**Meet the Free Agent Learners:
Changing School from the Outside In**

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Our discussion today

- **Meet the Free Agent Learners!**

- Examine the what, why and how of K-12 students' pursuit of self-directed, interest-driven learning outside of school

- Reflect on the implications of these student learning behaviors on school and community practices

- Think about new ways for educators to leverage Free Agent Learnership in our classrooms and schools

About Project Tomorrow (www.tomorrow.org)

- Nonprofit education organization supporting K-12 education since 1996

- **Mission:** to support the development of new leadership capacities within the K-12 ecosystem through the translation of research into practice

- **Core belief:** the voices and views of K-12 stakeholders can be a valuable asset for stimulating change in education if used effectively

- **Programs and research:** focus on understanding the impact of new learning models, including digital learning, on student outcomes and educator effectiveness

About the Speak Up Research Project

Facilitated annually by Project Tomorrow, Speak Up is:

- A **leadership support tool** for education leaders in schools, districts, states and supporting organizations.

- A **free turnkey service** for schools and districts to collect feedback from students, parents, teachers and administrators. Includes local reports with state and national comparative data.

- A process to effectively use the **authentic views and ideas of K-12 stakeholders as an asset** to inform decisions, programs, policies, funding and new initiatives.

- **A reliable and valid source for understanding key national and state trends in education since 2003.**

Most comprehensive data set on digital learning includes feedback from over 6.2 million K-12 stakeholders.

Let's get to know each other!

Let's get to know each other with a waterfall activity!

- I will ask the group a question.

- You will think about your answer and put it in the chat box – **but do not press enter!**

- When I say enter, everyone will push their answers out at the same time … *like a waterfall.*

- Read through different answers and **respond back to one person with your thoughts** or a different point of view on their answer.

Question:

What is one thing that you learned recently on your own by using social media or through a video?

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What is one thing that you learned recently on your own by using social media or through a video?

Let's reflect on your learning experiences . . .

- Was your learning self-directed?

- Was it driven by something that you were interested in – a curiosity or personal passion?

- Did you initiate the learning on your own, sponsored or facilitated by others?

- Were you directing the learning experience from A to Z?

- Was your learning enabled through the use of digital tools, content or resources?

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**These are the key characteristics of**
Free Agent Learning

Based upon Project Tomorrow research from 2014 – 2022 examining the experiences of 2.5 million students nationwide.

- *Key finding: 2/3 of our K-12 students are regularly engaging in Free Agent Learning*

Publication date: October 11, 2022

https://tinyurl.com/5n7xpkk5

Book review from Susan Patrick, President and CEO, Aurora Institute

FREE AGENT LEARNING

LEVERAGING STUDENTS' SELF-DIRECTED
LEARNING TO TRANSFORM K-12 EDUCATION

JULIE A. EVANS

project tomorrow
SpeakUp

JOSSEY-BASS
A Wiley Brand
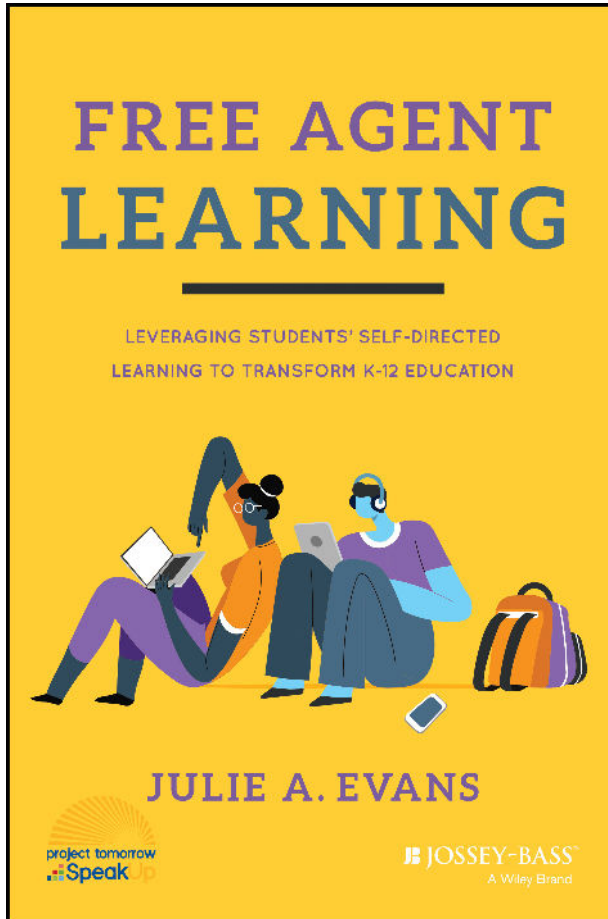
"*Free Agent Learning* explores how students might become co-designers and stewards of learning experiences that extend beyond school walls and receive credit for anytime, anywhere, passion-driven learning. Evans explains how having a meaningful choice in the path and pace of the learning process is important to students based upon Speak Up data from surveying students since 2004. She lifts up a fundamental principle – a majority of students want to be in control of when and how they learn. An important consideration is how education systems will need to evolve to shift power to the learner, in hopes students can build agency over the path and pace of their learning with a focus on purpose and student goals, and underscores how advanced digital learning can support this vision."

Susan Patrick

Defining Free Agent Learning

Free Agent Learning:

- Students self-direct highly personalized learning experiences around topics and subjects of strong interest or academic passion for them.

- The learning activities are not sponsored or facilitated by a teacher, or other educator – the student is un-tethered from traditional education settings.

- Access to digital tools, content and resources enable students to adopt a Free Agent Learnership mindset and related behaviors more easily and efficiently.

- The students' learning experiences are representations of their preferences for how learning should be in the classroom.

Another type of
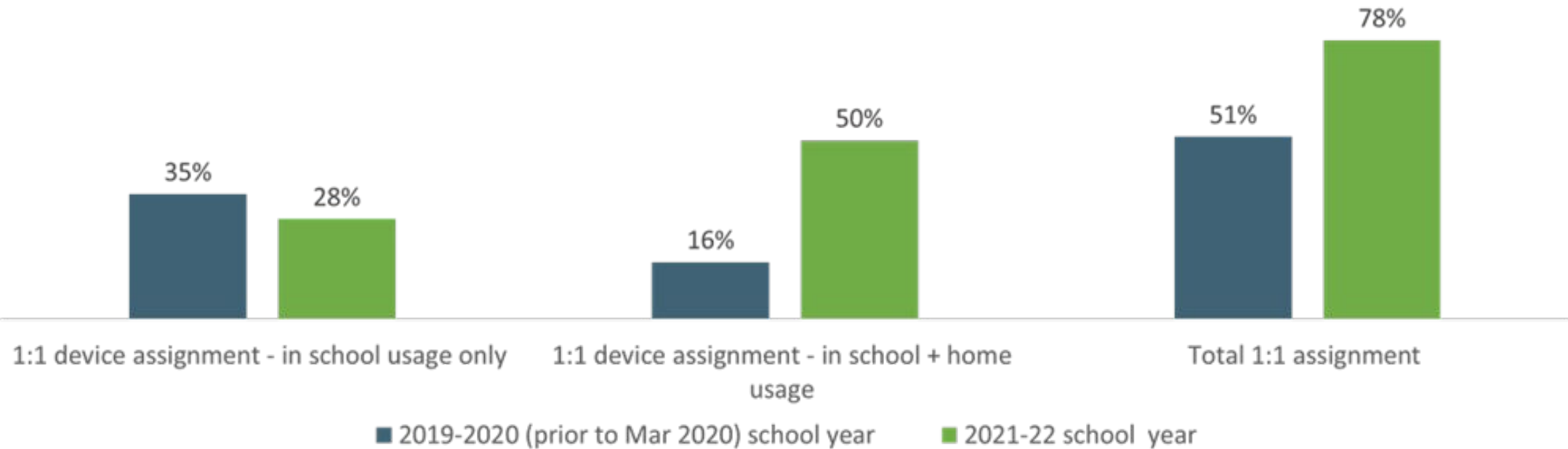Free Agent ….
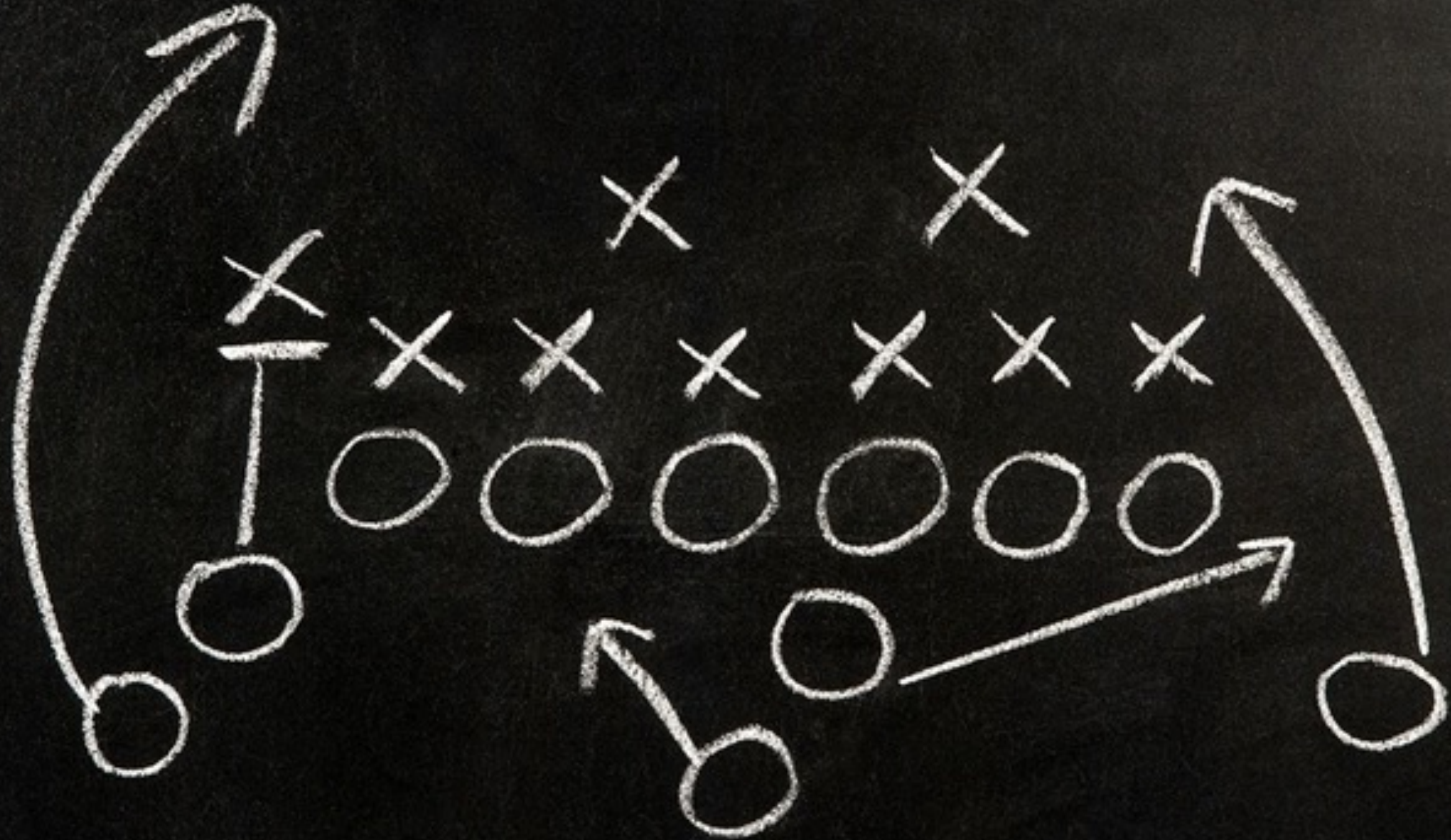
Setting the context

Understanding the 4 education environments for students:

- **School-based learning experiences**

- Homework or out of school assignments or studying

- Extracurricular programs

- Self-directed, interest-driven learning

1:1 Programs in K-12 schools – 2019/20 vs. 2021-22

Teachers report on student access to digital devices
in their classroom

35% — 1:1 device assignment - in school usage only (2019-2020)
28% — 1:1 device assignment - in school usage only (2021-22)

16% — 1:1 device assignment - in school + home usage (2019-2020)
50% — 1:1 device assignment - in school + home usage (2021-22)

51% — Total 1:1 assignment (2019-2020)
78% — Total 1:1 assignment (2021-22)

■ 2019-2020 (prior to Mar 2020) school year   ■ 2021-22 school year
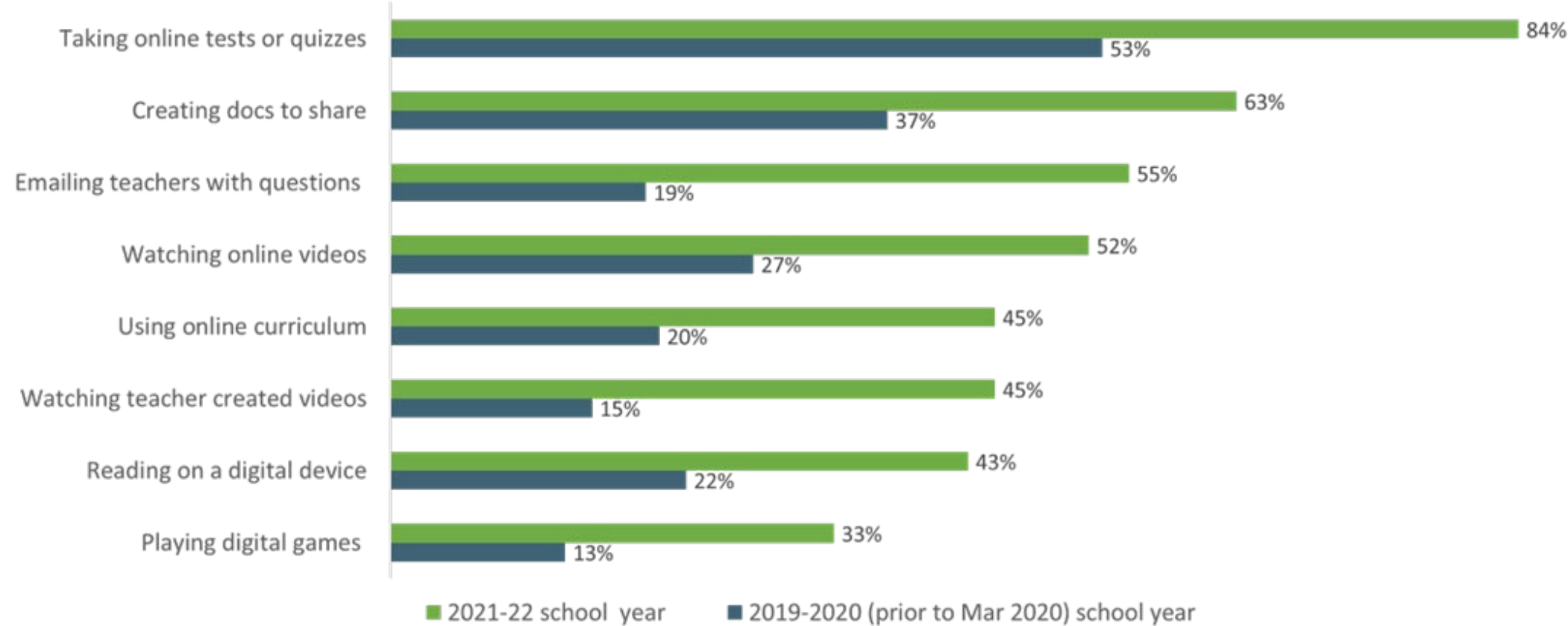
Speak Up Question for you!

What do you think?

What do you think?

What is the #1 way that students are using technology in schools today?

Put your answer in the chat box now!

Understanding school-based learning experiences today

What are the ways that students are using technology in schools today?

Grade 6-12 students report on regular schoolwork tasks using digital tools

Task	2021-22	2019-2020
Taking online tests or quizzes	84%	53%
Creating docs to share	63%	37%
Emailing teachers with questions	55%	19%
Watching online videos	52%	27%
Using online curriculum	45%	20%
Watching teacher created videos	45%	15%
Reading on a digital device	43%	22%
Playing digital games	33%	13%

■ 2021-22 school year ■ 2019-2020 (prior to Mar 2020) school year

"I can surely say from my personal experience that "Traditional schools" definitely don't work for the majority of students including me, and although they are working to improve their teaching methods and the class/school environment and modernizing it, most of the administrators and teachers still have that old traditional mentality and aren't willing to change to a more modern, easier and understandable way of teaching so that students may learn easier and quicker. My school is improving technologically wise but teaching methods it is very slow and hard to understand at times, and although some teachers are open-minded with new teaching methods to help students, most teachers need to understand that not all students learn the same way and as fast as others."

Grade 10 student, El Paso, Texas

Grade 6-12 students' views on school and learning
National sampling of 41,000 students
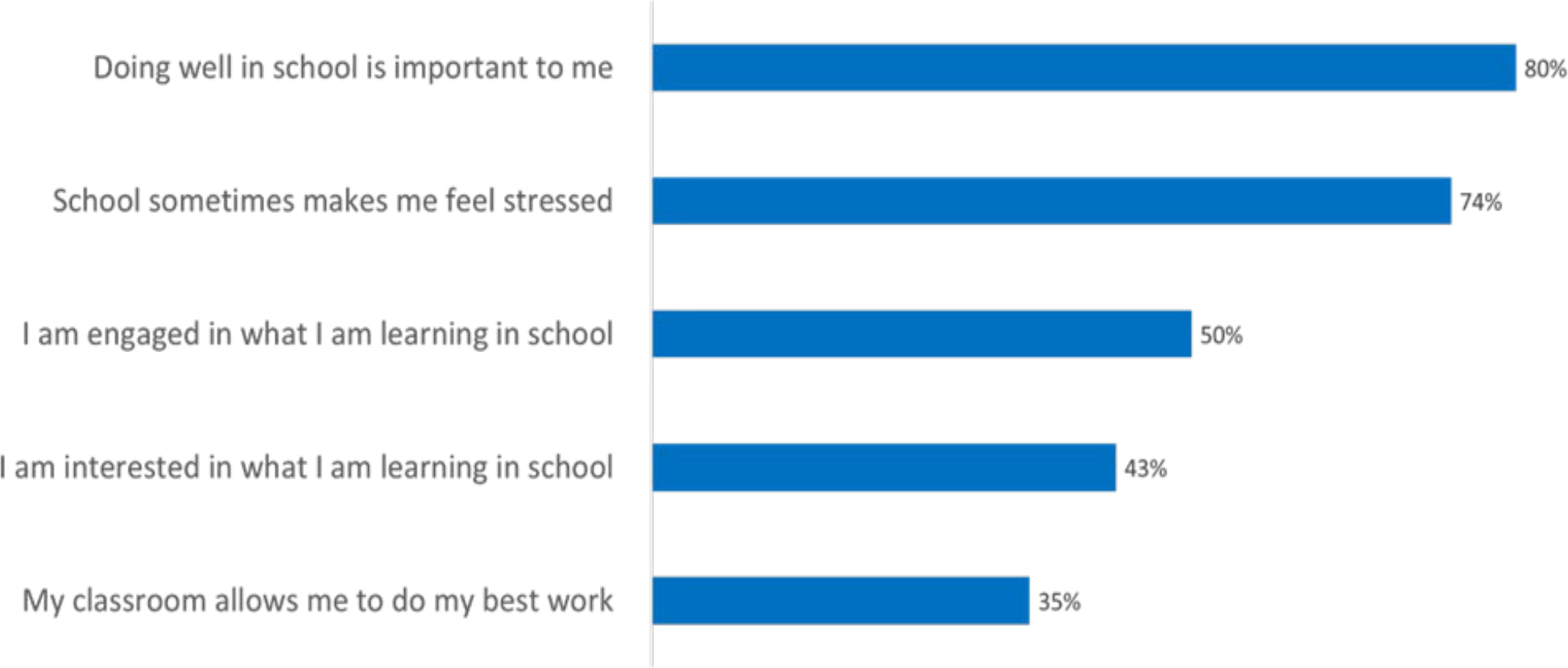
Grade 6-12 students' views on school and learning
National sampling of 41,000 students

Learning preferences	% of students who agree with the statement	
	Grade 6-8 students	Grade 9-12 students
2-way communication with my teacher is important for my learning success	49%	61%
I wish my school provided ways for me to learn more about future jobs	52%	51%
I like learning when I can be in control of when and how I learn	51%	51%
I learn best when I can do projects that engage me in solving a real-world problem	49%	48%
I learn best in a physical classroom	68%	66%
I learn best in a virtual classroom	15%	16%

What do you see?

Do we have a learning disconnect?

This learning disconnect may be a function of our own perceptions about education, school, learning and especially technology use.

Do we all "see" these concepts in the same way?

Do our students see things differently than we do?

What are the sightlines of our students regarding their own education?

How do these different sightlines impact equity in educational experiences and opportunities?

Students have their own Vision for Learning

Per our students, learning is most effective for them when it can incorporate these essential elements:

- Socially-based

- Un-tethered

- Contextually rich

- Independently driven
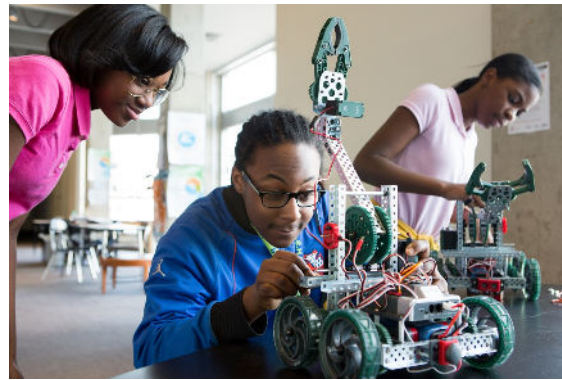
Understanding the Student Vision for Learning

Essential elements:

- Socially-based

- Un-tethered

- Contextually rich

- Independently driven

This Student Vision for Learning is the result of how students feel about their in-school learning experiences *plus* their views on the efficacy of their own self-directed learning experiences.

This Student Vision for Learning is the result of how students feel about their in-school learning experiences *plus* their views on the efficacy of their own self-directed learning experiences.

Let's talk about the self-directed, interest-driven learning experiences that students are having outside of school.

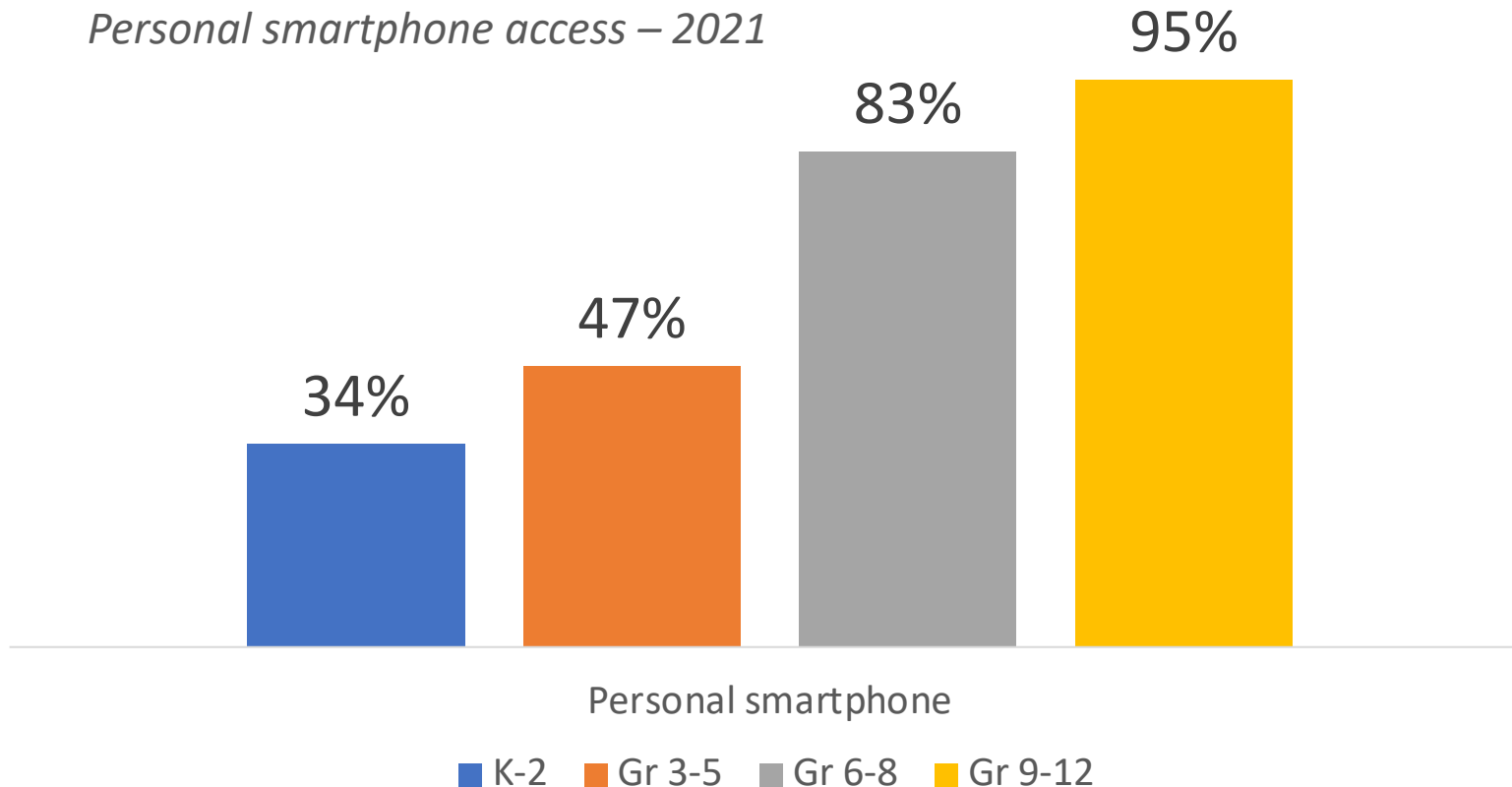Data findings from K-12 students from 2019-2022: 472,000 students nationwide

The **self-directed learning experience** – students' activities and valuations on those experiences

Students' use of technology outside of school

Personal smartphone access – 2021

95%

83%

47%

34%

Personal smartphone

■ K-2   ■ Gr 3-5   ■ Gr 6-8   ■ Gr 9-12

Personal access to digital devices – not school provided includes:

- Laptops
- Tablets
- Smartwatches

The **self-directed learning experience** – students' activities and valuations on those experiences

Students' use of technology outside of school

- Entertainment
- Friend development activities
- Relationship maintenance
- Fun!

The **self-directed learning experience** – students' activities and valuations on those experiences

Students' use of technology outside of school

- Learning activities

- **Over 2/3rds of students in grades 6-12 are using technology outside of school for self-learning purposes**

How many teachers ask their students about how they are using technology for learning at home?

The **self-directed learning experience** – students' activities and valuations on those experiences

For today's students, learning is a 24/7 enterprise

Students are **engaged in learning** outside of school:

- Using their own technology and social media tools

- Controlling the learning process at their own pace

- Exploring areas of personal learning interest

- Addressing the essential elements of the Student Vision for Learning through their own learning paths

Meet the Free Agent Learners!

The **self-directed learning experience** – students' activities and valuations on those experiences

Sampling from the Free Agent Learner Activity Typology

- Learning how to do something by watching a **YouTube video**

- Working to improve writing skills by getting feedback from **online writing forums**

- Playing **online and video games** to learn workplace skills – *watching others play also*

- Using **voice technologies** to get answers to their curiosities

- Using **social media and TEDTalks** to learn about new ideas

- Researching information on **websites** or asking questions on **online forums**

- **Taking a self-paced online class or tutorial** about something they want to learn about

The **self-directed learning experience** – students' activities and valuations on those experiences

Examples of "Free Agent Learning"

"I'm very interested in chemistry and physics and instead of learning the same lesson that has been taught since the 90's, I've been teaching myself by reading papers I find online, watching videos, going on free online textbooks, and having online discussions with other students and experts."

Boy/Grade 7/Urban Community/Arizona

"I'm currently studying up in medical illnesses, such as encephalitis. I think I'll fill a notebook up with medical conditions I find fascinating. This subject is interesting to me because I plan to go into the medical career in the future. Technology aids in this research because the information is more readily available."

Girl/Grade 12/Suburban Community/California

The **self-directed learning experience** – students' activities and valuations on those experiences

Examples of "Free Agent Learning"

"I like to learn about fishing, historical events like Pearl Harbor, and welding and blacksmithing. I like welding and blacksmithing because I get to learn how make different objects with metal. I like to learn about Pearl Harbor and other historic events that happened in our nation. I like to learn about all the different types of fish and lures that I can use to catch fish. Technology helps me learn about these things because there are so many sources online."

Boy/Grade 6/Rural Community/Alabama

"I am learning how to use Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator outside of school. This is interesting to me because I get lost in graphic design and it's a lot of fun for me. This helps me learn new tools within editing/designing projects."

Girl/Grade 11/Suburban Community/Wisconsin

Universality of Free Agent Learning Behaviors

Differences by?

- Gender

- Technology skills

- Demographics

- Community

- Internet access

Research results:

- ✓ Actually only small, non-statistically significant differences between subgroups

- ✓ Free Agent Learner profile is not defined by the typical variables

The **self-directed learning experience** – students' activities and valuations on those experiences

What makes Free Agent Learning different than school-based learning? Four key attributes:

1. **Place independence**: un-tethered from school or a formal learning space

2. **Power ownership:** students are self-directing the learning process

3. **Purposeful technology usage:** use of digital or online tools that yield highly specific benefits and outcomes; technology as a utility

4. **Passionate motivations:** the organic impetus – the spark - for doing the self-directed learning

The **self-directed learning experience** – students' activities and valuations on those experiences

But why are students self-directing learning outside of school? Four key reasons:

- Self-remediation

- Skill development

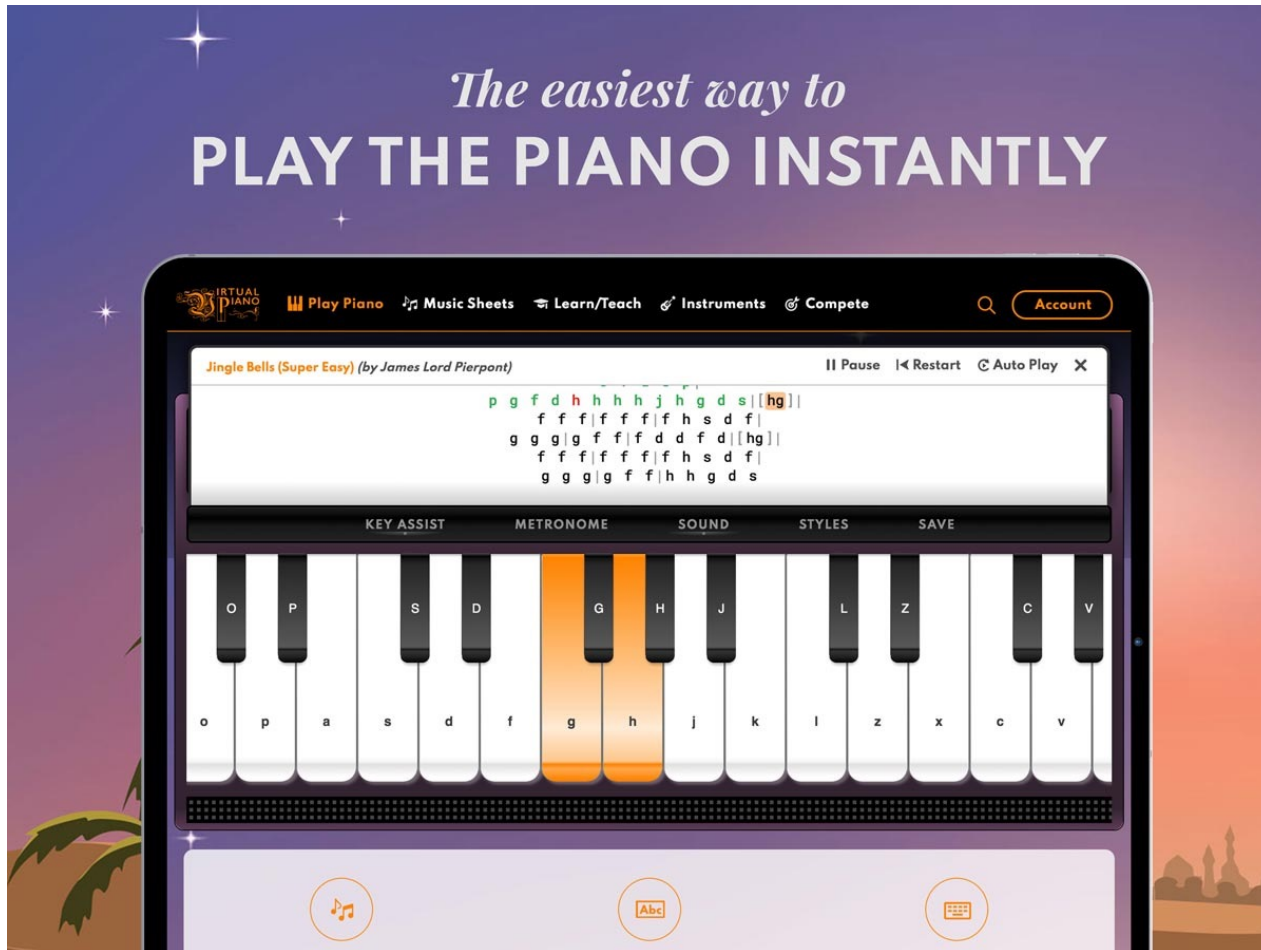- Curiosity

- Career exploration and preparation

The **self-directed learning experience** – students' activities and valuations on those experiences

Meet the Free Agent Learners!

- **Chad**
- **Samantha**
- **Anna**
- **Diego**
- **Thomas**

Meet Diego, a Free Agent Learner!

The easiest way to
PLAY THE PIANO INSTANTLY

- 5th grade student – urban elementary school

- School provided every student with a tablet to use in school – and to take home with a data plan to facilitate connectivity for homework

- Diego always wanted to learn to play the piano, but his parents could not afford lessons or a piano

- He found online resources to teach him how to use his tablet as a keyboard and watched YouTube videos to learn how to play the piano

- Gave a concert to his 5th grade class to show off his newly self-learned piano skills accompanied by a friend doing the vocals

- *Teacher institutionalized asking students "what did you learn on your own last night" as part of the morning class routine*

Meet Samantha, a Free Agent Learner!

- A 9th grade student in a rural community

- Interested in learning more about how the economy worked and the impact of financial markets on poverty and equity

- Found online articles, videos and websites – her interest grew to include the stock market. Watched Mad Money and Squawk Box and followed financial news reporters and commentators on social media.

- Started using allowance and babysitting money to make small trades on her own – used her school provided Google tools to keep track of her trades. Exploring bitcoin now.

- *Sees her self-directed learning as effective life preparation that she has to do on her own since this type of experience is not provided by school.*

Meet Chad, a Free Agent Learner!

- 12th grade student – suburban high school

- Read textbook chapter on quantum mechanics and wanted to learn more

- Trolled online forums and discussion boards – and learned about a college textbook on the subject

- Purchased used copy on Amazon

- Satisfied both a personal curiosity and a career exploration interest

- *Never even thought to tell his teacher about his self-initiated, self-directed Physics education*
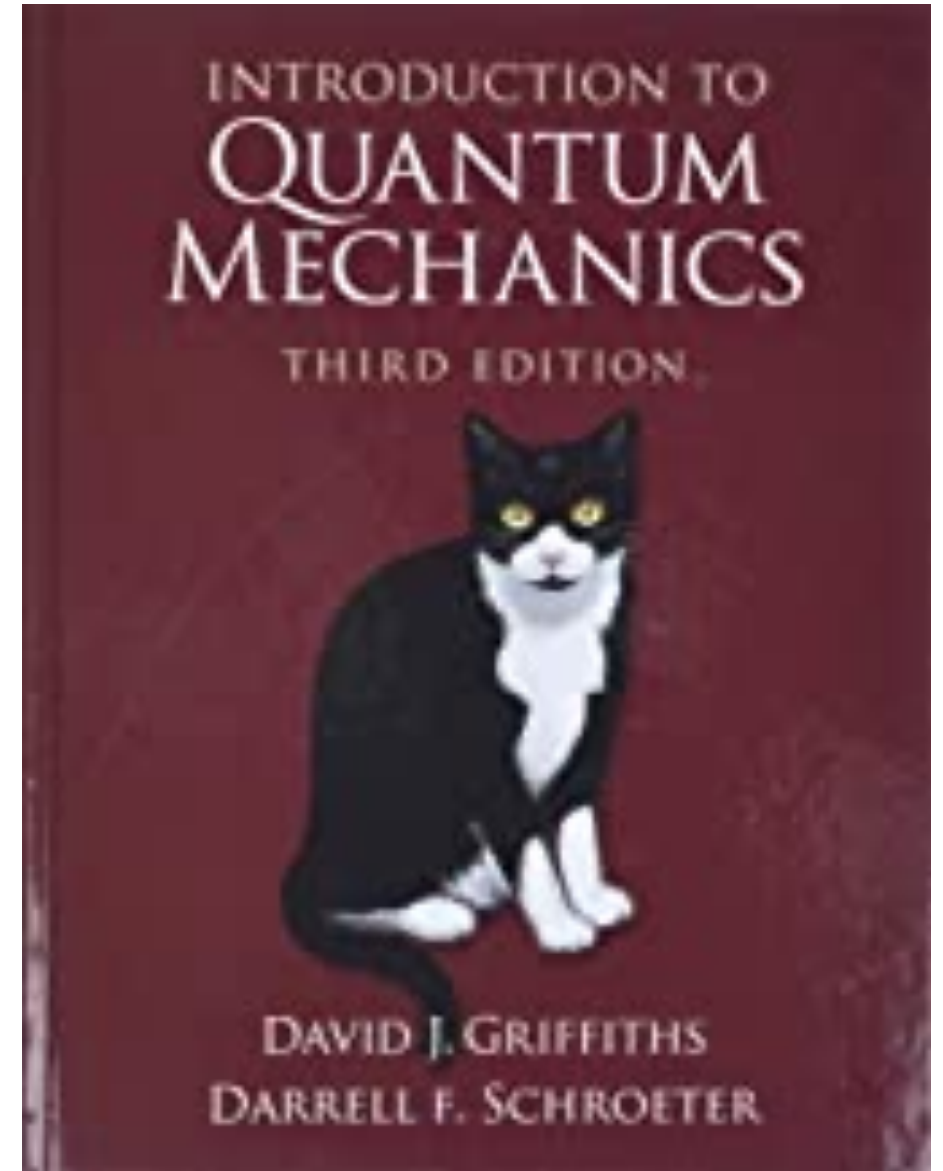
Meet the Free Agent Learners!

What do all the stories about self-directed learning have in common?

- Students are already self-directing learning beyond sponsorship of teachers

- Students have control of their learning process

- Technology use is highly purposeful – it is a utility

- There is intrinsic motivation behind the learning

- Students are highly engaged in the learning process

- Students develop agency as a learner

Meet the Free Agent Learners!

Why can we learn from this information?

- Realization that school is not the only place where meaningful learning happens

- Technology enables *anytime, anywhere, anyplace, any pace learning* for all of us including students

- We can learn how to improve "school" by paying attention to the motivations and activities of Free Agent Learners

- Every learner is an individual; personalizing learning is a powerful motivation for innovation

- Self-directed learning helps students develop effective skills for life-long, independent learning

Why is this information so important right now?

- To help us all see beyond our assumptions about education, school and learning.

- To gain a greater appreciation for the views of our students regarding their preferences for learning.

- To use this information to stimulate new discussions about effective learning today.

- To use this information to address key issues in education including equity.

Meet the Free Agent Learners!

What are the barriers to the potential of Free Agent Learnership to inform classroom teaching and learning?

- Belief that legitimate and valid learning only happens in a school environment.

- Most educators (as well as policymakers and media) have an incomplete valuation on the role of technology within learning.

- Whether we like it or not, technology access is changing the traditional power equation in the classroom.

- Lack of awareness or willingness to see/acknowledge that the learning experiences students are having outside of school may be more meaningful than what is happening in their classroom every day.

Our discussion today

- **Meet the Free Agent Learners!**

- Examine the what, why and how of K-12 students' pursuit of self-directed, interest-driven learning outside of school

- Reflect on the implications of these student learning behaviors on school and community practices

- Think about new ways for educators to leverage Free Agent Learnership in our classrooms and schools
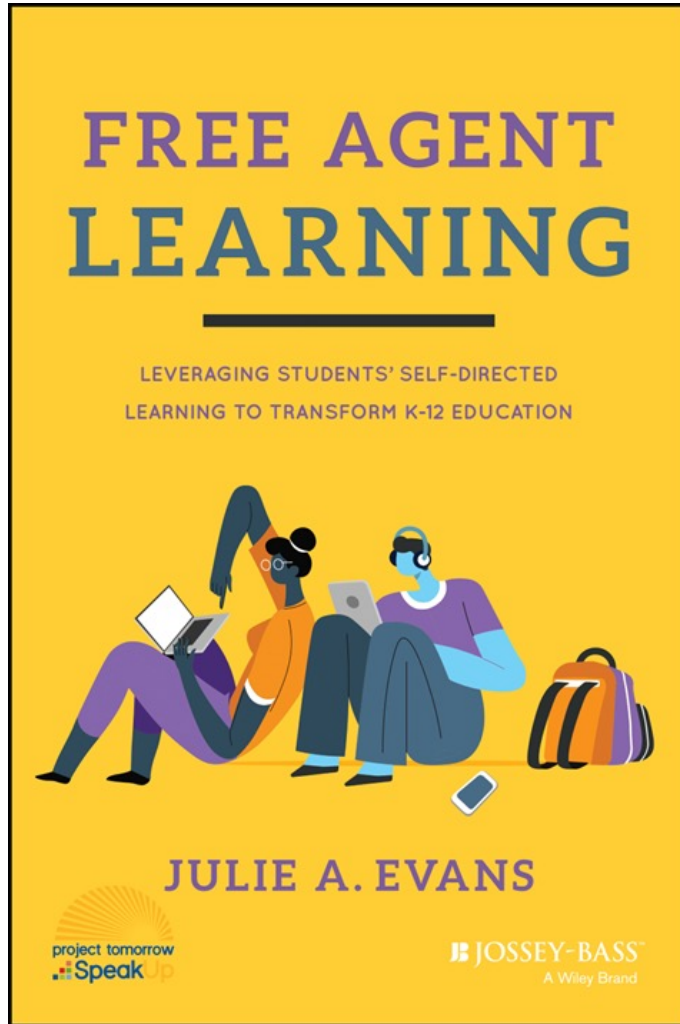
Your questions, insights, ideas, comments?

Group discussion

How could educators could use this new information about **Free Agent Learning** to improve in-school learning experiences for all students?

Are there connections that can be made to address these issues in education?
- Inequities in learning experiences
- Challenges with student engagement
- Developing student agency or self-efficacy

Excerpt from Chapter 10 of the book:

*Ten Things Education Leaders Can Do Today to
Support Free Agent Learnership*

1. Discover the potential benefits of simply asking students about their Free Agent Learning activities

2. Integrate the key concepts of Free Agent Learning within everyday classroom activities

3. Enable every student to be a Free Agent Learner by supporting at home access to technology – not just for schoolwork or remote learning

4. Provide academic credit for self-directed learning

5. Encourage teachers and administrators to be Free Agent Learners also in their own professional learning and development

Excerpt from each chapter of the book: *Now Think about This*

Questions to think about – discuss with colleagues – use for planning:

✓ Do we value students' self-directed, interest-driven learning as meaningful educational experiences? Why or why not?   How do we think our students feel when we don't value those experiences?

✓ How can we use this new knowledge to improve school, community activities, higher education offerings and programs that connect education and industry? What do we need to get started?

✓ Can we leverage students' Free Agent Learning to help us collectively address the education equity challenge? Is access to technology outside of school just to support school-based learning or can it also be used to enable self-directed learning?

✓ How can we support the development of student agency and learning efficacy in our communities? Can an explicit recognition of Free Agent Learning help us with this goal?

Other resources from Project Tomorrow to support your ongoing professional learning about Free Agent Learnership

Learn about the experiences and views of your own students by using the free Speak Up Surveys to collect that data – and understand the context using the comparative state and national data and Project Tomorrow data analysis tools

o Speak Up 2022-23 surveys open from October 13 – May 13

Host a "Meet the Free Agent Learners" professional learning workshop or book study in your school or district

o Contact me for more information: jevans@tomorrow.org

FREE AGENT LEARNING

LEVERAGING STUDENTS' SELF-DIRECTED
LEARNING TO TRANSFORM K-12 EDUCATION

JULIE A. EVANS

JOSSEY-BASS
A Wiley Brand

I would love to hear what you think of my book!

Publication date: October 11, 2022

https://tinyurl.com/5n7xpkk5

Thank you for joining me today!

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