Interview with Alan Shusterman, Founder of The School for Tomorrow

Sara Bennett

What a school that is connected to the real world and is focused on the real needs of students might look like.

**Sara Bennett**: Alan, can you tell me a little bit about your background and why you decided to start a school?

**Alan Shusterman**: I was a public school kid, always a good student but never particularly engaged in school. I was able to get A's despite myself. Growing up I loved hanging out with kids younger than me, I set up school for my younger sister and taught her how to read, and I always had the teaching bug.

But because I was a good student, I ended up at the University of Pennsylvania, and becoming a teacher was never on the horizon. Back then, before Teach for America, it wasn’t culturally acceptable for someone graduating from an Ivy League school to go into teaching. So, instead, I went to Harvard Law School. As history would have it, Barack Obama was in my class at Harvard; as luck would have it, I didn’t befriend him.

Every little aspect of my life story has informed my philosophy of education, including having gone to Penn and Harvard and seeing firsthand what the best and brightest secondary school graduates are like and do. Of course this is an overgeneralization, but, in general, the students who succeed in high school arrive to college narrow-minded, conformist, and supporters of the status quo. That President Obama, for one, has turned out to be a rather conventional politician, especially with respect to education, has not surprised me, given his educational pedigree.

ALAN SHUSTERMAN lives in Chevy Chase, MD, with his wife and three children. He is the founder of School for Tomorrow, an independent nonprofit secondary school (grades 6-12) located in Rockville, which opened the Fall of 2009 with 18 students, and three full-time and six part-time teachers.

SARA BENNETT, the co-author of The Case Against Homework, is the founder of Stop Homework, a project devoted to changing homework policy and practice. Her website is <www.stophomework.com>. She lives in Brooklyn, NY, with her husband and two children.
With my law degree I got a well-paying job in a big law firm — and ended up, at the age of 25, having what I describe as “a mid-life crisis.” I was miserable and unfulfilled. So, I made the “radical” decision — that is, radical to my peers — to leave my first law firm job in under a year. For years I regretted going to law school but, as it turned out, the variety of work experiences I had over the next decade — in the legal and business and for-profit and nonprofit worlds — were invaluable. And there’s no way I’d be sitting here today, the founder of a unique new school, without them.

The big turning point came eight years ago, when I was trying to decide what to do next. One day my father began a conversation with “Alan, you’ve always wanted to teach.” And then he and my mother offered me this incredible opportunity to make the transition into teaching, with financial support from them; without that, I’d never have been able to do it, for at that point my wife and I had three young kids to support.

I was fortunate to get a job at Sandy Spring Friends School [in Montgomery County, Maryland], a well respected Quaker private school, teaching U.S. history to 7th and 8th graders. I had never taught a day in my life and I had never taken an education class, but very quickly I figured out that I loved teaching, and that I had at last found my calling. Almost as quickly, however, I figured out that there’s something very wrong with secondary schools as they exist today.

Secondary schools are completely disconnected from the real world. It’s as if they are in a parallel universe. This results in outdated curriculum that does not make sense for the world our high school graduates will be entering and a learning environment that doesn’t take advantage of all that today’s world has to offer. For example, most schools today, whether public or private, will proudly show you their wonderful state-of-the-art computer labs or their mobile carts. Yet, in the real world, computers aren’t relegated to a special room or occasion, but are integrated into everyday life. And then there are the computer or technology classes where what is taught has already been learned by the students, on their own, years before.

Which leads me to the second, even more profound, disconnect between schools and between many of the adults in schools and students. Schools relate to and treat these complex, evolving individuals, the students, in unreal, artificial ways by expecting them to do things that simply don’t make sense, yet not expecting them to do other things they are fully capable of; and by regularly placing them in restrictive, suffocating “boxes.”

So I decided, within the first few months of teaching at Sandy Spring, that someday I would start my own school. I imagine that had I gone straight into teaching from college, I’d have been one of those teachers who spends his career trying to buck the system, or who ends up burning out and leaving the profession. But, because I was 37 at the time, and had so much real world experience behind me, I could see everything with a fresh perspective and, perhaps more importantly, I had the ability to envision and ultimately create a different type of school.

A few years later, I left teaching, I homeschooled my 4th grader for a year because her 3rd grade year in school had been so debilitating, and I began full-fledged planning to get my own school started. After working full-time for the next two years to get it off the ground, The School for Tomorrow at last opened this past September.

Sara: What does the physical space of SFT look like?

Alan: This year we are subletting three very large carpeted, windowed classrooms in a former public school building, with additional classrooms available for us in future years. We have our own bathrooms and hallway, as well as an administrative office. We also have shared use of a large multi-purpose room, library, and other parts of the building. Outside there are a great soccer field, a full basketball court, two playgrounds, and nice open space.

Our classrooms are designed to be multi-purpose, with lots of different workspaces and configurations possible. All of our classrooms contain a lot of IKEA furniture, assembled by both staff and students, as well as desktop computers and wireless internet; all of our students have laptops. One of our classrooms has a nice home theatre setup, another has most of our growing book collection, and another is where we do most of our art and science and other messy activities. Like everything else at SFT, we are continually transforming and improving our physical space.
Sara: Tell me about School for Tomorrow. What makes it unique?

Alan: Everything we do here at SFT can be traced back to two core questions. First, what does a high school graduate need to know and be able to do in order to thrive in college, the workplace, and life in the decades ahead? Second, what are the most effective and efficient ways for students in general, and each student in particular, to master the learning outcomes resulting from the answer to the first question?

I’ve yet to find any other school that seriously addresses these fundamental questions. Quite simply, asking these questions is what makes SFT unique and results in a school that is relevant to today’s world and makes sense for today’s students. And the good news is that the answers are already out there—in work done by others within and outside the education world. For instance, over the past decade at least three or four well-funded, compelling studies have been completed that address the first question. Most schools, however, completely ignore or pay lip service to them. But, unlike 20 years ago when they’d be sitting on a shelf somewhere growing dusty, now they’re sitting on the Web, available for anyone like me to utilize.

Sara: Do you have a curriculum?

Alan: Yes, there are three main areas of curriculum, in the sense of required learning outcomes, that result from asking our first core question.

First, reading, writing, and arithmetic still matter. Or, put another way, all students must master what we call the transferable academic skills of learning—that is, how to ask the right questions, problem solve, find information and understand it in whatever form it is found, analyze, use, and be able to communicate the information in writing, orally, and with the assistance of multi-media tools. In addition, the research shows that there’s a certain level of quantitative reasoning and mathematics that is beneficial for all students to master.

Second, we have a core knowledge component. That’s the basic foundational knowledge that someone needs so they can then apply their generic learning skills if they want or need to learn more about a given subject. For example, our U.S. history requirement isn’t a one-year course that covers all you can cram into a textbook and 150 45-minute class periods. Instead, it’s a pared down mix of key concepts, storylines, and facts that might take a student, say, 20 hours to learn. Through this core knowledge approach, we enable our students to more effectively understand and retain important background information and concepts, and cover many more subjects than in regular schools.

Third is what we refer to as our right brain curriculum. At SFT, drama, music, art, emotional intelligence, character, collaboration, conflict resolution, physical fitness, and mind-body work are treated as seriously as traditional academic subjects. In the 21st century, from a purely economic, earning potential point of view, all students must be given the opportunity to develop their right brain, as well as their left brain skills and abilities.

On top of this well-rounded education, every SFT student will have time to exhaustively pursue whatever study she’s most passionate about. For example, we will arrange internships for our students and bring real world experts into the school. Kids are capable of doing amazing things before they’re 18 if given the opportunity. We will break through the ceiling that holds kids down in other schools.

Sara: Do you have “bottom-line” requirements?

Alan: Our students will have to meet specific graduation requirements that fall under each of the three main areas of curriculum that I told you about. Where student choice and individualization come into play is how they choose to meet the requirements. For instance, all SFT student are required to master algebra and geometry; but how they do it, and when they do, will naturally vary greatly among them.

Sara: How does this work?

Alan: First and foremost, we recognize that every student is different, and that the same student is different depending on the week, the month, and the year. So, every single student must have his own individualized learning path that allows him to learn at the pace and in the way that makes sense for him. And, given all the resources and knowledge that we have to assist learning in today’s world, this absolutely can be done.

Second, more often than not, you’ll see interdisciplinary learning at SFT, which is much more mean-
ingful and efficient than the automatic division of the school experience into artificial subject matter pods. You will also see multi-age groupings of students. For instance, if we have a 14-, a 12-, and a 10-year-old who are each ready to learn calculus, then there’s no reason they can’t learn it together. On the other hand, if they haven’t yet mastered pre-algebra, then we don’t push them into algebra until they’re ready. Moreover, multi-age groupings help to facilitate something we continually promote at SFT: kids teaching and learning from each other. Kids tend to accept help from each other more readily than from adults and, perhaps more significantly, teaching others is the best way to consolidate your own learning.

Which brings me to the role of the adult teachers at SFT, which is very different than at other schools. Traditional teachers basically play three roles: subject matter expert, behavior monitor (or classroom manager, as we refer to it in the business), and judge (Who is smart? Who is stupid?). Of course, great teachers transcend those three roles. But, unfortunately, truly great teachers are few and far between.

At SFT — and this is how it should be in every school — teachers are first and foremost facilitators of learning. What matters is whether we help the students progress in their learning, not what supervisors or colleagues or we think about our “performance.” In doing so, our default position — which is the opposite of the traditional micromanagement teaching approach — is that we want our students to be as independent as possible; at the same time, we’re there to provide direction and support when it’s needed.

The second main role that SFT teachers play is that of modeling what it’s like to be a respectful, caring, contributing member of a community and a true lifelong learner. Our teachers model that it’s okay not to know something, that it’s okay to make mistakes, that, in fact, the most meaningful, significant learning takes place through making mistakes. Most students at other schools are programmed to spend the day trying to avoid making mistakes or revealing what they don’t know. At SFT, however, we’re creating the opposite culture, one which leads to a challenging but safe learning environment.

Sara: How else are you different from most schools?

Alan: Well, as you’ve probably figured out already, I can go on and on and on. But I know our time is limited. So, for now, I’ll mention only a few more differences.

Research shows, and anyone with common sense knows, that kids learn best when they’ve had a decent night’s sleep and are well fed and well hydrated. The SFT school day starts at 9:30. We have healthy snacks available throughout the day so our students can eat when they’re hungry, and we have water coolers in our classrooms so they can get drinks when they’re thirsty. Our students are allowed to get up to stretch, to move around, to go outside when they get antsy.

The general rule at SFT is we don’t care what your learning looks like — for example, you can chew gum in class or listen to an iPod when working independently — as long as you’re making sufficient progress in your work and you’re not disturbing anyone else.

Sara: What’s your homework policy?

Alan: We have what we refer to as “a sensible homework policy.” The only mandatory homework is a half hour of reading a night — reading of the student’s own choosing. Beyond that, there is no built-in daily homework at SFT. To be clear, our students will, on occasion, do school-related work at home, but the rule is that, before doing any school-related work at home, students should know why they are doing it and what they are supposed to be doing. If they don’t, then they should stop, not waste their time and energy, and check with a teacher the next day.
By Alan Shusterman. New York Daily News | Dec 27, 2015 at 4:20 AM. Follow their lead (Courtesy of Mark Zuckerberg/Reuters). This month, Mark Zuckerberg and his wife Priscilla Chan vowed to invest nearly all of their fortune—a staggering $45 billion—in philanthropic causes over the course of the rest of their lifetimes. They highlighted education “personalized learning in particular” as a key area of focus. That’s great news. Shusterman is the founder and head of School for Tomorrow (SFT), a Silver Spring, Maryland nonprofit, independent school for grades four through 12. 

Recommended on Daily News. Discouraged at school. Alan Turing spent much of his early life separated from his parents, as his father worked in the British administration of India. At 13 years old, he was sent to Sherborne School, a large boarding school in Dorset. The rigid education system gave his free-ranging scientific mind little encouragement, so Turing studied advanced modern scientific ideas, such as relativity, on his own, running far ahead of the school syllabus. Alan Turing, aged 15, at Westcott House, Sherborne School. 1930. Devastated but inspired by his friend’s death. Engineer Donald Bayley describes Turing’s frustration at not being able to work on the construction of the ACE. Clip from Horizon (BBC Two). Interviewing is an important step in the job seeking process. For teachers, interviews are especially critical because the position requires strong presentation and interpersonal skills which can be difficult to measure outside of a face-to-face meeting. However, even teachers who are comfortable with public speaking can find interviews stressful. Thoughtful planning for your next interview can help you feel confident and prepared. Preparing for standardized testing is a crucial part of the teaching profession, especially for those in public education. When answering this question you should describe how you incorporated different standards into your lesson plan, as well as how you develop a robust curriculum that isn’t based on the standards alone.