

Forget Straight A's— We're Teaching Girls to Change the World

by Kate Chandler

If you went to school in the '80s or '90s, you probably think you know what academic excellence looks like—long hours, good grades, piles of homework, and a straight path to a top university.

But what if that version of success is no longer enough?

The world has transformed in the last few decades, and education hasn't. **NAHEED BARDAI**, Principal at UWC Atlantic College, which has its roots in experiential education, believes we must challenge our assumptions about education: "If education has hardly changed in the last 25 years while the world around us has changed dramatically, how can we be so confident that the education we're giving today will be worth anything to a young person in 2060?"

Climate change, artificial intelligence, geopolitical uncertainty, and rapid technological shifts have made a static education obsolete. Today, schools must ask themselves: are we preparing students for where the world is going or for where it is right now?

"The work of a school is determined by the needs of society," said **FRANCIS PARKER**, considered a pioneer of the progressive school movement in the United States in the late nineteenth century. Although the quote is more than 100 years old, its relevance today is clear. Author, ed-activist, speaker, and strategist **IAN SYMMONDS** references it as he examines the role of education in modern society: "The best schools take measure of that society every five years, and they systematically try to recalibrate their educational environment to meet that future."

Today's top schools aren't just preparing students to ace their exams, they are preparing them to be future-ready. To navigate a world in flux that offers a moving target rather than a static point of arrival.

THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY IS OVER

Once, knowledge was power. Today, knowledge is everywhere. The democratization of information means that memorizing facts or completing math problems is no longer a marker of intelligence. AI can synthesize and analyze information at speeds no human can match. The ability to recall data has been eclipsed by something far more valuable: the ability to question, connect, adapt, and create.

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For those of you who attended school 20, 30, or 40 years ago, you probably equate academic excellence with time on task, mastering content, and proving one's ability to retain and regurgitate information. The modern world no longer rewards that skill set alone. Instead, students need to be equipped with creativity, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and the ability to interact with others and the world around them to solve complex, interdisciplinary problems.

Head of School **DERYN LAVELL** sees this in action at York House every day, "Step into our Junior School Atelier or Innovation Lab, and you'll see our young Yorkies working together utilizing design thinking and their innate curiosity to tackle complex environmental, social, or engineering issues all while looking at problems from several perspectives. Their theories, ideas, observations, and sheer joy in learning shine like bright sparks and remind me why we are on the right track with our Spark Plan."

THE TOOLS, THE BRAINS, THE SPIRIT, THE GUTS

At York House School, this evolution is more than just a pedagogical shift; it is a commitment to the community. Through the Spark Plan, York House is redefining academic excellence by embedding intellectual curiosity, real-world problem-solving, and meaningful impact into the very fabric of student learning.

"This fostering of questions and developing theories about the world and wonderings about how the world works—that is at the core," said **RACHEL HUGHES**, Principal of Junior School. "School tends to kill some of those things which we're really trying to counter."

Instead of treating learning as a race to the highest GPA, York House encourages students to question conventional wisdom, navigate ethical complexity, and develop the resilience to thrive in an unpredictable

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world. The school is designing learning experiences that emphasize agency—to advocate for oneself, to engage deeply with societal challenges, and to take action that means something.

GENNY LEE, Principal of Senior School, commented, “There’s one theme that unites our community together, which is a common belief that all the work, all the sweat, all the homework, all the hours of study, is really to cultivate people who will make a positive difference in the world—beyond our own personal success.”

Transformations are taking place at schools all around the world. At UWC Atlantic, the pilot *Systems Transformation Pathway: Leadership for Just Futures* program challenges students to think beyond traditional disciplines. Integrated within the IB Diploma Program, students take two courses to explore four major impact areas: food, biodiversity, energy, and migration. They learn how systems function, where they fail, and how to create change. And they don’t just study solutions—they implement them, including applying them to their home context.

“It’s like a mini Master’s Degree in Social Policy,” said Bardai. Added Symmonds, “It’s no longer about what students know or what tests they pass. It’s about what’s inside them, what’s in their toolbox, and how



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One student from Nepal discovered that rural hospitals had solar panels, but no one knew how to repair them, so she developed an accessible training manual, now used in 60 hospitals. Another student in Cardiff wondered why electrical vehicle uptake was slower there than in other parts of the country and found that because many houses don’t have driveways, there aren’t places to charge the cars. They lobbied the city to install EV charging points on street lamp posts, solving a real-world barrier to electric vehicle adoption.

This is the future of education. Schools like York House and UWC Atlantic aren’t just preparing students to succeed within existing systems; they are preparing them to build something better.

WANT YOUR CHILD TO BE FUTURE-READY? GET COMFORTABLE WITH UNCERTAINTY

For many parents, this shift is unsettling. You want to ensure your children have a secure path to success. But clinging to outdated notions of academic excellence risks leaving students ill-equipped for the challenges of tomorrow. The best schools know growth happens in discomfort. That’s where students discover resilience, problem-solving, and courage.

“The best schools are doing something that is not generationally very fun for parents,” education-futurist Symmonds observes. “They place students in environments where they are uncomfortable because it is in those spaces that we learn the most about ourselves.”

At York House, according to Lee, this means embracing experiential learning, engaging with community partners, organizations, and field experts to ensure that students recognize “what they are doing in the classroom is actionable now and has a direct relevance to what is happening in the world. It’s not just theory, and we’re not just raising a generation of armchair critics, but people who are actually engaged and being part of the solution to what’s happening in the world.”

Often, this work is anchored in the school’s motto, *Not for*



Ourselves Alone, with students working alongside community organizations such as Covenant House and the YWCA, understanding social issues not as abstract problems but as realities that demand their engagement. And as Lee sees it, students are the driving force. “A lot of the shift and the momentum we’ve had in this direction has been guided by student voices. They have said, ‘We must do this all the time.’ Just yesterday, three very passionate students came to me saying, ‘We see what’s happening in the world, and we need to learn about this and take action.’”

Not for Ourselves Alone is a guiding principle that shapes how students approach their education and their place in the world. York House students aren’t just working towards their prosperity or success; they are preparing to make a

meaningful and positive impact on the world around them. And this first means understanding their place in that world and forging greater connections.

In the Junior School, service learning and community engagement go hand in hand, and at the core is giving students the opportunity to see what kind of impact they can make, rather than simply bringing in a can of tuna for the food drive.

“For younger ones, in order for them to really understand a cause and understand how they’re contributing to supporting that cause, it’s really more about awareness—learning about the different people who are affected by whatever issue it is, and then some kind of experiential, active engagement,” said Hughes. Bardai expands on this, “It’s not just about teaching students to

do service—it’s about teaching them to challenge why a food bank needs to exist in the first place.”

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE GRADES?

Preparing students to be future-ready also means rethinking assessment. At York House, this doesn’t mean that homework or essays don’t exist, but much of the focus has also shifted to hands-on projects that teach students how to research, analyze, and act. Ensuring that students are evaluated not just on what they know, but on how they think and what they do.

According to Lavell, “Marking a test or a quiz right or wrong is only part of assessment for meaningful learning. Our students must demonstrate their understanding and critical thinking in myriad ways. Recently, I listened to

a group of senior students dissecting complex ideas within a particular novel while one member of the group analyzed their discussion to determine their abilities to collaborate and build on individual contributions. Metacognition—the process of thinking, is a powerful and necessary part of assessment here at YHS.”

WHAT’S NEXT? RETHINKING SCHOOL AS WE KNOW IT

If the years since the pandemic have shown us anything, it’s that the pace of change is accelerating. If education doesn’t move alongside it, students are the ones who will be left behind. Schools like York House are ensuring that this doesn’t happen by preparing students not just to pass exams but to think critically, adapt to

change, and shape the future.

But this shift isn’t complete without schools rethinking their most sacred structures: the traditional school day, class groups, and timetable. As Lee points out, “There are some aspects of education, no matter how much the world changes, that haven’t changed in schools. The structure of the school day, age-based grouping, and the way we divide subjects—these are ripe for rethinking.”

At York House, the willingness to question and innovate is embedded into the Spark Plan. The school is exploring new ways to integrate learning experiences that reflect the complexities of the world beyond its walls. With its small, tight-knit community, it has the agility to experiment and adapt in ways that larger institutions cannot.

Lee questions what this could look like at York House. Should students spend more time outside of classrooms working on interdisciplinary, real-world projects that make an impact? Should flexible scheduling allow for deeper, sustained inquiry into complex problems? Should students of different ages collaborate more frequently, reflecting the diversity of perspectives they will encounter in the workforce? “We are looking at re-envisioning how we structure the day. That could mean changing the schedule, but it has to be done in a way that maintains the sense of community.

But Lee also acknowledges that innovation will need to be balanced with custom, “There’s a fear of breaking tradition. People worry that if we use less time for certain subjects, we are compromising learning. But we need to ask whether the current model is actually serving students for the world they will enter.”

The schools and educators with the courage to ask these questions are already starting to move beyond rigid structures to enable students to navigate uncertainty with confidence, resilience, and creativity.

The question for parents is no longer, Will my child get into a good university? but rather, Will my child be ready for a future that is not yet knowable?

At York House, the answer is yes. 🌀

