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*Matthew Resnick is a senior at Eleanor Roosevelt High School in Manhattan. His interest in education policy and technique began in his own school, where as an appointed member of the School Leadership Team he advocated for the integration of current events in the school curriculum. In December of 2011, he began blogging for The Huffington Post. Matthew continues to collaborate with students, teachers, and administrators to advocate for education reform.*

As students rise up the grades, there are a number of changes that should occur. Some of them are a given; a student should be able to handle more challenging material, handle a heavier workload, take responsibility for his or her actions, set and achieve basic academic goals, and so on. Qualities such as these are generally easy to measure – you can tell from a student’s academic and behavioral record if they are meeting the criteria, and there are basic guidelines in place to try and help students become more competent in these areas. Some other changes are a lot less straightforward – most importantly, acquiring the skills necessary to one day break free from the role of student, and step out from behind a desk as a learned citizen capable of participating and leading. How do we measure that? How can we tell if a student is ready to go out into the world and make a difference? A report card won’t tell you. A multiple-choice test won’t tell you. A policy alone won’t tell you. It’s time to get creative; to be daring and try new things, and to do whatever it takes to give students an education that stretches beyond the words of a textbook and the walls of a classroom.

What exactly is the purpose of education? If you ask around, you will likely hear a range of responses – but there is no denying that an education should prepare students. What it may prepare students for can vary – and that is the beauty of living in a country where we have choices. Regardless of what a student decides to pursue, all will become part of the world, and to some degree be influenced by what is happening around them. They will be faced with the decision to become a follower or a leader. Are our schools doing enough to prepare students for either of those roles? Is the emphasis on standardized tests teaching students anything about what is happening in the world today? The answer is no. The material that we are being taught and tested on is valuable, and it is necessary, but it means nothing to students if they are not being taught why it is valuable and how it relevant to today. Teaching historical events without citing modern relevance is missing a powerful point that could potentially transform the value of history, as well as current events in the eyes of students. It disappoints me when students walk out of a classroom and I hear something along the lines of “Why do I even need to know this?” There are so many opportunities to connect the current curriculum with relevant events. In my school, I started an initiative to start bringing more current events into the classroom, and I worked with students, teachers, parents, and administrators to integrate my initiative without disrupting the required material. The result? After just one current events discussion held in every class, participation and enthusiasm increased. I can’t express how happy I would feel after someone raises their hand in

class and starts their sentence with “this is kind of like what’s going on today because...” A statewide initiative could bring this enthusiasm to every classroom. My hope is for every single student to find meaning in their education, and for no one to ever walk out of a classroom and question why they just learned what they did.

I realize that it is not easy to create a dramatic shift in curriculum quickly, but I urge this commission to begin taking action, and begin giving students an education that will really mean something to them, and will empower them as leaders of today and tomorrow. I’m not calling for an education overhaul to happen overnight. Start by taking advantage of the resources already being used, such as state tests. You can give us as many standardized tests as you want, but no matter how many we take, we are not going to become standardized students. We’re creative, we’re curious, we’re each unique. Give us the chance to showcase our creativity using information that is actually relevant to our lives. Why not make the tests more relevant and put a couple of short-response questions requiring students to creatively discuss current events? Give teachers the freedom to teach their classes relevant information, assign projects that promote creativity and spark interest, and host discussions about current events, knowing that not only is it more helpful and engaging for the students, but that the education system as a whole recognizes the importance of real world education. If the teachers are going to be forced to teach to a test, let it be to a test that is more than factual regurgitation, but rather an analysis of students’ creativity and understanding of information that actually means something to them. It is time for policymakers to re-evaluate the real purpose of education. This country is at a crucial point, and the only way we are going to move forward is to prepare all of our students to become informed and capable leaders, ready to take action, and ready to create a better future.