

A brief introduction to the

# Inspired Learner Model

## Transforming Washington State Public Elementary Schools to a Learner-Centered Model



The **Inspired Learner Model (ILM)** can operate in US public elementary schools with existing budgets and staffing levels. ILM can provide every child with the advantages of learner-centered education while meeting state student performance assessment expectations.



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**Center for  
Inspired  
Learning**

THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

# Overview

Compulsory elementary education in the US began in the 1920s. During the ensuing century, public schools' appearance and dynamics have changed drastically, but the basic model has remained mostly unchanged. This paper is a critique of this hundred-year-old model and offers a long-overdue replacement.

To be clear, the critique offered here does not discount the progress made over that same period. Desegregation, the school lunch program, guaranteed access for children with disabilities, the abolishment of corporal punishment, the expansion of curriculum from reading, writing, and arithmetic to the multitude of subjects taught now, and the larger focus on the individual needs of students are all to be celebrated. However, these changes and reforms are not enough to overcome the failings of a classroom model that was a bad idea from the beginning.



The dominant education model is to group students by age, advancing them one grade level at a time. Teachers are at the center of this form of education, and their primary goals are to impart knowledge and maintain order within the classroom. Other hallmarks of this traditional model include reliance on textbooks and the familiar classroom design: students at desks, facing forward, with an expectation that they will remain there until dismissed. This paper refers to traditional "teacher-centered" education as the Whole Classroom Instructional Model or WCIM.

This paper makes a case for transitioning to a radically different way of educating children called the Inspired Learner Model (ILM). Among the many benefits of ILM is that its implementation does not require new facilities, more staffing, or increased budgets. The model is based on the experience and research of cutting-edge thinkers and education leaders around the world. Schools implementing components of this model have consistently outperformed traditional schools.



**“The fact is that given the challenges we face, education doesn’t need to be reformed—it needs to be transformed. The key to this transformation is not to standardize education, but to personalize it, to build achievement on discovering the individual talents of each child, to put students in an environment where they want to learn and where they can naturally discover their true passions.**

**- Sir Ken Robinson, PhD**

# Evidence

## Papers

### [Evidence for Student-Centered Learning](#), Education Evolving.

Reasons for and principles of learner-centered education backed by vigorous research, including historical context.

### [Education Reimagined Origin Story](#), Education Reimagined

The creation of a transformational vision to making learner-centered education available to all children in America.

### [A Nation at Risk](#), U.S. National Commission on Excellence in Education

1983: “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.”

### [The Play Community](#), Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance

Implementation of learner-centered education done right. (Note: paywall)

## Online Videos

Dynamic presentations on the failures of WCIM and solutions that will motivate and inspire you.

- [How Our Schools Thwart Passions](#) with Peter Gray, Ph.D.
- [Stop Stealing Dreams](#) with Seth Godin
- [Why Finland has the Best Education System in the World](#) with Michael Moore
- [Teaching Methods for Inspiring Students](#) with Joe Ruhl
- [Build a School in the Cloud](#) with Sugata Mitra, Ph.D.

## Books

If we could recommend any two books on the subject:

- [Creative Schools](#) by Ken Robinson, Ph.D. and Lou Aronica
- [Most Likely to Succeed](#) by Tony Wagner and Ted Dintersmith, Ph.D.

## Detail

### More from the Center for Inspired Learning

- [Inspired Learner Model Concept Paper](#)
- [Implementing the Inspired Learner Model](#)
- [Prototype ILM School](#)



# Sobering Statistics

## Public Education in the United States

Average cost per child per year: over \$12,000 ([source](#))

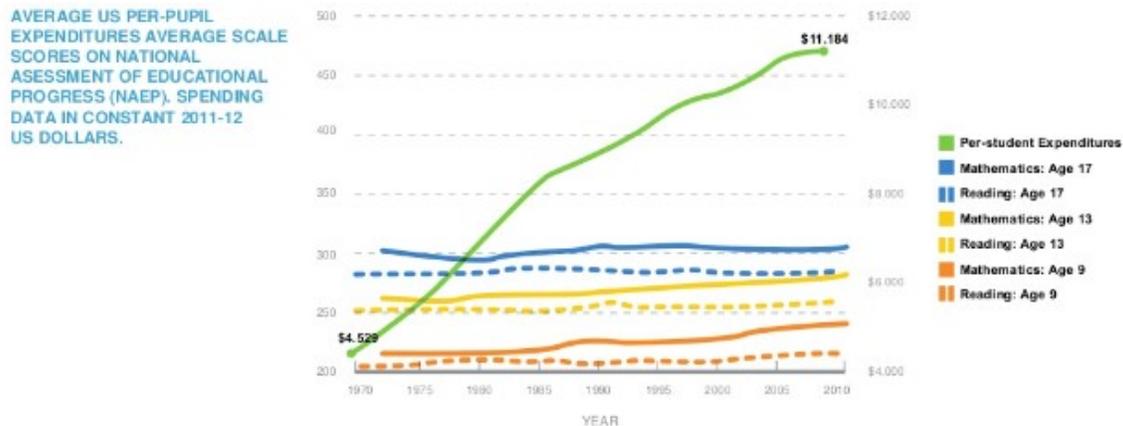
At an average of 23.6 kids per class ([source](#)), cost per classroom: over \$283,000

## For Comparison: Private Education in the United States

Average cost per child per year: under \$12,000 ([source](#))

**Takeaway:** On average, taxpayers spend **\$283,000** per year to run one classroom. These classrooms operate only 180 days a year. Adding insult to injury, during a typical day, only 4.5 hours are spent on learning. This is especially grievous because the one-size-fits-all Whole Classroom Instructional Model is used. By implementing the Inspired Learner Model, we could instead have a system where children are naturally inspired to learn throughout the day, they could attend school 220 days a year, have before and after-school support, and it would cost the same amount we are spending now.

**Over the past 40 years, spending has doubled while achievement has been flat** ([source](#))



**Takeaway:** Trillions have been spent trying to make the wrong model right. No amount of money or reforms can fix the Whole Classroom Instructional Model. It needs to be REPLACED.

## Teacher Stress

**61%** of educators found their work to be “often” or “always” stressful. ([source](#))

## Teacher Attrition

**44%** of new teachers leave the profession within five years. ([source](#))

**Takeaway:** Teachers are often consumed with classroom management and discipline. The pressure to be Wonder Woman or Superman can be overwhelming. This leads many to seek mental help or quit. The Inspired Learner Model greatly reduces the stress and unrealistic expectations put upon teachers.

# ABOLISH

## The Whole Classroom Instructional Model



The current educational model is defined by the grouping of children with different capacities for engagement, wide-ranging interests, varied abilities, and inconsistent levels of attention into a single classroom solely based on their birth year. The classroom teacher is then expected to instruct all the students to a similar level of understanding, or at least make sure each child progresses sufficiently to move up to the next grade level.

**Focuses on:** Passive learning, test-taking, conformity, grades, and competition.

**Collateral Damage:** Low test scores, bullying, teacher burnout, a world ill prepared to confront challenges such as climate change, poverty, war, and injustice.

**History:** Over 100 years old, reforms have largely failed to improve outcomes, entrenched by bureaucratic inertia and a failure of imagination.

# IMPLEMENT

## The Inspired Learner Model

This behavioral science-based approach to education builds on each child's individual interests, passions, and strengths. Utilizing online learning, it frees teachers to focus on project-and-activity-based learning, address individual children's needs and aspirations, evaluate students, and create a supportive environment where kids are engaged and naturally inspired to learn.



**Components:** Project and activity-based learning, enhanced learning through technology, assessment centers, tutoring centers, student choice, peer mentoring, teacher as facilitator, life coaching, personalized student growth plans, parental and community involvement, extended school days, longer school year, home-school partnerships, extracurricular activities during the school day.

**Fosters:** Active learning, collaboration, critical thinking, global citizenship, conflict resolution skills, development of a work ethic, self-care, financial literacy, media and digital literacy, foreign language acquisition, visual and performing arts.

**Development:** This model is the result of a concerted ten-year effort to integrate components of the best learner-centered education models in a way that can work in US public schools with existing infrastructure, staffing, and budgets.

# Inspired Learner Model Student Goals

The Inspired Learner Model (ILM) recognizes the value and importance of state essential standards and does not seek to change or disrupt any existing goals or expectations for students. ILM does, however, have some specific goals that work in tandem with state standards. The point of these goals is:

- 1. For students to develop a passion for learning so that they WANT to be in school and do well.**
- 2. To set students up for success in their post-elementary school journey—this includes their future academic, social, family, professional, and civic lives.**
- 3. To give students the desire, tools, and values so that they may have a positive impact on society and help make the world a better place for future generations.**

## To these ends, the goal is for all students to:

- Become caring, sharing, inclusive, and compassionate people
- Find their interests and passions
- Participate in extracurricular activities
- Discover and participate in hobbies they enjoy
- Learn at least one foreign language
- Develop conflict resolution skills
- Become adept at and comfortable with computers and technology
- Achieve digital and media literacy
- Have an awareness of local, state, national, and world issues, and a desire to participate in civic life to help find solutions to these issues
- Learn how to mentor others in the skills they master
- Develop leadership skills
- Have exposure to the arts and ample opportunities to participate
- Develop public speaking skills
- Learn self-care skills (i.e., regular exercise, personal hygiene, healthy eating, etc.)
- Learn “home and beyond” skills (i.e., financial literacy, cooking, using hand tools, basic repairs, etc.)



# Components of the Inspired Learner Model (ILM)

The goal is for students to be naturally motivated to learn and feel supported in their educational journey. Teachers and staff are seen as part of an away-from-home extended family. The structure creates an inspiring environment and safety net for all children.

## Core Components / Phase One Implementation

- 1. Project and Activity Based Learning (PABL):** Participation in learning-oriented projects and activities enables children to be active participants in their learning process. When a student sinks their teeth into a task, they learn without even realizing they are learning. As part of this, extracurricular activities are built into the school day so that no student is left out.
- 2. Online Learning:** Students are challenged at their current mastery level, meaning that teachers don't get bogged down figuring out how to teach to the most and least advanced students, and everyone in between, all at the same time.
- 3. Assessment and Tutoring Centers:** Students are assessed regularly to evaluate their progress in achieving their grade-level expectations and optional personal learning goals, along with tutoring as needed.
- 4. Student Choice:** This allows students to develop their interests and create a personalized curriculum that has intrinsic value, another way to inspire children to WANT to learn.
- 5. Peer Mentoring:** Younger students benefit from the experience and knowledge of the older ones, older students reinforce knowledge and gain skills, and teachers are freed up for mentoring and overseeing PABLs.
- 6. Teacher as Facilitator:** The role of the teacher changes from one of imparting knowledge to facilitating an atmosphere of curiosity, discovery, and self-motivation.
- 7. Charismatic Leadership:** Charismatic leaders inspire, motivate, and support everyone in the school.
- 8. Personalized Student Growth Plans:** A formal plan that sets learning goals based on personal and academic interests, as well as the completion of grade-level requirements.
- 9. Parental Involvement & Community Engagement:** The passion and knowledge in the community is passed on to the students, and also builds links between the classroom and the world.
- 10. The Home and School Partnership:** Maximizes the relationship and support for the child at home. Parents are also encouraged to volunteer in the school.

## Secondary Components / Optional Phase Two Implementation

- 11. Extended School Days:** Schools open earlier and close later. During these earlier and later hours, engaging, supervised activities are offered for any child who shows up at school.
- 12. Longer School Year:** Addresses the “summer slide” when students experience a decline in academic skills, gives more opportunities for social growth and pursuit of academic goals, and allows for more thorough instruction. Also reduces childcare burdens on parents and guardians.



# 21st Century Curriculum

The Inspired Learner Model curriculum includes subjects that build on the standard elementary school curriculum. These subjects are important in the development of lifelong habits that lead to happiness, healthy relationships, mental stability, community engagement, good health, career success, and financial prosperity.



**1. Self-Care:** Includes learning the importance of regular exercise, good personal hygiene, getting enough sleep, eating a healthy diet, constructively dealing with strong emotions, and contributing to a functional home environment.

**2. Financial Literacy:** Includes counting, conservation, exchange, value, prices, tipping, income, expenses, savings, investment, earned interest, and the importance of living within one's means. Such concepts augment and reinforce studies in math.

**3. Conflict Resolution:** Students receive experience in practicing and applying different methods of conflict resolution.

**4. The Arts:** The visual and performing arts encourage teamwork, self-discipline, promote a deeper understanding of other cultures, bridge cultures, reach students who are discouraged in school, and even help improve students' achievement in other subjects. Many children learn better when they watch or listen to something expressed creatively.

**5. Citizenship:** Students become actively involved in progress that relates to global social, political, economic, and environmental issues. The goal is for students to see themselves as an integral and empowered participants in their community, country, and world.

**6. Foreign Languages:** Students learn at least one foreign language through online programs. Conversation skills and cultural understanding are included as part of their project and activity-based learning.



**7. Media & Digital Literacy:** Students develop media literacy by thinking critically about the media, learning to recognize biases, understanding search engine limitations, recognizing and reporting online harassment, avoiding plagiarism, using appropriate privacy settings, understanding digital footprints, employing strong passwords, etc.

# Comparing Roles in WCIM and ILM

Using the example of a typical elementary school of 300+ students, the chart below shows how the **Inspired Learner Model** (ILM) can be implemented using existing staff. ILM is also designed to operate in the same buildings and facilities used in the **Whole Classroom Instructional Model** (WCIM), meaning that this transformation can take place without increasing school budgets. In ILM schools, the teacher's role changes from "command and control" to helping each child discover their inner treasures and reach their full potential.

## Whole Classroom Instructional Model

Kindergarten - 3 teachers  
1st Grade - 3 teachers  
2nd grade - 2 teachers  
3rd Grade - 2 teachers  
4th Grade - 2 teachers  
5th Grade - 2 teachers  
Remedial Math - 1 teacher, 2 paraprofessional  
Remedial Reading - 1 teacher, 2 paraprofessionals  
Special Education - 1 teacher, 3 paraprofessionals  
Music—1 teacher  
Physical Education - 1 teacher  
Technology - 1 teacher  
Librarian - 1 classified

## TOTAL

**20 Teachers (Certified)**

**8 Paraprofessionals / Classified**

## Inspired Learner Model

Music - 2 teachers  
Technology - 2 teachers  
Sports & Recreation - 2 teachers  
Visual & Performing Arts - 1 teacher  
Science - 2 teachers  
Foreign Languages - 1 teacher  
Reading Tutoring Center - 2 teachers  
Writing/Speaking Tutoring Center - 2 teachers  
Math Tutoring Center - 2 teachers  
Assessment Center - 2 teachers  
Special Education - 1 teacher, 2 paraprofessional  
Cohort Advisor (oversees online work stations) - 1 teacher  
Librarian - 1 classified  
Clubs & Games - 1 classified  
Citizenship (local to global) - 2 classified  
Home & Beyond Skills - 2 classified

## TOTAL

**20 teachers (Certified)**

**8 Paraprofessionals / Classified**

ILM is a personalized, learner-centered approach to education that is tailored to each child's needs, interests, and abilities. It can operate 220 days per year from 9 AM to 5 PM, with before and after-school support, **without increasing a school's budget.**



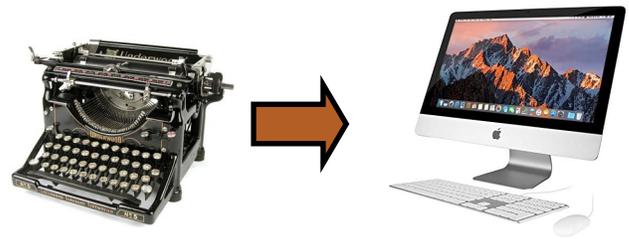
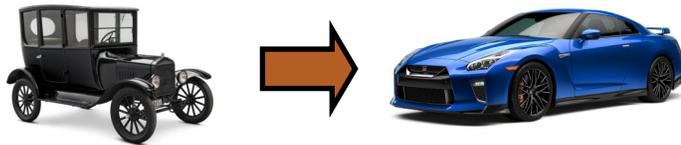
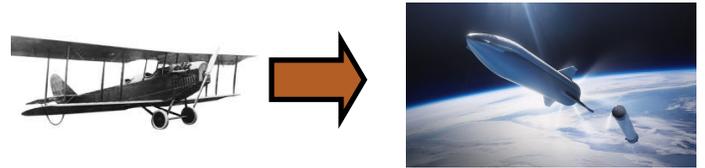
# Comparison

## 4 Elementary Education Models

	Whole Classroom	Waldorf	Montessori	Inspired Learner
Learner-centered	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Multi-Age Classrooms & Peer Mentoring	No	No	Yes	Yes
Flexible Curriculum	No	No	Yes	Yes
Personalized Student Growth Plans	No	No	No	Yes
Online Learning	Limited	No	No	Yes
Extended School Days & Longer Year	No	No	No	Yes
Extracurricular Activities Built Into School Day	No	No	No	Yes
Project & Activity Based Learning	Rarely	Yes	Yes	Yes
Emphasis on Meeting State Standards	Yes	No	No	Yes
State Assessments	Yes	No	No	Yes
Uses Existing Public School Budget	Yes	No	Rarely	Yes
Foreign Language Acquisition	Rarely	Yes	Sometimes	Yes
Authentic Assessment based on Mastery	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Emphasis on Life Skills & Good Habits	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Global Citizenship Education	No	Yes	Yes	Yes



Many other things have been completely reimagined in the last 100 years. It's time for schools to do the same!



In a **1920s** classroom, children were randomly placed into classrooms based on their birthdate and taught the same material at the same pace.

In a **2020s** classroom, children are randomly placed into classrooms based on their birthdate and taught the same material at the same pace.

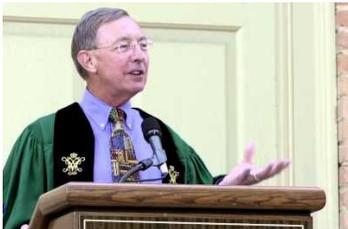
**Takeaway: In 100 years, the basic structure of education has not changed.**

# What Others Have Said



**"Education is the only billion dollar industry that tolerates abject failure."**

— Dr. Geoffrey Canada, Educator, Named one of "America's Best Leaders" by *U.S. News and World Report* (2005), Listed as one of TIME magazine's 100 Most Influential People in the World (2011)



**"The education policies our country is pursuing to 'fix' schools only serve to harm students and disillusion teachers."**

— Ted Dintersmith, Public Education Advocate, Recipient of the Highest NEA Award (2018)



**"Our 'leaders,' on both sides of the aisle, continue to claim that our schools are failing and need to be reformed, while in reality our education is obsolete and needs reimagining."**

— Dr. Tony Wagner, Senior Research Fellow at the Learning Policy Institute



**"The goal of early childhood education should be to activate the child's own natural desire to learn."**

— Dr. Maria Montessori, founder of the Montessori method of education



**"Experiments show that children in unsupervised groups are capable of answering questions many years ahead of the material they are learning in school. In fact, they seem to enjoy the absence of adult supervision, and they are very confident in finding the right answer."**

— Dr. Sugata Mitra, , Professor of Education Technology at Newcastle University

# Concluding Thoughts

As almost any public school teacher will tell you, the job can be extraordinarily rewarding one minute and aggravating beyond belief the next. As mentioned earlier, 61% of educators find their work highly stressful, and 44% leave the profession within five years of entering it. We have yet to meet a teacher who was surprised by such statistics.

Even with these sacrifices, the results of public education leave a lot to be desired. Chronically low test scores, bullying, economic disparities, low graduation rates, and the lack of life skills in the children served by public schools are but a few of the warning signs that we are doing something wrong. We live in an age of human achievement and technological wonder but still haven't learned to avoid war, take care of our planet, house the homeless, feed the hungry, or meaningfully address many of the other massive challenges we face. This *should* scream out that **our education system has failed us.**

Education Visionary Ted Dintersmith says that the Whole Classroom Instructional Model is “putting an entire generation at risk” and that “it is not the solution, it is part of the problem.” We could not agree with him more.

This paper shows that the problem is not that we need to spend more money on our current education system. **We can't repackage practices and programs to fix an obsolete, ineffective, and harmful system. We need to CHANGE the system!** This is not a new revelation; many prominent educators have been saying this for decades.

**The Inspired Learner Model was developed to implement this transformation in public education** without toppling the cart. In other words, we can make the needed changes without building new schools, hiring or firing anyone, raising taxes, or any other significant disruptions to the economy or society. We have the knowledge and the tools to do this now!

We hope you will join us in that endeavor.



THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION