

A For-Profit 21st Century School

Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, donated \$100 million for the “reimagining and transforming education with a proprietary technology platform” to AltSchool, which was founded in 2013 by Max Ventilla.¹ AltSchool is a collaborative community of micro-schools that uses teachers, deep research, and tools to offer a personalized, whole-child learning experience in San Francisco, Palo Alto, and Brooklyn for pre-kindergarten to 8th grade students.²

Each micro-school has a mixed-age class of 25 to 30 students with two teachers. Children enrolled in AltSchool use laptops and tablets to complete a daily, personalized “playlist” of lessons, projects, and activities. Children might work on a lesson from Khan Academy or collaboratively create a skit about cell anatomy. A student’s “playlist” also incorporates parents’ input as to the skills they want emphasized for their child. The cost of enrollment for AltSchool in Brooklyn is \$27,500.³

What makes AltSchool different from other for-profit schools is its paired function as a tech company. AltSchool employs engineers and researchers to collect and analyze data on enrolled students for Research & Development. Each classroom is outfitted with fisheye-lens cameras and a sound recorder. AltSchool engineers are working on a wearable device for students with a radio frequency ID tag to track all movements. The goal is to use this data to improve teaching techniques and/or assess student mastery, thereby benefiting the students attending these schools, and potentially future students as well.

Using the collected data, AltSchool is also developing software to build an operating system for education. This software will combine elements of a learning management system, administrative functions (enrollment, recruitment, finances, record keeping), and a social network for parent-teacher communication. Ventilla plans to market the software to charter, private, and public schools. By outsourcing these basic administration functions, the argument goes, educators can focus on serving students.

Not everyone is a fan of this model. Some argue that education ought to level the playing field, and this technology doesn’t. In a technology-saturated world, students at schools that can afford this kind of education may be more advantaged, thus furthering the inequities that already exist. Also, Bryan Alexander, an education technology expert, believes this software model is too expensive for many K-12 schools. He also argues, “Issues of funding, technical support and confusing and sometimes conflicting state and federal policies make adopting new technology very difficult. In short a new platform would have to be astonishing to be worth the battle.”⁴

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is the purpose of education? Should part of its purpose be to level the playing field?
2. Is it morally problematic that children in school systems that can afford this technology can get this service, while children in other school systems cannot?
3. Is it morally appropriate for schools to partner with technology companies in this kind of way? If so, what limits and safeguards, if any, should there be on such partnerships?
4. Is it morally appropriate for schools to conduct research on students in this kind of way? If so, what limits and safeguards, if any, should there be on such research?

¹ <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2015-06-10/what-happens-when-an-ex-google-executive-creates-a-school-system>

² <https://www.altschool.com/>

³ <http://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2015/05/04/403577703/a-for-profit-school-startup-where-kids-are-beta-testers>

⁴ <https://medium.com/bright/a-peek-into-silicon-valley-s-latest-bet-altschool-abf6c6973ecd>