



THE OUTDOOR CLASSROOM

*At a local charter school,
environmental education broadens kids' thinking*

Thomas Friedman, the New York Times columnist known for his insightful analysis of global developments in *The World Is Flat*, has an idea about what our schools need to do better.

"If schools can actually produce people who are good synthesizers, they're going to be more effective and innovative workers," he says.

Friedman is hardly alone in stating what many business owners know to be true: the 21st-century economy require a different kind of worker from what our schools have traditionally produced. Workers of the future will have to function more independently, be intellectually nimble, and blend ideas from a variety of disciplines into their organizations' decision-making processes.

To create this kind of pupil, educators will have to break down some walls of their own.

A local charter school, the two-year-old Environmental Charter School at Frick Park, has found that one effective way to break down the walls of traditional education is ... to do education without walls. Environmental education has enabled this school to break free from the "silo" model of disciplinary content and, instead, to teach children the connections between subjects like math, reading, and science. This approach was pioneered in Philadelphia, at the Green Woods Charter School. That school's numerous awards include a "Best Practices" nod from the Philadelphia School District.

"Schools need to prepare children for a world that thinks, acts, and presents challenges across disciplines," says Jon McCann, principal and CEO of the school.

"What better place to learn this than by teaching kids about the environment, where every decision we make, from the paint we use in our homes to how we get to work, can and should be looked at from multiple perspectives."

An Environmental Charter student may tackle the abstract concept of circumference, for example, by hiking through the woods to measure, compare, and graph the circumference of various species of trees, rather than just sitting at a desk with a compass. Research shows that experiences like these enhance a student's conceptual understanding of a skill, because applying the concept to real life allows the learner to internalize the idea better. They also get used to learning methods more akin to the constant on-the-job learning that occurs in today's complex work settings.

It would be hard to change an existing public school into an innovative one like Environmental Charter overnight. But because this is an independent public charter school, it can implement its innovative environmental curriculum without resistance.

In an ideal world, all our schools would allow for this type of innovation, to nimbly adjust their methods to meet the needs of the future economy. Charter schools, like the Environmental Charter School at Frick Park, meet this challenge today and offer a vision for training students to become the kind of nimble thinkers that Thomas Friedman envisions and that our world needs.

This series is brought to you by a consortium of Allegheny County charter schools.



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