



Press Kit

Most Likely To Succeed

🕒 89 minutes

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Synopsis

The feature-length documentary *Most Likely To Succeed* examines the history of education in the United States, revealing the growing shortcomings of conventional education methods in today's innovative world. The film explores compelling new approaches that aim to transform learning as we know it. After seeing this film, the way you think about "school" will never be the same. Over a century ago, American education underwent a dramatic transformation as the iconic one-room schoolhouse evolved into an effective system that produced an unmatched workforce tailored for the 20th Century. As the world economy shifts and traditional white-collar jobs begin to disappear, that same system remains intact, producing potentially chronic levels of unemployment among graduates in the 21st Century. The film follows students into the classrooms of High Tech High, an innovative new school in San Diego. There, over the course of a school year, two groups of ninth graders take on ambitious, project-based challenges that promote critical skills rather than rote memorization. *Most Likely To Succeed* points to a transformation in learning that may hold the key to success for millions of our youth – and our nation – as we grapple with the ramifications of rapid advances in technology, automation and growing levels of income inequality.

From The Film

“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.”

Greg Whiteley
Director, Writer, 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.”

Ted Dintersmith
Executive Producer

A Provocative Look at the Future of Education

Once the envy of the world, the American educational system produced an unmatched workforce tailored for the 20th Century. But as the global economy has shifted over the past 20 years, the United States has clung to an obsolete education model with an emphasis on teaching to the test, thus leaving our students woefully unprepared for 21st Century employment and disillusioning our teachers. In the new feature-length documentary *Most Likely to Succeed*, which premiered at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival, director, writer and producer Greg Whiteley examines the shortcomings of conventional education methods in today's changing world. The film also explores an exciting new approach that promotes so-called "soft skills," which many believe are more important in today's workplace than the "Three R's." At a time when many recent college graduates find themselves unemployed or underemployed, *Most Likely to Succeed* explores the causes of this phenomenon and offers up a possible solution. Interviews with education specialists, economists, business leaders, teachers, students and parents shed light on the urgent need for a new kind of education that develops the uniquely human skills and capacities that cannot be replaced or made obsolete by a machine.

Most Likely to Succeed traces education in America back to the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, when reformers like Horace Mann advocated for a more regimented system inspired by innovations like those Mann observed in Prussia. There, every male child from the ages of seven to fourteen studied a systematic program of subjects that ensured every student receives the same information delivered in the same way. The goal was to produce a more disciplined, homogenous and obedient military.

In America, the Prussian model was championed by titans of industry including J.P. Morgan, Andrew Carnegie and Cornelius Vanderbilt, who were looking for ways to build a more dependable labor force to man their factories. A cohesive course of study was developed for American schools with a standard set of subjects, including English, mathematics and history, with an emphasis on learning to follow instructions.

"The economy we created over the course of the 20th century was an economy that needed a large number of moderately skilled people who could do the 'Three R's' and who could follow pretty simple instructions," says economist Andrew McAfee, Director of Digital Business at MIT, who provides thoughtful analysis throughout the movie. "As we head deeper into the 21st century I really don't think that's the case anymore, yet our educational system still seems to be focused on turning out people with that relatively small set of skills."

Whiteley looks back to 1997 when chess-champion Gary Kasparov lost a series of matches to the IBM-created supercomputer Deep Blue.

**"If we teach today as
we taught yesterday,
we rob our children
of tomorrow."**

John Dewey
Educational Reformer

“Jeopardy” game-show champion Ken Jennings recalls his defeat on national television by IBM’s Watson. “I sort of felt like some ’80s Detroit auto worker ... looking at the robot who would replace him on the welding machine,” Jennings says in an interview. “Maybe game-show contestant is the first Information Age job to be made obsolete by our new computer overlords, but I feel like it’s not going to be the last.”

Whiteley takes his cameras to a new and unconventional school in San Diego. High Tech High, where project-based learning is a central precept, was founded by educator Larry Rosenstock in collaboration with Gary Jacobs of the global semiconductor company Qualcomm and Kay Davis of the Business Roundtable. The school provides an alternative to traditional rote memorization in teacher-led classrooms by giving students the means to explore subjects more deeply.

The school promotes learning by doing and aims to create all-important “soft skills” such as independent thinking, collaboration and decision-making—qualities many experts believe are critical to the next wave of American workers. Humanities teacher Mark Aguirre explains it this way: “One of the things we tell kids is: ‘Listen, you have a choice: I can micromanage you through this thing or you can do it on your own.’ So what I think we do is help them find ways to figure it out on their own.”

“For all of human history the primary focus of education has been about acquiring more content knowledge. Today, content is ubiquitous. It’s free. It’s on every Internet-connected device.”

Tony Wagner
Harvard Innovation Lab

For teachers, working at High Tech High means having the freedom to design and teach their classes in any way they choose, even if it means turning traditional teaching methods on their heads. There is no mandate to prepare kids for standardized testing. There are no bells, no set class periods, no single-subject courses. Instead, students drive the conversation in seminar-style classes. In the classroom, Whiteley observes two groups of ninth graders. In one class, physics, engineering and humanities collide as the students are asked to study great civilizations to define what makes a society rise and fall, and design a final project that illustrates their theories with a system of interlocked gears, cogs and wheels. Another group embarks on an in-depth study of fifth-century Athens that affords the kids the opportunity to learn about government, human rights, foreign policy and drama—as well as the science and engineering of set design and lighting. Their final project, entirely designed and implemented by the students, will be a riff on Euripides’ play about sexual politics, *The Trojan Women*, transported to modern-day Pakistan.

The unfamiliar learning process can be disorienting for students used to a more traditional atmosphere, but that is part of the reason for teaching this way. As Jed Silverstein, an English teacher at Riverdale Country School, explains, “If we can compete with other countries, it’s got to be in producing citizens capable of innovative thinking. What we need to produce are the people who seem to do well in this new information economy where creativity, a kind of anti-authoritarianism, is celebrated. These are the people who are totally willing to try stuff, to learn from their failures and to try again.”

“Most Likely to Succeed provides a new vision of what is possible in today’s schools, with a compelling example from High Tech High in San Diego, CA. The school emphasizes creativity, project-based learning, technology-enabled instruction and a student-centered culture. This film should be watched by every caring parent and educator who wants to improve the learning process.”

Cindy Johanson
Edutopia

Even the most avid proponent of project-based learning cautions against seeing it as a panacea for what ails American schools. Some parents who choose to send their kids to High Tech High express ambivalence about the lack of emphasis on the high-stake test scores and AP classes that colleges look for in prospective students. But as Whiteley points out, High Tech students do quite well on conventional measures of success even though the school’s focus is on engaging and inspiring its students. Even more impressive are the changes Whiteley documents in the ninth-grade students he observes. When Samantha, painfully shy, unexpectedly volunteers to direct the play they have written, the experience transforms her. She evolves into a self-assured young woman, comfortable with making quick decisions and implementing them. Whiteley also visits high schools and colleges all over the country that are employing unconventional techniques to prepare their students for the new economy. “Education is a complex human system,” says education expert Sir Ken Robinson. “It’s much more like gardening than engineering. If you’re a gardener, you don’t make it grow. The plant grows itself if you provide the right conditions.”

Director, writer and producer Greg Whiteley’s first film, *New York Doll*, premiered at the 2005 Sundance Film Festival and was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize. His second film *Resolved*, won the Audience Award at the Los Angeles Film Festival in 2008 and was nominated for two Emmys®. Whiteley’s third outing, *Mitt*, was selected as the Opening Night Film at the 2014 Sundance Film Festival. He was born in Provo, Utah, and raised in Seattle, Washington. He lives now in California with his wife Erin and two kids, Henry and Scout.

Producer Adam Leibowitz was born in Norwalk, Connecticut. He attended Emerson College in Boston. Leibowitz has worked at One Potato Productions since 2009 and was a producer on 2014’s *Mitt*. He lives in Los Angeles

After a 25-year career in venture capital, executive producer Ted Dintersmith is now focused on issues at the intersection of innovation, education and film. He served as part of the delegation representing the U.S. at the United Nations General Assembly, where he focused on global education and entrepreneurship. Dintersmith is a partner emeritus with Charles River Ventures and has served on the board of the National Venture Capital Association.

Press Quotes

“Whiteley has constructed an engaging look at how big picture issues can be intimately explored through human confessionals. All of his subjects offer contemplative and honest assessments of their role in a system that might need a complete overhaul to survive.” — *The Hollywood Reporter*

“Whiteley captures an inspiring solution: when teachers give youth more agency in their education, it leads to the kind of innovation and character-building confidence skills that are essential for success in a post-internet job market. A thoughtful consideration, and with lots of heart.” — *Movie City News*

“Plenty of documentaries have been made about the failures of our educational system in this country but Greg Whiteley’s film makes a case that our entire structure of how we teach and learn needs to be adjusted to match the electronic age.” — *RogerEbert.com*

“Most Likely to Succeed is not a one-stop enumeration of the ways to achieve exemplary education and train the next generation of learners in how to digest knowledge, but instead a thought-provoking and energizing argument for aiming outside the box. It is nowhere near the time to give up hope, and this boost of creative optimism feels like just the shot of adrenaline that the education system in America needs to revitalize itself.” — *Shockya*

“Whiteley’s latest film offers a thought-provoking exploration of our education crisis, both in identifying fundamental problems with our historical approach to teaching and student learning, and by considering compelling potential alternatives which might very well offer practical solutions for the future.” — *What (Not) To Doc*

“It is an alarming documentary, but also hopeful, as it showcases innovative K-12 schools that are adapting to changes, even if the educational system as a whole is not.” — *Provo Daily Herald*

“Whiteley certainly acknowledges the results from this new form of education are too preliminary to make any rash decisions, but his comprehensive investigation, exciting classroom immersion, and appealing teacher interviews certainly beg for the discussion to continue far into the future.” — *Slug Magazine*

Expert Quotes

“The 21st century is going to be all about building, creating, and innovating. This remarkable film shows a path of how we can empower all of our children to do that.” — Sal Khan, Khan Academy

“Until now, none of us has been able to fully capture the need and vision for a new model of education. “Most Likely to Succeed” has done it! Show it to your students! Show it to your PTAs! Show it to your faculty! Show it to your school board! And let the conversation begin on how we bring this kind of education to every child so each one is truly ready for the challenges of 21st century life.”

“My wife and I stayed up way past our bedtime to watch the movie. It is terrific! It is thrilling to see the case and the vision for a new model of education pulled together as a compelling visual story. Those of us proposing a new model for 21st century schools and districts are lucky to have this great film help us build momentum for our collective efforts.” — Ken Kay, CEO, EdLeader21, founding President, Partnership for 21st Century Skills, co-author, “Leader’s Guide to 21st Century Education”

“I am watching the video and am in tears at the beauty of what’s being visualized as learning in the unfolding voices and images. I want to share this with everyone and am already anticipating the release. We need an opening at the Paramount here in Cville! It captures the dreams of so many teachers who are helping to catalyze similar work in our 26 Albemarle schools. It’s hard work and often resisted work but when I see the joy among our children who are finding pathways to learning that give them voice and agency in their own learning, I know it’s the right work. Thank you - this made my early morning after a long week of budget meetings.” — Pam Moran

Filmmaker Bios



Greg Whiteley

Director, Writer, Producer

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Ted Dintersmith

Executive Producer

After a 25-year career in venture capital, Ted Dintersmith is now focused on issues at the intersection of innovation, education and film. He served as part of the delegation representing the U.S. at the United Nations General Assembly, where he focused on global education and entrepreneurship. Dintersmith is a partner emeritus with Charles River Ventures and has served on the board of the National Venture Capital Association, chairing its Public Policy Committee. He earned a Ph.D. in engineering from Stanford and an undergraduate degree in physics and English from the College of William and Mary.



Adam Leibowitz

Producer

Adam Leibowitz was born in Norwalk, Connecticut. He attended Emerson College in Boston. Leibowitz has worked at One Potato Productions since 2009 and was a producer on 2014’s *Mitt*. He lives in Los Angeles.

Credits

Director

Greg Whiteley

Executive Producer

Ted Dintersmith

Producers

Greg Whiteley
Adam Leibowitz

Film Editing

Adam Ridley

Cinematography

Gabriel Patay

Original Music

Matthew Lurie
Josh Ethan Johnson
Dan Kramer

Associate Producer

Erin Whiteley

Re-recording Mixer/Supervising
Sound Editor

William McGuigan

Additional Cinematography

Roderick Santiano
Charles Ackley
Anderson
Terry Zumalt
Henry Whiteley

Additional Editing

Adam Leibowitz

Animation

Brian Wade Scott

Strategic Advisors

Tony Wagner
Stephanie Rogen