The following is an excerpt from the book "Rich Dad, Poor Dad" by Robert Kiyosaki with Sharon Lechter CPA.

"Does school prepare children for the real world? Study hard and get good grades and you will find a high paying job with great benefits," my parents used to say. Their goal in life was to provide a college education for my older sister and me so that we would have the greatest chance for success in life. When I finally earned my diploma in 1976—graduating with honors, and near the top of my class, in accounting from Florida State University—my parents had realized their goal. It was the crowning achievement in their lives. In accordance with the Master Plan, I was hired by a Big 8 accounting firm, I looked forward to a long career and retirement at an early age.

One day in 1996, one of my children came home disillusioned with school. He was bored and tired of studying. "Why should I put time into studying subjects I will never use in real life?" he protested.

Without thinking, I responded, "Because if you don't get good grades, you won't get into college."

"Regardless of whether I go to college," he replied, "I'm going to be rich."

"If you don't graduate from college, you won't get a good job," I responded with a tinge of panic and motherly concern. "And if you don't have a good job, how do you plan to get rich?"

My son smirked and slowly shook his head with mild boredom. We have had this talk many times before. He lowered his head and rolled his eyes. My words of motherly wisdom were falling on deaf ears once again.

Though smart and strong willed, he has always been a polite and respectful young man.
"Mom," he began. It was my turn to be lectured. "Get with the times! Look around; the richest people didn’t get rich because of their educations. Look at Michael Jordan and Madonna. Even Bill Gates, who dropped out of Harvard, founded Microsoft; he is now the richest man in America, and he’s still in his 30’s. There is a baseball pitcher who makes more than $4 million a year even though he has been labeled 'mentally challenged'."

There was a long silence between us. It was dawning on me that I was giving my son the same advice my parents had given me. The world around us has changed, but the advice hasn’t.

Getting a good education and making good grades no longer ensures success and nobody seems to have noticed, except our children.

"Mom," he continued," I don’t want to work as hard as you and dad do. You make a lot of money, and we live in a huge house...If I follow your advice, I’ll wind up like you, working harder and harder only to pay more taxes and winding up in debt. There is no job security any more; I know all about downsizing and rightsizing. Look at doctors. They don’t make nearly as much money as they used to. I know I can’t rely on Social Security or company pensions for retirement. I need new answers."

The challenge for education and educators today is to ask the right questions, questions which will set young people on the path to finding the right answers for them.

Unfortunately however, school education is still, in many ways expecting yesterdays questions to provide the answers for young people today.

But today’s reality is vastly different from yesterday’s.

Traditionally children went to school to learn the three R’s - Mum and nanna have told me that once upon a time schools taught the same subjects, in the same way to students
who all did the same work, year after year, decade after decade. Little changed. Even
the readers remained the same, so if you were particularly careful with books, especially
the Primers, a whole family of children could use one book. Dick and Dora, Jack and Jill,
Nip and Fluff thrilled thousands of students for over fifty years.

In secondary school, there was a little more variety. Students were streamed with the
academically inclined doing general subjects, the not-so academic doing technical studies
for the boys or commercial for the girls. Anyway, for girls it didn’t much matter,
because a job was only a temporary measure before undertaking the important role, that
of being wife and mother.

So much of what was learnt was forgotten because it didn’t have to be remembered
once exams were over. It wasn’t relevant for anything other than passing exams and
certainly found little application in life. Except if you did commercial or technical. Then
your knowledge had direct application in the workplace.

That was then, perhaps thirty years ago. Now things have changed and quite
considerably. For example, Dick and Dora have long been replaced by a more relevant
and interesting range of readers. Thank Heavens!!

While there have been significant and positive changes, particularly in schools where
visionary leadership has seen very worthwhile programs instigated, in many areas
education has failed to keep pace with social change. And where there has been advance
it has been slow.

There is a definition about the past and the present by J.R. Oppenheimer which I think
is most appropriate when reflecting on the metamorphosis of the community.
This world of ours is a new world, in which the unit of knowledge, the nature of human communities, the order of society, the order of ideas, the very notion of society and culture have changed and will not return to what they have been in the past. What is new is new, not because it has never been before, but because it has changed in quality.

Changing family structures, work conditions, social mores and circumstances, and a much more mobile population have all impacted significantly on the way young people view their place in and form their attachments to a community. As a result of the changes, young people seem to have less sense of belonging.

While the following is an excerpt from a book "Ophelia Speaks" compiled by Sara Shandler, a 16 year old girl from the United States, her reality and that of her friends is certainly reflective of the sort of reality for Australian young people.

"It’s just a little coke Sa. It’s not like I’m smuggling kilos over the border or anything,“ Jade’s eyes searched for my approval, "Just don’t worry, okay?"
My shoulders hunched around my emptied lungs. I forced the single word from the bottom of my stomach, "Okay."
Jade pulled the screen door shut behind her. I stood, forehead against the thin wire mesh, and watched her headlights run away. I breathed in the last of summer’s warm nights and reviewed my day: Rachel ate only rice for lunch, Alexis took and HIV test, Jade bought cocaine/ Today’s events were not unusual. Today, as a whole was not even disturbing. Deadly diseases, hard drugs, and eating disorders should rattle me. Instead, these issues seemed alarmingly commonplace.
In my room, I glanced towards my desk. The shelf leaned against it like a heavy drunk, sagging under the weight of its contents. My rows of journals reminded me of my own struggles gone by. There was junior high: drinking in the baby blue book, rumors of too many boyfriends on the yellow Mead perforated pages. Tenth grade: My pleas to God to figure out why I slept so much and cried so much in the small wire bound book. Now, I can place my struggles into neat categories- subtitles to journals that are far from where I am now. But, I watch my friends continue to struggle. Sometimes I still struggle with them.

It’s not for lack of understanding or intelligence that my circle of friends is plagued by drug abuse, eating disorders and depression. We have all been told to love ourselves. We are all intelligent. We are all aware that we have been raised in a culture that cradles double standards, impossible ideals of beauty, and asks us to listen. But we are caught in the crossfire between where we have been told we should be and where we really are.”

While the reality of each young person is usually different from individual to individual, and it is important for this to be acknowledged, I think it is accurate to reiterate the general assessment of the author of Ophelia Speaks that "we are caught in the crossfire between where we have been told we should be and where we really are." Many young people feel trapped by others’ expectations.

Because the expectations of yesterday, particularly in the school system have been more or less transposed into today’s reality, young people are feeling trapped by those expectations and schools seem often to be unable to meet the requirements of new conditions.

The moment an expectation is imposed on someone or something it creates a standard, below which failure is inevitable.
Expectations require conformity, which in turn, limits options.

For example there is an expectation that if you have all the privilege of wealth, as a young person, you really shouldn’t have a problem in the world; that you should go to University, that you shouldn’t have sexual health, mental health problems or learning difficulties and you most certainly have no reason to kill yourself. But unfortunately those expectations and the conditions they create or fail to create often mean that problems fester below the surface and needs become even more acute.

The prevalence of false perceptions and expectations limit options in many respects, for young people to choose for themselves- to create themselves in their own way. This is very much a hangover from yesterday.

A powerful contemporary example of this is to be found in the novel/movie, Looking for Alibrandi. The character is a teenage boy, school captain, private school, wealthy family, all the trappings of privilege and all the expectations in the world. These expectations placed an unbearable burden on him. His anguish is tragically evident in a note to a friend.

"I wish I could be the person that my father expects me to be, I wish I could be what my school wants me to be, I wish I could be what you want me to be, but I can’t. I just want to be me. But I can’t, so now I just want to be free."

This was his suicide note.
Sadly this is not just an isolated scene in a movie - it is very true to life. The suicide of a young male from Murray bridge recently brought the issue of suicide to the fore once more. But the report was placed in the context of an overall assessment of young males, education and society. Statistics reveal that young males more and more are disenchanted with education, the drop out rate is increasing, the incidence of male adolescent crime and violent behaviour is rising and the suicide rate has increased 600% in the last decade! And of that %, more than half the suicides occur in rural areas.

Following this was an ABC radio interview in which a spokesman for the rural sector spoke of the sense of hopelessness that seems to pervade the thinking of young men in the country. He told of a typical day for many young men meant gathering in the main street mid-morning with their friends and spending the day "mooning". And this is not the mooning of the film Grease!

No sense of purpose, no confidence about tomorrow, few prospects, the result of the changing rural situation, no hope - so what’s in the future?

Obviously, something is drastically, tragically wrong. Education has neither equipped these young men for the reality of their world, nor given the encouragement they have needed, the strategies or the skills to create a new reality for themselves.

There are plenty of students in situations where there is an expectation that they will go on to University because of the home that they come from, the school they go to, their parent’s profession, but where this expectation does not fit their own ideas or hopes or dreams for themselves. There are plenty of students who may fit this scenario who may like the option of doing a VET course or undertaking an apprenticeship or traineeship but there is often a belief that these options are for those without other
choices. And it is this that prevents young people from having access to or being aware of their options.

Often if a young person has the courage not to conform or seek out options they are faced with a paradigm that invalidates their decision.

In assessing the needs of young people in the school system we need to be brutally honest with and about ourselves and the reality of now. Not only do we need to provide a range of options and opportunities for a diverse range of youth with a diverse range of needs and hopes, but we also need to give every young person the message that whatever option they choose is a valid one.

Numerous surveys, studies and consultations with students reveal that they are under no illusions as to what the future might hold for them and are aware of the "mismatch" between school and life. Young people are constantly being given messages about the new world of work and the need to be flexible and adaptable, even lateral in their thinking, yet the school system does not always provide or encourage these skills. Moreover, schools are reducing the chance that young people will become adaptable and flexible by failing to adjust structures and processes accordingly. Many students are therefore beginning to question the value of school in preparing them for life. Educational institutions need to readjust their standards and measures of success to ensure that the yardstick is life.

At the 1998 Australian Secondary Principal's Association Conference national conference in Tasmania, one of the sessions involved a group of students who used performance to depict their feelings about education and identity. They presented a powerful but poignant message of alienation, discrimination and perceived failure, yet at
the same time spoke strongly of the desire to be treated as individuals. In order to develop the potential of our youth, it is vital that these messages are heeded.

I recall the account given by a Deputy Principal at a Graduation Ceremony that I feel sadly portrays the devastating effects of imposing quantitative standards. The student, now my age, was memorable for her unfailing cheerfulness, motivation and resolve. She was not academically brilliant but what she lacked in natural ability she made up for in commitment and determination. Graduating from High School she went on to do a Tafe course while working at two part time jobs. The last time the Deputy Principal had seen this person was in the Eating Disorder Clinic at Flinders. Her self perception was one of being a failure. She had failed to achieve an acceptable standard in her Tafe course and was failing to live up to, what she perceived, was an acceptable standard in relation to her physical appearance. As the Deputy Principal left the hospital room, the young woman said "I am so lost."

Schooling still emphasizes success based on the amount of marks received, whereas true learning is actually about failure. What this girl could not see was that failure is an intrinsic part of the learning process and does not reflect on your worth as a person. We must recognize conditions such as eating disorders, drug abuse and suicide and respond as a matter of urgency to the message they are giving about young people and their self worth. A single set of standards for measuring success denies diversity and negates the need to be treated as an individual. It fails to recognize what might be considerable strengths in less conventional areas.

Dr William Glasser and Haim Ginott stated that,

"We must establish conditions that make it safe for students to risk failure. The major obstacle to learning is fear: fear of failure, fear of criticism, fear
of appearing stupid. A quality teacher makes it possible for each child to err with impunity. To remove fear is to invite attempt. To welcome mistakes is to encourage learning. To establish trust is to create a sense that I care, I am here to help you, not hurt you. I have your best interests in mind. When you achieve and meet your needs, then I do the same. Whether we build a climate of trust or fear will determine if we do quality work or work that is just ‘good enough’.

Creating an environment where it is okay to make mistakes, is actually creating an environment which better reflects the realities of the world of work, the real world. School should no longer be an artificial simulator.

The learning experience itself must be adapted. We often refer to education in terms of what students are taught, rather than what they have learned.

Education can no longer be compartmentalized, the knowledge acquired within institutions being a means to an end, that of meeting requirements so that students can then move beyond the school fences. In fact it is increasingly apparent that the fences must be removed so that education merges with the ‘real world’.

At the Tasmanian conference I referred to earlier, George Copa presented research conducted through the National Centre for Research in Vocational Education at the University of California and the College for Education and Human Development at the University of Minnesota. In his paper, *Redesigning the Learning Experience and Connecting the Learning Environments to the Future Work Lives of Children* he said "rather than starting with a curriculum that is modeled on the University or the latest textbooks, the challenge is to begin to sort out what are the important challenges and opportunities that young people are going to face, that they are facing now or will in the
future in work, family, and community settings, and then begin to work backwards and see what curriculum makes sense." This means asking young people to be partners in the redesign process. This needs to go way beyond an SRC structure that is allowed input into social events for students and fundraising activities. Partnership is more than asking questions, it is more than just giving "the youth a voice". Partnership is about involving students in an equitable way in making decisions, creating solutions, implementing plans and evaluating their success.

The following is taken from a poem entitled, student forgive me and it identifies the gap which often exists between teachers and students and articulates the importance of student voice in bridging the gap.

I have not understood the questions you have asked,  
Nor heard the answers you were given;  
I have not walked your path of youth,  
Nor stood at the crossroads of your decisions.  
Then how can I walk with you today?

Last week I attended a meeting at which a Education Department Superintendent commented on an experience she had on meeting a 14 year old street kid which spoke volumes about how school education needs to be challenged. She told of her attempts to convince the girl to return to school, but said that she stood no chance of doing so because the girl was earning up to $1000 a week on the streets. But from this girl she learnt that schools should not be rapping students over the knuckles for lateness, but instead should be enthusiastically welcoming those who would not otherwise be there, just for arriving. And this is the story of but one student for whom inflexible expectations were stifling. The messages in all those stories need to be heeded and
utilized to drive an evaluation process if school education is to successfully develop the potential of young people today.