

# LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



**TITLE: Tony Wagner**

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We're all born curious, creative, imaginative; that's the human DNA. The average five-year-old asks a hundred questions a day, and most kindergartners think of themselves as artists. But then, something happens. We call it school. 'Cause you see, the longer kids are in school, the less curious they become. The more they become obsessed with getting the right answers versus continuing to ask their own questions, curiosity begins to wither. And so, no; we can't teach curiosity, but we can sure as heck nurture it.

**He dropped out of high school once, and college twice. But he went on to earn two degrees from Harvard University, and is now one of the leading voices for education innovation. Dr. Tony Wagner, next, on Long Story Short.**

One-on-one engaging conversations with some of Hawai'i's most intriguing people: Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox.

**Aloha mai kākou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Tony Wagner, who holds a Harvard doctorate in education, hated school for much of his life. Today, he travels the world, speaking about transforming the way that schools do their job in this age of innovation. As of this conversation in early 2018, Dr. Wagner is a senior research fellow at the Learning Policy Institute at Harvard University. He wants to see students prepare for the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century through play, passion, and purpose. Wagner authored six books on education, including *Most Likely to Succeed: Preparing Our Kids for the Innovation Era*, co-authored Ted Dintersmith, who was also featured here on Long Story Short. Wagner says he intensely disliked his school experiences throughout his middle, high school, and college years on the U.S. East Coast.**

My father was a fighter pilot in World War II. He volunteered for the Royal Air Force a year before the Americans got in the war, and he flew Spitfires, and he was a very hot pilot. But he was shot down three days before D-Day, and spent the last year of his life in prison camp. And he told me years later—he didn't like talking about the war experience, except to say it was the happiest time of his life. Go figure. But he did say that one of the things that sort of kept him going was the dream of having a farm. So, right after the war, he married my mother, and they bought a farm. And that's where I was born, on a farm; Spook Hill Farm in Upperco, Maryland. And so, I really grew up on the farm.

**And what were your experiences in school?**

From a very early age, school and I just didn't seem to get along. I think partly it began perhaps because I was slow to learn to read. I was sent to a reading tutor for a few years. And you know, it may have just been that I was a boy, and sometimes boys learn to read late. I just never quite figured out why we were asked to learn the things we were learning, and I just wasn't very interested. But at the same time, I quickly became a very hungry reader, and I just read every single night. I'd read under the covers with a flashlight at night. So, while school and I didn't get along, I was passionate about reading, and then became passionate about learning other kinds of things along the way. I was going to an all-boys middle school in Baltimore. My parents had moved closer to town by then and given up the farm, so I could go to this boys' middle school. But I didn't do much homework, and so finally, you know, partway through eighth grade, they call a conference, and my parents and I are invited in, and I'm told I'm not gonna be invited to come back to that school next year.

**It was a private school?**

It was a private school.

**Where did you go after that?**

I went to a very second rate boys' boarding school called Avon Old Farms. And that was worse.

**And you lived there.**

That's why it was worse, of course. You know, people ask me a lot about co-ed, and what do I think about single sex schools. I think single sex schools are great for girls; they're horrible for boys. Because, you know, boys at that age can be just sadistic, and vicious, and if you don't have clear guardrails from adults, you know, kids just are mean to each other. At the same time, I was sent to a summer camp, all summer long, for six years. And that was where I really came alive as a learner. And it kind of made up for what school wasn't. And you know, I learned all kinds of skills, and I learned to love hiking, and camping, and canoeing.

**Well, that's survival stuff. You can see the value of that.**

Yeah; but it was also—they had a full-blooded Cheyenne Indian in residence, so I studied Indian lore and Indian dancing with him, and performed. Another guy, you know, I studied axemanship all year. And it became very influential to me as an educator later, because this camp pioneered the concept that the Scouts later called merit badges. The whole idea of kind of having a certificate of mastery, having

mastered a certain competence, was something that I later was kind looking back at that experience and said: Oh, yeah, that's really what high school should be.

**Meanwhile, you're in high school, and you're getting closer toward college age. How's it going in high school?**

**It never got better?**

No. It never got better.

**Oh ... that's a long time.**

In fact, it got worse.

**Why'd it get worse?**

Well, October of my senior year, I had this gruff English teacher, and really kind of a mean guy. He had this huge four D-cell flashlight. He'd go around campus with the flashlight at night, looking for trouble. So, we called him The Mole. And that was his nickname; but we all were scared to death of him. So, one Saturday night in, I think, mid, late October, I came in about twenty minutes after curfew. We were allowed to go into town on Saturday night. I was late. And sure enough, The Mole was on duty. And he spots me with this big flashlight. And I can't repeat word-for-word what he said to me, so I'll have to just kinda fill in a couple words. He said: Wagner, you're a screw-up; you've always been a screw-up, you're always gonna be a screw-up. Only he didn't use the word screw-up. At any rate, I had never heard an adult use that language, and applied to me. And so, I left. Next morning, I called a cab. This was in rural Connecticut, outside of Hartford. I took a train to New York. I said: I'm not going back there.

**Yes, it's a recurring theme. After dropping out of Avon Old Farms School during his senior year, Tony Wagner decided to enter a boarding school near Baltimore, Maryland so that he could finish high school and graduate. Things didn't go any better at the new school.**

It was a tiny little school that was sort of a school for kids who hadn't made it anywhere else. It was what you call a last-chance boarding school. And it was run by a woman who was a sadist. It was a for-profit school. It was shortly before I was supposed to graduate. I had taken the regents exams. So, she calls me in. She says: Sit down, I have bad news for you; about the biology regents, you got a forty-nine. Meaning I wouldn't graduate. I rushed screaming out of her office. She yells: Just kidding; it was a ninety-four. Can you believe that? Can you believe somebody would do that?

**Although Tony Wagner had many dark, dispirited times in middle and high school, he was curious about learning, if the subject matter interested him. There were a few bright spots, and some teachers who nurtured his passion for literature.**

It began a few years earlier. I had an English teacher in ninth grade whom I liked, and we were reading great stuff. We were reading Steinbeck, and Hemmingway, and Fitzgerald, and all of that, and I was really enthralled with the literature. And he gave us creative writing assignments, and I wrote my first short story. From then on, really interested in writing. And so, then I got to this last-chance boarding school, and for whatever reason, I decided I wanted to be a writer. And so, I kinda looked around, and there was a guy who was one of the other English teachers. He was not my senior English teacher; he was another guy, he was an English guy, totally nice guy. So, for whatever reason, I went up to him, and I said: Will you teach me to write? He said: I'd be delighted. So, every week, we would meet, and he would give me a different assignment. And it was a genre kind of an approach; one week it'd be a dialogue, next week a monologue, a childhood reminiscence, an essay, whatever. And so, every week, I'd bring him this, and he'd sit down and we'd talk. And he'd point to one or two things that he thought I'd done well, and maybe give one suggestion. And it later became the way, in fact, I taught writing as an English teacher. But I was just totally enthralled. And so, I think that experience saved me, in a sense, in school. Because finally had something to go to school for.

**After graduating from high school, Tony Wagner enrolled at Randolph-Macon College in Virginia. And then, he dropped out. He moved to Fort Lauderdale, Florida and found work as a hotel waiter, with the idea of writing the great American novel. Well, things didn't go well, and back to school he went**

So, I got myself into another college, down the road from Randolph-Macon. It was called Richmond Professional Institute; now it's called Virginia Commonwealth University. This is now September of '65. And I'm studying, for the first time, because I've decided I can't kinda be jumping around like this.

**You've gotta get through this.**

And I started a novel. And so, I'm pretty serious now. But then, in the first week, I see a bunch of students protesting outside the dean's office. This was, again, September of '65. These were seniors who'd been told by the college they could not finally come back as seniors, because they'd grown longer hair and beards over the summer. Honor students, refused readmission 'cause of their hair. So, they'd started this little group called Students for Individual Rights. So, I decided to join; protesting. And from there, I'd kinda learned about a meeting about civil rights, and I actually went to Southern Virginia as a part of a boycott. It was a small town where there was a lot of Ku Klux Klan activity, and so a group of us were volunteering to sort of help organize for this boycott.

And it was dangerous and scary. And it left a mark on me, just kind of having that experience. But I came back to campus, and in a little while, I got a note from the dean of students asking to see me. Not asking; telling me to show up. So, I walk in. Finally, he says: Son, we know all about your communistic homosexual drug activities. That's all he said; that's all he said. Communistic? No; I was looking forward to voting. Homosexual? No; I was kinda living with a girl at the time. Drugs? I'd tried a little pot, but you know, everybody did that; nothing serious. So, I just freaked; totally. Like, I don't want to be here; I don't want to be in the South, I don't want to be anywhere where, you know, it's threats and intimidation. So, I dropped out again. Then, I go to work for a civil rights lawyer in Washington, D.C. by the name of Bill Higgs.

### **What did you do?**

Oh, all kinds of things. I helped to organize the bus boycott in D.C. This is now late fall of '65, early winter of '66. I'm working with him, he gives me seventy-five bucks a month, plus room and board, and doing whatever. But I start working on a lawsuit challenging the D.C. tracking system. The D.C. public schools have four tracks. And through this guy Bill Higgs, I met William Kunstler, the now famous lawyer of the Chicago Seven, bla-bla-bla, who was working with Higgs.

### **So, you were in the hotbed of activism.**

Oh; oh, yeah. Absolutely. And it was through Bill Kunstler that I heard about this brand new small startup college called Friends World Institute, started by the Quakers. Whole philosophy is you study social problems, you study in different parts of the world. And I got excited, for the first time. By that time, I really wanted to understand social problems. I thought maybe I might want to do social work. I still wanted to write, I wanted to be a novelist. So I was more, I guess, focused and purpose-driven.

**At last, Tony Wagner earned his bachelor's degree from Friends World College in New York. And that's not all he came away with. He'd spent a great deal of time doing independent study in San Francisco, Mexico, and Vermont. During that time, he honed in on what he wanted to do with his life.**

I wanted to be a teacher.

### **You decided that?**

By that time, I knew I wanted to teach. Because it was it was a mission, it was a social purpose. And it felt like it was a way to combine my love of writing. While I was at Friends World, I'd gone to a war resisters conference, a pacifist conference. And a man was there by the name of Ryan Desai; he was a disciple of Gandhi's, worked closely with Gandhi. And he was there at the conference. I asked him: What's

revolution; what's your definition of revolution? And he said: Revolution is the dynamic process of transforming individual virtues into social values. And I wrote that on my Harvard application. I said: I want to become a teacher for this reason, in order to work towards transforming individual virtues into social values. And I think Harvard had never seen a transcript like mine. That's the only reason I got in. You know, it had no grades, I'd been to all these colleges. And I'd published a couple things by then; I'd published three or four articles at the age of twenty-one or whatever I was then. So, I went for a master of arts in teaching.

### **Did you enjoy Harvard?**

I hated the education classes. I thought they were miserable. You know, you practiced with a so-called master teacher in the first summer. He was a horrible teacher. He was terrible. He was not a master of much of anything. But half of my curriculum were electives. I loved my electives. And my most favorite class of all wasn't a credit class. This guy by name of Jay Featherstone, who was then a journalist with the New Republic, writing about education, started a non-credit seminar, where we read a book a week about education. And it was all the 60s guys. And he was a model of good teaching, 'cause he believed, and said this, that a teacher's job is to provoke a thoughtful conversation. And so, that's what he would do. Frame a question or challenge, and sort of keep a few boundaries around the conversation.

### **And did you also later teach that way, as well?**

I did; very much. Both those teachers very much influenced my own teaching style. I left there with a clear understanding that I was gonna teach, but I didn't want to teach in a conventional high school. So, I found this small little alternative school within a school in a large public high school in suburban Washington, D.C., Montgomery County, that a group of students had started by walking out of their classes, saying: We want something more relevant. And the school kinda just shrugged its shoulders and said: We don't know what to do with these kids. So, you know, somehow, they got my name, and they said: Well, let's hire this guy Wagner and let's see what he can do with them.

### **So, you had a reputation already.**

You know, wrote and thought about, you know, wanting to transform education. By that time, I had a sense that education wasn't working for large numbers of kids, I being one.

**So, real world education now. I mean, then you have a chance to apply your own ideas.**

Well, I don't know how many ideas I had back then. I just knew that we needed to try to develop different models, and the only way I knew to do it was trial and error. And so, my job was to figure out how to engage them. And you know, it was the kind of problem I had as a learner. So, I began by just simply having a conference with a student; every single student, once every two weeks, fifteen-minute conference. And I'd take notes, and I'd simply say: What do you want to learn? You can do anything related to reading and writing. I can give you an English credit, I can give you a social studies credit, but you have to read and write. What do you want to read, what do you want to learn? And whatever they answered, I'd write it down, so I had a record. And you know, they'd come back two weeks later, and I'd say: Well, what'd you do? Uh ... I didn't do that. So, okay; I said: I'll start over. Tell me something you want to work on, something you want to learn about, something you want to read, something you want to write. And I started a writing seminar, writer's workshop somewhere, but I learned over five years about the importance of intrinsic motivation. I mean, I knew that in part from my own experience. But I learned that as a teacher, my job is to figure out what that spark is, that spark of curiosity, that desire to learn, that spark of the desire for self-expression, and to, you know, give it life, give it breath.

### **And did they all find what motivated them?**

You know, nearly every kid did. I mean, it took some much, much longer, 'cause they'd been more damaged. But what I found was, they knew I was gonna ask them the same question every two weeks, and I was gonna write down whatever they said, and I wasn't going away.

**After a decade as a high school teacher, Tony Wagner decided to move into administration, and became the principal of a K through 8 school. The job did not work out for Wagner, and after just two years, he and the school parted ways.**

Cambridge Friends School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. When I received the job offer, I was thirty-three years old. I had a decade of high school teaching experience, no elementary experience, no administrative experience. Total hubris on my part, to think that I could do this job. Disaster. Arguably, probably one of the hardest setbacks of my entire career. Not one of; it was. What was hard was that I heard the echoes of that English teacher from my first boarding school. The echoes of his voice: Wagner, you're a screw-up. You've always been a screw-up, you're always gonna be a screw-up. So, it was very difficult to overcome that. But I'd become very involved—this was now 1982, in this little group in the Boston area calling themselves Educators for Social Responsibility. There were twenty or thirty of us. And somebody said: You know, we ought to start a national organization. I said: Okay; I'll do that. Sheer hubris, again. But you know, I had a few months' salary in the bank, I could take a risk. We had, you know, a box of index cards of people calling themselves members. Leslie, four years later, we had ten thousand members. We had a hundred and twenty-

five chapters, and I had been on the front page of the Wall Street Journal, I'd been on the MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour. I was really interested in our being the conscience of our profession. I mean, there was a schism within Educators for Social Responsibility. Some folks said: Want to go the barricades, want to sponsor demonstrations. I said: No, we're gonna write curriculum, we're gonna do teacher professional development; we're gonna become the conscience of our profession about how to teach controversial issues in ways that are responsible.

**Oh, that's very much who you are now.**

Yeah. So, you know, it was very much something that captivated me back then. And I started writing articles; I wrote a number of articles back then about different aspects of kind of developing this kind of idea. What is critical thinking, how do we teach it, how do we assess it. And along the way, I decided to throw an application in at the Harvard Ed School for a doctorate, 'cause I didn't know what I wanted to next, but I knew I wasn't gonna run this organization forever. I didn't want to do that.

**Tony Wagner went on to earn a doctorate in education from Harvard University. He continued to write and publish about reimaging education. In this information and innovation era, he has keenly observed how the world has changed, and how schools and education have not adapted to the times. For the last fifteen years, Wagner has traveled extensively, both nationally and internationally, to share his observations and advice with fellow educators and institutions.**

We no longer live in a knowledge economy. Knowledge is no longer the corner realm; it's a commodity, growing exponentially, changing constantly, on every internet connected device. It's like air, it's like water. There's no competitive advantage in knowing more than the person next to you, because Google knows everything. The world doesn't care how much you know. What the world cares about is what you can do with what you know. And that is a brand new and totally different education problem. There are a series of fundamental contradictions between what is required to succeed in the innovation era of an individual, and what school requires.

Contradiction number one: schools are all about celebrating and rewarding individual achievement, aren't they? Not the world of innovation. It's all about teamwork; innovation is a team sport. The world of innovation is all about iteration; trial and error, rapid prototypes. World of school penalizes you for making any mistakes at all. So, you can't make a mistake; you'll get graded down for it, you'll get the dreaded F-word. So, finally, the world of innovation is interdisciplinary. You can either study, understand, or solve any problem you can name, using a single academic discipline. But back in school, we're using a compartmentalized system that's a hundred and twenty-five years old. So, there are a series of very fundamental contradictions between the traditional cultural of schooling, which is a century and a half old almost, and the new

culture, and the skills required. 'Cause they're the same; the skills you need for learning, for citizenship, and for work have converged for the first time in human history.

### **When would you say that happened?**

Just in the last twenty years. That's what's so extraordinary. And living in the midst of rapid change, we can't see it. I mean, that's in a sense all I've tried to do in my books, is try to chronicle kind of this is what's happening in the world, and here are some things we might want to consider as parents, as educators, as community leaders. You know, the problem with the last decade of education reform is that it's been on the necks of educators. We've been blaming teachers. The theory of change, Leslie, is that teachers aren't working hard enough, so if we make them accountable for improving test scores, that's surely gonna make them work harder, and that's gonna solve the problem. Well, that's ridiculous. The world had changed; that's not our fault. The education system hasn't; that's not our fault. But it is our responsibility. Change is scary, it feels risky. Not changing is also risky, only in that case, it's our kids who are at risk. So, that's the context I try to explain. This is not anybody's fault, but it's a different world. We don't have a knowledge economy anymore; we have an innovation economy requiring completely different things from kids.

### **Where do we stand now?**

We desperately need leadership, and I think that's where this state has a real opportunity. We need leaders at the top who can clearly say: These are the competencies that matter most in the innovation era. Getting into a good school may be nice and fun, but it's not gonna be a guarantee of a good job. Schools aren't failing; they're obsolete. They don't need reforming; they need reimagining.

### **Even if leading educators advocate this, there are citizens that are gonna say, no.**

Well, this is what I meant by community leadership. So, on Thursday, a group of community leaders from all over the state, from all these different sectors, are coming together at the Bishop Museum to talk about, what's the knowledge, what are the skills, what are the dispositions that our high school graduates need to thrive in the future. That's unprecedented.

### **And what is your answer to that? What do they need?**

Well, first of all, I think it's a community decision. The answer in Hawai'i is gonna be very different than perhaps the answer in Detroit. There will be some similarities. I can tell you virtually everybody will talk about some version of critical thinking, collaboration, communication skills, and creative problem solving, as well as the disposition of perseverance, tenacity, and having a good character. That's universal. But you know,

in Hawai'i, it's all about the Aloha Spirit, it's all about the sense of home. In Detroit, it's all about conflict resolution. I can tell you. So, in different communities, there's gonna be a different emphasis. But what's important is that we first identify what does it mean to be a high school graduate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Let's create a high school diploma as a certificate of mastery, not a certificate of seat time served. And then, let's create the assessments and accountability systems that align with those new outcomes. That's the really good work that Hawai'i can and should be doing right now.

**At the time of this conversation in early 2018, Dr. Wagner was completing a week-long trip to Hawai'i, talking with both private and public institutions about education in the innovation era. Mahalo to author Tony Wagner of Cambridge, Massachusetts and Sandwich, New Hampshire. And thank you for joining us for this edition of Long Story Short on PBS Hawai'i. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.**

For audio and written transcripts of all episodes of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, visit [PBSHawaii.org](http://PBSHawaii.org). To download free podcasts of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, go to the Apple iTunes Store or visit [PBSHawaii.org](http://PBSHawaii.org).

I don't like the F-word. I don't want to see the word fail, ever again in school. It's iterate. We learn through trial and error. How do we learn to talk? How do we learn to walk? What if we said to a kid: I'm sorry, you can never bicycle, 'cause we know you're gonna fall and skin your knee. Trial and error is how we learn the most important things we learn. And the sooner we recognize that as intrinsic to education, the better we're gonna be.