K-12 schools need a makeover. There’s no denying it. Ask almost any teacher and they will tell you that teachers are in the nation’s most over-tested, over-regulated, over-inspected, over-politicized profession. Everybody on earth seems to think that since they once went to school, they know everything they need to know about how schools should be run. Sorry, but in all honestly, I’m afraid that’s a lot like saying that since you’ve flown on an airplane, you know how to pilot it.

The truth is that many of the over-arching decisions about schools are made by legislators who may not have a lot of first-hand experience inside a classroom except as long-ago students. But, being a teacher is very different from being a student—as different as riding in versus piloting the airplane. The view from the cockpit is very different from Row 32.

If I could change just one thing about schools, I know exactly what I would do. I would take the very overdue step of putting teachers and principals back in charge of their own schools. I’d get the federal government to find something else to do instead of making K-12 teaching as complicated, confusing and overwhelming as the federal tax code.

Here is the one thing I would do away with. I would ramp down the hot political climate, eliminate the always suspect, ever-changing high stakes testing, and I would immediately stop grading schools and teachers. Grading schools and teachers is impossible for teachers to explain to students and makes as much sense as grading pilots on their on-time arrivals. Obviously on-time arrivals are subject to thousands of variables like weather, air traffic control and mechanical issues—all of which are completely out of the pilot’s control. Similarly, teaching results are not solely driven by
the person in front of the class as teachers work with students with emotional problems, learning challenges, illnesses, behavior problems, language differences, special needs, crises, and parents who keep them home from school--and on and on and on.

So, once free of entanglement in the bureaucratic system, what could teachers do with their time to make their school more perfect? If it was up to me, I would revamp teacher training to fit contemporary students. Teacher training has been stuck in the 1950s since well, the 1950s. While schools work pretty much the way they always have, students have changed dramatically. In my workshops, I always joke that students have gone from Beaver Cleaver to Beavis and Butthead. Using yesterday’s teaching methods with today’s students is a complete mismatch. In the 1950s the top concern of teachers was too much trash in the trash can. Now the only time teachers think about the trash can is when it’s been used as an assault weapon. It would seem to me way past time to trade in the tired, ineffective approaches of decades past for up-to-date, more effective, modern methods that actually train youngsters how to be motivated, on-time, involved, appropriately behaved, in-control, successful students.

Yesterday’s methods may work okay for compliant, involved, motivated students who are not weighed down by serious family problems, personal crises, emotional disorders, learning challenges, language differences and discipline issues—but shouldn’t a “perfect” school work hard to succeed with challenged students and not just the already successful ones? School is supposed to be a haven for all students, but for some students who are leading hard lives, the teacher may be the only sane, sober, humane adult in the child’s universe. It would seem to me that at a time when teachers constantly report seeing more students who struggle, that upgrading teacher training to fit those youngsters would be of paramount importance— and far more important than high stakes testing, grading schools and grading teachers.

Methods exist to make schools fit the students who actually attend today—yet methods like my Coping, School and Social Skills Program are in relatively limited use. High stakes testing, grading schools and teachers have become the center of the K-12 world. That leaves teachers serving two masters. On one hand, teachers want to do their best with each student. On the other hand, teachers want to keep their jobs. Those two laudable goals often conflict because keeping your job often means primary attention goes to passing the high stakes tests and keeping school and teacher grades high. Many teachers at my workshops confide in me that they struggle to find time to help needy, hurting children because they face such incredible pressure to deliver the testing and grading numbers that will allow them to keep their jobs. In a more perfect K-12 world, we would trust our teachers to strike a balance between being there to assist struggling students and effectively delivering education. But today’s K-12 landscape leaves no room for that.
Find the Reason to Stay Home From School

Circle all the valid reasons for missing school

I have to wait for the mail to come.
I have to wash my hair.
My face is breaking out.
It might rain.
I have a test.
My teacher's probably mad at me for missing school yesterday.
I can't keep up in class.
I don't feel like it.
My Mom doesn't make me go.
I was going to be late for school anyway.
I had to baby sit.
I had to work.
I had to help my cousin move.
I didn't know there was school today.
I've already missed a lot of school.
Nobody notices.
I hate P.E.
I had nothing to wear.
My hair was a mess.
I only had dirty clothes to wear.
I didn't have lunch money.
I'm just gonna be a Mom anyway.
I've had a really big fight with my boyfriend and I might run into him at school.
My Dad never went.
So, at present it may be just a dream that K-12 teachers could one day have the time, energy and skills to help all their students, including and especially their struggling youngster s. To take one step towards that dream, check out the wonderful resources that already exist to motivate and train all students to succeed in school—but especially those who struggle. You'll find a lesson on teaching attendance to students. Pick it up at https://www.youthchg.com/teacher-professional-development-resources. These Coping, School and Social Skills Strategies actually motivate students to learn to manage whatever obstacles and barriers they arrive to school with. These methods also teach children to become prepared students with good social and emotional skills.

Schools that focus on graduating competent, motivated, skilled, educated students rather than competing in a win-or-lose race for test numbers, school and teacher grades, might just produce what years and years of testing and grading haven't: Competent, motivated, skilled, educated adults.

Author/Trainer/Adjunct Professor Ruth Herman Wells, M.S. is the Director of Youth Change Professional Development Workshops. Register for her upcoming Portland, Oregon and Seattle, Washington workshops at http://www.youthchg.com or email dwells@youthchg.com. Ruth’s courses offer $45 college credit and free clock hours, and are also available online any time at http://www.youthchg.com/webinar. Ruth also is a popular speaker at conferences and school inservice workshops, and is available for direct bookings by calling 1-800-545-5736, or book her through several speakers bureaus.