to [USA Today](#), the school, known as Powderhouse Studios, is attempting to break free from the traditional form of classroom instruction prevalent in America's classrooms. While students will still work on traditional subjects such as "math, science and the humanities," they will learn these subjects through tutors instead of the normal classroom instructors.

Another difference between traditional schools and Powderhouse Studios will be the latter's incorporation of "real-world work," which one of the school's founders, Alec Resnick insists is "key to engaging students who might be bored or distracted with traditional classwork." As *USA Today* notes:

"Resnick said that rigorous, challenging and interesting work is often the thing that's missing for students who feel disengaged in a traditional high-school setting."

Whether or not Powderhouse Studios' new approach to education works or not remains to be seen. That said, the idea of

incorporating real-world work and giving more individualized instruction does seem to hold promise, a fact once acknowledged by former New York teacher of the year [John Taylor Gatto](#):

“Independent study, community service, adventures and experience, large doses of privacy and solitude, a thousand different apprenticeships – the one-day variety or longer – these are all powerful, cheap, and effective ways to start a real reform of schooling.”

However, Gatto went on to say that reforms like these will largely fall flat unless they also incorporate an often overlooked component:

“But no large-scale reform is ever going to work to repair our damaged children and our damaged society until we force open the idea of “school” to include family as the main engine of education. If we use schooling to break children away from parents – and make no mistake, that has been the central function of schools since John Cotton announced it as the purpose of the Bay Colony schools in 1650 and Horace Mann announced it as the purpose of Massachusetts schools in 1850 – we’re going to continue to have the horror show we have right now.”

Do you think Gatto is right in his assessment? Is every attempt at innovation and school reform destined to fail if it doesn't heavily incorporate a student's family?