

Dear Watershed Community,

I had the privilege of attending and presenting at the [EL Education](#) national conference last week. It was great to be among so many educators and administrators excited about future possibilities for education and willing to think big about educational change. EL Education is an organization working mostly with public and charter schools to move toward practices that are more student-centered and project-based. There is a lot of philosophical overlap with Watershed. Indeed, as they were founding Watershed, Jason Berv and Sumaya Abu-Haidar drew on ideas from EL Education (and others) as they created the design principles for our school. As I attended different sessions, I felt lucky to be at Watershed where we are so far along in these practices.

For my presentation: *20 Billion Hours - The untapped potential of U.S. high school students*, I began with the observation that there are about 16 million high school students in the U.S. averaging about 1200 hours of schoolwork each year. This means that collectively U.S. high school students do a staggering total of 20 billion hours of work each year. Their work is, of course, good for their own learning and growth. But the sad part is that almost none of it has an impact on the common good. This is, at best, untapped potential, and at worst, a message to young people that we do not think they can make real contributions. I believe that young people can help their communities – that some portion of their work can be in support of local non-profits or others working on some of the unmet needs in our communities. Our students have great skills. They could do research work, design thinking exercises, and data collection & analysis, for example. Not only would this be real work with real impact, they would be honing their academic knowledge and skills.

One of the points I made in the presentation that led to further conversations afterward was that there is a documented increase in individualism in our society over the past 50 years. And I wondered aloud what role schools might be playing in that increase. I believe that because the vast majority of schoolwork is just for students' own learning and growth, we are unintentionally telling them that "it's all about them." We are increasing individualism in our society. Indeed conventional school structures that lead to academic competition reinforce this individualistic message. If we were to engage students in what we call "work that matters" – academic work that is meaningful to students and makes a contribution to our communities – maybe we can push back against the tide of individualism and help students develop a commitment to the common good. Really, this is a moral issue – what kind of society do we want to build, and how can we craft an educational experience that aligns with this vision. Because what we have been doing in school has brought us to where we are today. This is yet another reason we need to think big about educational change.

I was excited to have a full room of engaged educators and administrators (and a couple of students!) at my presentation. It is clear that the work we are doing at Watershed is intriguing to other practitioners. It was a special surprise to me to have [Camille Farrington, Ph.D.](#) attend my presentation. She is a researcher at the University of Chicago who has had a profound influence on my thinking and practice over the years. Dr. Farrington's reports [Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners: The Role of](#)

[\*Noncognitive Factors in Shaping School Performance\*](#) (2012) and [\*Foundations for Young Adult Success: A Developmental Framework\*](#) (2015) have been foundational for many progressive educators.

As I often say, It is a real privilege to be at Watershed – to be among educators, students, and families who are willing to think differently about education, who are willing to think big about educational change and it was a privilege to be part of a national network of educators who are thinking and doing along parallel tracks with Watershed.

Thanks for reading.

Warmly,

Tim