

What should a modern workforce education look like?



By [Guest Voices](#)

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The Rip Van Winkle Rule asks one to consider if they fell asleep 100 years ago and woke up today, what aspects of American life would totally freak them out and what would seemingly be the same. While healthcare, manufacturing, transportation, and most other sectors have rapidly advanced due to the effects of innovation and technological progress, it is likely that the modern school classroom is the singular place one would still feel quite comfortable.

The world has changed. School has stayed the same.

As a recent Birmingham transplant having lived out of state the past 14 years, my family and I decided to rent a home within city limits to figure out where we ultimately wanted to settle. Birmingham has changed so much since my college days, but the schools have stayed the same.

With two small children, one in preschool, we are already having to consider what schools our children will attend. We want our children to have a diverse education, so they are exposed to different people, ideas, and cultures than they come home to each day. We want teachers to act as facilitators, not to stand and deliver at the front of the classroom. We want our children to gain independence, not to rely on adults to usher them through each moment of their day. We want our children to learn through doing, not solely by sitting and listening, while we're left hoping their attention lasts long enough to avoid a phone call home. Most of all, we want our children to develop a love of learning, something I didn't always experience in school. In fact, my final two years of high school I left Grissom for almost 3 hours a day to go work on

my car at Huntsville's Center for Technology. I knew I was college-bound, but I was bored out of my mind at school and wanted to meet others, work with my hands, and be challenged to think critically, problem-solve collaboratively, and see immediately the results that my learning had on the real world (and my 1983 Chevy Camaro). Though I managed to avoid taking a physics class in my now 21 years of formal education, the best physics lessons I ever experienced were in that automotive technology class. The internal combustion motor and the transmission's torque conversion are physics brought to life.

Too often however, there is a real disconnect between the two-dimensional classroom learning found on a textbook page or a blackboard, and the real world application that learning should have. In most schools, learning lacks relevance, and when the relevance is missing, student engagement is sure to follow.

The causes of this are innumerable, starting with the tremendous burden we place on educators to develop our future workforce while also playing counselor, parent, friend, nurse, and even Uber driver (some quite literally). Additionally, educators must tackle all the effects of poverty that enter a classroom with a child, yet the tools at their disposal are largely confined to the silos of the Ed sector, such as adapting tests, curriculum, and instruction. It's a futile task and one that leads far too many teachers to burn-out or leave the profession altogether.

However, there are countries like Switzerland and Germany that are getting this right. They realize that everyone wins when youth are guided into adulthood with professional mentors and experts in their field. Through apprenticeship learning, youth not only learn the value of hard work and get the experience that comes with it, they also get paid, as teenagers, to do real world work. These countries have much lower unemployment rates, much higher employee retention, and much fewer dropouts and kids who fall through the cracks.

That's why I'm starting Build Urban Prosperity (Build UP, for short). Build UP looks nothing like school as we know it. Instead, it focuses on real-world skills and experiences, and academics with direct linkages to paid apprenticeships. Build UP- Ensley, our launch site, will enroll Ensley youth, otherwise zoned for a "failing" school, to work with one another and real estate and construction professionals to renovate blighted, abandoned homes into like-new duplexes. Over the course of 6 years, youth will earn a high school diploma, an associate's degree in a chosen field, and they'll have career skills to directly enter middle-class jobs, completely debt free. They'll also take-over the deeds to the duplexes to become both homeowner and landlord in one fell swoop, with interest-free mortgages and passive income that enable them to quickly build wealth. These youth will not only rebuild their own homes, but they'll also collectively revitalize their larger community, by stabilizing the neighborhood and launching small businesses to create jobs. Build UP is by no means a silver bullet to solving our education conundrum, but it will provide certain youth with a different opportunity, one that allows them to pursue their dreams and determine their own paths to a successful future.

To learn more, enroll your student, or to support our program, please visit www.BuildUP.work or email info@BuildUP.work.