



UNTHINK & UNLOCK

STUDENTS' CAPABILITIES

Erik Wahl paints a picture of a way of thinking that could unleash the creativity of educators and students alike.

Photos Courtesy of Lifetouch Photography

Graffiti artist, entrepreneur, and author Erik Wahl became frustrated by the lack of innovative thought and corresponding profits he saw in his business career. More than 10 years ago, he began to challenge companies to change their way of thinking, while simultaneously pursuing his passion for art. In advance of Wahl's recent inspiring presentation at NAESP's annual conference in Long Beach, California, NAESP Executive Director Gail Connelly engaged in conversation with the man whose speed paintings of thinkers, leaders, and cultural icons such as Michael Jordan, Steve Jobs, and Bono have inspired audiences to take their leadership and creativity to new heights.





GAIL CONNELLY: Erik, you've inspired businesspeople to tap into their creativity. Tell us why it's important for educators and principals specifically to think this way.

ERIK WAHL: It's more than important; it is the way of the future. If I am working in corporate America, whether it is sales, marketing, technology, engineering, or manufacturing, our adults are behind the curve in figuring out how to navigate ambiguity and even master complexity.

We've been educated in a very linear format that has become an outdated model. It is time not just to evolve in education, but also in the way that we educate and create a revolution. I'm passionate about going back to creativity's root, its starting point: our kids and the creative way that they think, the way that they process information and solve complex issues.

CONNELLY: In your book *Unthink: Rediscover Your Creative Genius*, you describe a new way of thinking and working that stems from a tension, so to speak, between business sense and artistic sensibility. How can "unthinking" benefit principals, teachers, or even students?

WAHL: "Unthinking"—I coined a term that had not been invented before—is unlocking or unleashing our minds' capabilities. In the case of our children, we are losing some of our best, most talented, most creative children because they don't fit into the very linear, standardized, myopic format for how we educate. I want to open that back up so that we are including all students and all of their great ideas toward future education.

CONNELLY: Unthinking seems to be a kissing cousin of "unlearning," which is a huge challenge for all of us. What are your thoughts on putting the two together—especially in terms of how complex our world has become?



Erik Wahl's keynote address at NAESP's Best Practices for Better Schools annual conference in Long Beach, California.

WAHL: What some people call challenges, or obstacles, or a chief barrier, I consider exciting. The opportunity by which people come to unlearn, or unthink—to rediscover new landscapes—is so exciting. I want to open up the window of opportunity to how much landscape that has been left unexplored because of the arcane system that has been in place for so long.

CONNELLY: Following up on your concept of unthinking, how does it correlate to helping students develop 21st century skills that are based on critical thinking and problem-solving? We hear constantly about college- and career-ready standards, including skills like close reading. How would that translate in terms of how you might apply unthinking?

WAHL: We are not becoming career ready. We are becoming college ready with the focus on SAT and test scores. I am looking to not just educate, but to ignite that passion for lifelong learning. It's very exciting when that passion kicks in—with a drive, curiosity, and passion to learn about the connectedness of our world.

CONNELLY: I see what you're saying. But with close reading, for example, the standards

include explicit language that drives educators to ask students specific questions to gauge their depth of understanding. Might teachers be well served to turn that around by having the students *ask themselves* questions. Would that challenge teachers to think a little differently?

WAHL: [Teachers should] open the dialogue, ask open-ended questions, and lean into experiential learning and a shared experience as opposed to a traditional lecture. There is a lot of value in that type of holistic one-to-one teaching.

CONNELLY: What can school leaders do specifically to encourage teachers to think more creatively? What would you say to those educators who don't believe they have creativity to draw upon?

WAHL: I'd say that teaching is a creative profession. It's not a delivery system. The reason they became teachers was because they wanted to nurture and grow and draw the best out of kids. I think a lot of times we're losing our best teachers because they become standardized or rote or have to teach to the test. It becomes less exciting for them. They became teachers because they love that nurturing process. To inspire teach-



ers and empower teachers to have that love for why they first entered teaching is a very exciting place to restart that process.

CONNELLY: Early childhood experiences tend to be characterized by fearless creativity. How can educators tap into—and extend—that creativity throughout a child’s schooling?

WAHL: The key word for me is curiosity. That is the magic elixir. Curiosity is what leads children to walk. Curiosity is what leads children to want to learn to speak the language. We need to change our educational system to tap into that creativity so that we can compete against Xbox and reality TV, and recapture our children’s curiosity and their passion for learning and constructive models.

CONNELLY: What would you say are the components of a culture that would foster that kind of innovation?

WAHL: That is a culture where it’s okay to take risks and where failure is not defined by loss or weakness or negativity. We stigmatize mistakes, which has made our children afraid to be wrong. It has made our teachers afraid to be wrong. If they are afraid of being wrong, they will never

come up with anything new. They will have no new ideas, no breakthrough opportunities. They are only going to teach what was known yesterday rather than turning around and looking out toward the future. It is a fundamental shift in teaching forward instead of teaching backward.


CONNELLY: As we think about teaching forward, we know that children are becoming more and more proficient with technology at younger and younger ages. What do you think are some of the unintended consequences of technology stimulation, especially as it relates to a child’s ability to be imaginative and creative? Can too much technology stifle creativity?

WAHL: It’s no longer a question of whether technology is good or bad. Is social media good or bad? It’s how we use it that can be good or bad.

One of the challenges is certainly that most of our teachers are not social media savvy. They don’t know how to talk to our kids. Our kids are learning a newly invented language. They’ve almost made teaching obsolete because of how they communicate and what drives curiosity.

Teachers need to learn about the really challenging, very ambiguous, complex nature of children and how they are communicating. This is going to be important in being able to tap back into their curiosity and corral it in. Left unmonitored and unauthorized, technology can be very destructive. How we use it can be both very, very good and quite bad.

CONNELLY: You certainly will grab attention with this notion that teaching may be all but obsolete. That segues nicely to the art of vision.

WAHL: We need to inspire, and include and disrupt what we’ve become comfortable with so that we can learn to become comfortable with uncomfotability. That’s what I really do on the corporate lecture circuit. I am teaching business leaders how to differentiate from the competition, how to create new opportunities, how to maximize profitability. I have three teenage boys who have gone through the educational system. I have a great deal of passion about education and am excited that principals are receptive to looking for change. 



DO THIS

Want to implement the ideas in this interview? Try these steps to get started.

- **Model** the teaching you want to see by opening the dialogue and asking open-ended questions.
- **Encourage risk-taking**—with your staff and students.
- **Challenge your teachers** to become social media savvy.