

# **THE BOLD SCHOOL EVOLUTION: How Diversity and Inclusion Will Bridge the Next Digital Divide**

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In 2014, the Pew Research Center conducted a huge survey on the political polarization of American public. Don't worry—this isn't a political essay. In fact, it's the opposite. But polarization is at play when it comes to a new kind of digital divide I'm seeing unfold in our schools.

The Pew survey found that politics are bleeding into all areas of our lives. Politics no longer influence only whom we vote for; they also influence where we live, the people we spend time with, the news we consume, even who we want our children to marry. We've also grown more extreme and stubborn in our political beliefs and less willing to expose ourselves to those that differ. Here are just two of the stark data points from the study:

- 50% of people on the right and 35% on the left say it's important they live in a place where most people share their political views.
- 63% of "consistently conservative" and 49% of "consistently liberal" Americans say most of their friends share their political views.

And that was in 2014!

Pew calls this phenomenon of siphoning ourselves off from those with different politics "ideological silos." We don't need the data to know that most of us are consuming news that validates, not challenges, our political viewpoints. We don't need to see data that shows we've "surrounded" ourselves on social media with those who think like us. And we don't need data to know that many of us have chosen to live in blue or red states, making them bluer and redder.

As a blended learning instructional coach, it is inspiring and hopeful to see that we are closing the digital divide. More and more of our students have regular access to the technologies that are driving the global economy. My job—my passion—is to see that blended learning goes beyond the mere shiny, new object. Those of you who have joined the Bold School movement know that technology isn't the point—the point is solid pedagogy. The goal of Bold School is restoring teachers to their rightful place in the blended learning equation—empowering them to trust their old school wisdom about what works as they incorporate new school technologies into their classrooms. Bold schoolers put high effect size instructional strategies first and then layer them with technology to enhance learning and elevate instruction. In other words, they are embracing a culture of "AND" rather than chasing the latest pendulum.

As I've traveled the world with the Bold School message, I am seeing an incredible, positive sea change in blended learning. Yet, I am also seeing a new caveat—a new digital divide, one born from the information we are exposing our students to through technologies.

Per the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, to excel in careers, our students need:

- 1. Learning and Innovation Skills** (The Four Cs: Critical Thinking, Communication, Collaboration, and Creativity)
- 2. Life and Career Skills** (respect, perseverance, contemplation, compassion, resilience, and so on)
- 3. Information, Media, and Technological Skills**  
Think for a moment what happens to you

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when you turn on the 24-hour cable news station that shares your political slant and hear someone claim politicians on the other side are “destroying” the country. Or what is happening in your brain when you log onto a Facebook group of people who agree with you. Or what it means for your worldview when everyone you interact with has the same one.

Are you using any critical thinking skills? Learning how to communicate with compassion? Are you benefitting from the resilience and perseverance that come from challenging your ideas and working out your thoughts to create new, expanded ones?

Now think about what happens when you engage in a healthy debate with someone about politics, hear her opinions, and attempt to understand where she’s coming from. Or what happens when you read a well-reasoned article with a different perspective on social or economic policy.

Now consider those questions again. We grow through exposure to a full spectrum of perspectives. Our brain literally grows when we create new synaptic connections, and this only happens by inviting new thoughts and ideas into our brains.

Educators, we are doing our students a disservice to their futures—their capacity to succeed in the careers that will be available to them—when we keep them in ideological silos. Ignoring even for a moment the disservice we are doing to our country, we are not being fair to our students when we keep their thinking small or closed by putting up walls around the information they access.

The teachers who boldly invite a true range of perspectives into their classrooms are the teachers who are developing in their students the skills they need for successful futures. Those who do not will be contributing to this digital divide of information exposure. And here’s the thing: technology makes closing it so simple. If you are in a rural school, do a project that requires collaboration with students in an urban school. If you’re a sociology teacher, ask your students to find and analyze political New York Times and Wall Street Journal articles from 30 years ago and today. Teach them not to fear other ideas, but find them interesting, challenging, eye-opening and—most importantly—bias destroying.

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Educators, we are nothing more than some Bold School instructional planning and a mouse click or Skype call away from bridging the next digital divide. With more and more of us living in like-minded communities, technology is our path “out” for our students, in that we can use it to access people whose lives are different from theirs and information that opens up and grows their minds.

I hope you will join me in the Bold School movement—a movement that comes down to

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ignoring the noise, casting aside consensus thinking, resisting the gravitational pull toward the latest silver bullet. And instead doubling down on our strengths and using innovation in a way that allows us to be the best, boldest teachers we can be. As we together bridge this new digital divide, we must bravely face our biases, keep them out of our classrooms, and focus on inclusion in all senses. We must step out of our tunnel vision and embrace a new vision of AND: old school wisdom AND new school tools, your ideas AND mine, their experiences AND ours.

As a country, as a school system, our strength is our diversity. Bold Schoolers are saying no to ideological silos and doubling down on this strength—welcoming the tapestry of ideas and perspectives that enrich our country to come into their classrooms and enrich their students. Let's remind each other and teach our students that we're more similar than not and that the differences we do have are what will lead us to creative solutions for the challenges of our time. And let's make our students more compassionate, critical, bold thinkers along the way. ■

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**Weston Kieschnick, a former teacher and school administrator, has driven change and improved student learning in multiple capacities within his educational career.**

**Weston's teaching career began internationally in Hamilton, Bermuda, where he served as both teacher and department chair for social studies, and during that time he was a three time recipient of the public schools' "Most Influential Teacher" award. Now, as an experienced instructional coach and Associate Partner with ICLE, Kieschnick shares his expertise with teachers in order to transform learning through online and blended models. He is the author of the best-selling book: *Bold School: Old School Wisdom + New School Technologies = Blended Learning That Works*.**