

# *If I Could Make a School*



*By Pooja Agrawal*

**Subject:** Education reform

**Audience:** Teachers, teacher educators, administrators, technology coordinators

**Grade Level:** K–12 (Ages 5–18)

**Standards:** *NETS•S 2; NETS•T II, III*  
*TSSA I, II, IV* ([www.iste.org/standards](http://www.iste.org/standards))

*Student leaders present their ideal school of the future.*

PHOTOS OF STUDENTS IN ACTION COURTESY OF VARIOUS SYMPOSIUM ATTENDEES.



flying” we would be doing during the following 30 hours. We were presented with this hefty challenge and were prepared to match it, not to mention turn a few heads, with our thinking caps on full speed.

### Finding Our Vision

First came the breakout sessions. All of the students were divided into different groups and set to work, with the help of facilitators from the Quest Program. Quest is a joint project between Toyota Motor Manufacturing of Kentucky and the Scott County Schools in Georgetown, Kentucky, where teachers integrate problem-solving methods used in business and industry into their curriculum. Hardware and software companies graciously donated technology for our use while developing innovative designs for learning. From flowcharts to lists and concept maps, the ideas were expanding at the speed of light. After discussing our dreams and desires, we began planning everything from curriculum and the form of assessment to the equipment needed and the design of the physical space.

Struggling to keep up with the plethora of ideas, we began formalizing our plans. We used PowerPoint, Inspiration, and other software to create exciting presentations that we rehearsed and practiced until the wee hours of the morning. Pumped and burning with passion, we headed to the ISTE Leadership Symposium that preceded the National Educational Computing Conference (NECC, June 25–27, 2001, Chicago).

### Sharing Our Vision

We presented “Student Perspectives: A Re-Designed Learning Environment”

## Imagine.

Imagine being able to grow, learn, and explore your own curiosities whenever and however you want. Imagine not feeling bound by society, the world, or people. Imagine the feeling of unrestricted discovery. *Imagine being free.*

That’s exactly what we did. Twenty-five students from the United States and abroad participated in the inaugural Student Technology Leadership Symposium sponsored by the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE). “If We Could Make a School” was held June 23–24, 2001, in Chicago, Illinois. Five “expert learners” participated:

- Dr. Thomas Carroll, Director, Preparing Tomorrow’s Teachers to Use Technology (PT<sup>3</sup>) grant program, Washington, D.C.;
- Dr. Jack Foster, former Kentucky Secretary of Education, Ohio State University, Lexington, Kentucky;
- Dr. Linda Roberts, former director of the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Educational Technology, Darnestown, Maryland;
- Dr. Stephanie Pace Marshall, President, Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy, Aurora, Illinois; and

- Dr. Robert Sibley, Educational Project Manager, ThinkQuest, Armonk, New York.

These mentors inspired us to think freely and create the positive and forward-thinking changes that today’s schools so desperately need.

Enthusiastic introductions by Marilyn Piper, (ISTE board member, symposium chair, and Student Voices column co-editor); Diana Sturm, Project Manager for ISTE’s symposia; and Jeff Conor of the Student Planning Committee were followed by the wisdom and insights of Dr. Stephanie Pace Marshall. She passionately described her experiences reforming education and helped guide our preliminary discussion of vision. The symposium’s mission—empowering students to use their leadership skills, voice, and technology expertise in educational reform—provided a base for the “high-

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*An educational system isn't worth a great deal if it teaches young people how to make a living and doesn't teach them how to live.* —Author Unknown

to more than 150 educational leaders from around the world. The hour-long presentation received a standing ovation and generated further discussion and exchange of ideas. Bursting with energy and enthusiasm, we made our perspectives apparent in hopes of building an education system that prepares learners for the 21st century.

Handshakes, business cards, and expressions of gratitude exchanged with the adults put smiles on our faces and helped us feel welcome. Continued e-mails of support overflowed inboxes as projects continued to grow. (Read examples in E-mail Exchanges on p. 31.) The responses from the adults ensured that we weren't alone in our ideas, and as we shared our dreams and visions, the adults joined us in building our future. This "mutual learning" produced enough energy to light the entire city of Chicago; they gained perspective from us and we from them.

### **Finding Your Vision**

Now hold on to your hats, folks. Here come the ideas that may have been hidden inside of us, waiting to burst, all this time: School should be fun. School

should be free. The days of lecturing from a textbook are over. Problem-, discovery- and inquiry-based and/or -centered curriculum should be instituted, not the type of curriculum taught in order to achieve high scores on standardized tests, such as Advanced Placement (AP) courses and exams. Implementing "real life" situations, problems, and hands-on experiences will keep children intrigued. There will be no need to ask the common questions, "Do I really need to learn this?" and "When am I going to use this in real life?" With this newfound involvement, students could add input into a flexible curriculum, shaping it with their interests in mind and thus becoming more responsible for their own learning. As one student group summed it up, "Curriculum should be the process of exploration by hearing, seeing, and doing, used to find your vision and passion(s)."

### **Creating a Mutual Vision**

Another issue addressed during the student presentations was relationships—not only student–teacher relationships, but also those of parents, administra-

tors, and staff. Communities as a whole should listen to, guide, and support one another. Animated mutual learning between adults and students, for example, had already appeared in the overcrowded presentation room during the span of a few hours. One student mentioned a democratic system where everyone has input in funding, discipline, and other major decisions. In addition, the new, hands-on curriculum would also affect these relationships, forging a stronger bond between students and teachers. We hope that students will no longer feel intimidated and will actually be (gasp!) encouraged to ask questions.

### **Housing the Vision**

Also affected by the curriculum are the environment and equipment needed. To provide such a flexible, accommodating curriculum, the physical environment of the school should be inviting. "Once you walk into this new learning place, you should want to *keep going*," a student added. With abstract art, exotic plants, and comforting furniture, walls and desks no longer exist. To challenge creative thinking and discov-

*Vision continued on page 41.*

**E-mail Exchanges.** Right after the symposium, we began e-mailing the educational leaders we had just met. The connections I made will prove to be invaluable, and I know my co-presenters feel the same. Here are two of my e-mail conversations.

Date: Friday, June 29, 2001 10:17 PM  
 From: Pooja Agarwal  
 To: John Bailey  
 Subject: Education Opportunities

Mr. Bailey,

Hi! My name is Pooja Agarwal and we spoke briefly at the past NECC conference in Chicago, IL. I helped present with the rest of the students from the ISTE conference on Student Perspectives: A Re-Designed Learning Environment. The entire weekend was a wonderful experience for me and helped me to realize my burning passion for education and its reform. I apologize for the delayed e-mail, but I have been busy for the past week with a program I mentioned, IMSA Science Explorers, a program "by kids, for kids" where we develop and teach hands-on science curriculum for elementary students.

I am extremely interested in education and am thinking about creating a school for grades K-12 (in collaboration with my friend, Matthew Knisley, whom you also met). This school will be a new type of school, incorporating many philosophies we presented, as well as many of my own regarding education. Connected to the K-12 school would be a "teaching university," and place designed by Matthew, specifically for educators training in problem-based, problem-centered, and inquiry-based learning. This environment will also give them hands-on experience next door and the opportunity to further their techniques.

As you can see, I am ready to take action and start soaring. In order to begin, I feel that I need more experience in the field of education and would appreciate your help. We briefly discussed a possible internship in DC which, if possible, I would put in all of my dedicated efforts. Do you have any advice, contacts, or opportunities I should be aware of?

Attached to this e-mail, you will find my current resume, along with the essay I wrote for the ISTE Student Technology Leadership Symposium.

Please feel free to contact me at your earliest convenience. Have a great weekend. I look forward to hearing from you soon!

Thanks in advance!  
 Pooja Agarwal

Date: Fri, 29 Jun 2001 16:41:19 -0500 (CDT)  
 From: Pooja Agarwal  
 To: Linda Roberts  
 Subject: Education Conference

Dr. Roberts,

Hi! First, I wanted to thank you for all of your wonderful insights and advice at the past ISTE conference in Chicago. It was a truly wonderful experience, and wouldn't have been the same without you.

I apologize for the delayed response, but I have been busy during the past week with the IMSA Science Explorers program (where we write and teach hands-on science curriculum to elementary students). Have you received any information about upcoming educational opportunities? My friend Matthew Knisley, another graduate of the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy whom you met at the conference, is very interested as well.

Please let me know at your earliest convenience if you have anything in mind.

Thank you for all of your help!  
 Pooja Agarwal

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Date: Mon, 02 Jul 2001 11:01:30 -0400  
 From: Linda G Roberts  
 To: Pooja Agarwal  
 Subject: Re: Education Conference

Dear Pooja: The Student Leadership Forum was the best part of NECC! It was fascinating to listen to the student deliberations and then very rewarding to have you present to the adult leaders of ISTE the next day. Throughout the week of the NECC the "student presentation" was talked about and folks who didn't attend, wished that they had!

Date: Mon, 9 Jul 2001 08:16:42 -0400  
 From: John Bailey  
 To: Pooja Agarwal  
 Subject: RE: Education Opportunities

Thanks so much for your e-mail. It was great meeting you at NECC and seeing your contagious enthusiasm in this area. I'm floating your essay and ideas around some folks here to hopefully lead to some meetings where we can explore some ideas and how to best support. I'm also going to forward your e-mail to a group called New Schools which backs educational entrepreneurs and you definitely fit the ticket :)

I'll be in touch but don't be afraid to e-mail me either. Thanks!  
 -John

I would love to see you take the students' presentation to other groups, such as the Aspen Institute, that are working on the issue of reforming the high school. Let me see what's possible. In the meantime, I suggest that you take the 4 presentations, make some edits and bring them together as one set of slides and work it up into a coherent presentation for the website (either ISTE or the Lucas Foundation).

Linda

*Vision continued from page 31.*

ery, technology will play a significant role, providing the means to even more unrestricted exploration. Computers, teleconferencing, hardware, and software will supplement, not supplant, the experience. This will not be a reformation but a transformation.

### Adjusting My Own Vision

With these extraordinary visions came an even more extraordinary experience. Having been interested in education previously, this opportunity opened my eyes to the limitless possibilities in education reform. Scribbling more than seven pages of ideas and quotes on a legal pad, I was ecstatic, despite the exhaustive thinking and working. Knowing there were others who shared the same views was comfort and encouragement in itself. I began imagining myself in the shoes of a few of the “expert learners” and began my own quest during, and soon after, the conference. Teaming up with another student at the conference, we set out to make our dreams come true. Contacting organizations such as the U.S. Department of Education became a reality as I envisioned a school that would truly do all this and more.

By now, I’m sure some of you are thinking, “Sure, great ideas from a few motivated people, but this utopian view of education will never happen.” Wrong! If a few positive e-mails and phone calls provided enough encouragement for this teenager to discover schools already implementing these ideas, organizations ready to fund edu-

cational entrepreneurs, and people eager and willing to listen, imagine what you could do! Start your own brainstorming. Open eyes and turn heads just like these 25 students proved possible. Send a few e-mails, get a few answers, and start making progress. Dynamic Web environments diving into these cutting-edge ideas through forums and chats may be the answer. Encourage the schools in your area to try something different. Get children involved. Start listening to their complaints. Just imagine what one could do in an education system “for kids, by kids.” No longer will the three best things about school be June, July, and August.

Overall, this unique experience has helped students (including myself), adults, educators, parents, and others ignite their own passions through unrestricted discovery in exploration, experience, and discussion. A famous quote has helped me keep a firm belief in my views and succinctly sums things up. “An educational system isn’t worth a great deal if it teaches young people how to make a living but doesn’t teach them how to make a life” (Author Unknown).

Today’s children are bursting with energy, enthusiasm, and excitement. The further these children travel down the current path of education, the greater the amount of this energy, enthusiasm, and excitement that is lost. The ISTE Student Technology Leadership Symposium provided an opportunity to regain what has unfortunately been lost and rebuild the future of to-

morrow. We, too, can burst with energy, enthusiasm, and excitement. *We, too, can be free.*



*Pooja Agarwal (pooja@imsa.edu) is a 17-year-old graduate of the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy in Aurora, Illinois. She was student coordinator of Science Explorers (a program created to spark interest in “hands-on” science for Grades 3–6, developed and taught by high school students), president of the student council, speaker at her graduation, and presenter at “Empowering High School Students to Become Classroom and Electronic Elementary School Teachers of Science” at the 2000 National Association of Biology Teachers Convention. Pooja is attending Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri and plans to study education and child psychology. Look for an article on Science Explorers in the spring.*



*Dennis Harper (dharper@genuwhy.wednet.edu), column editor for Student Voices, is the project director for Generation www.Y. He has been teaching for 33 years in such diverse locales as Australia, Singapore, East Los Angeles, and Finland. He has served on the faculties of the University of California, Santa Barbara; the University of Malaysia; and the University of the Virgin Islands. Reach him at the Olympia School District, 1113 Legion Way SE, Olympia, WA 98501; 360.753.8835; 360.664.0745.*



*Marilyn Piper (mpiper@osd.wednet.edu), co-column editor, began teaching 29 years ago in New York City. For the past 17 years, she has taught at Washington Middle School, one of the first schools in the nation to implement Generation www.Y. Marilyn is the Gen Y Curriculum Coordinator and Technology Coordinator for Washington Middle School.*



*“You are the product of your own brainstorm.”*

*—Rosemary Konner Steinbaum*

Do you have students who would have enjoyed this symposium? Well, they didn't have to be there to share their excitement about educational technology. Ask them to tell us how they feel about it. Send your comments to Kate Conley, L&L editor, at [letters@iste.org](mailto:letters@iste.org).