WHEN WILL WE LEARN?

One of my favorite CNN correspondants and columnists is Fareed Zakaria. In his recent Times Magazine article (TIME Nov. 14, 2011), “When Will We Learn?”, he discusses the deterioration of America’s public school system and what we can do. He notes that Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak received great secondary educations from a first-rate public school, Homestead High in Cupertino, graduating in 1972 when California’s public schools were the envy of the world.

Today, California’s schools rank at the bottom of the country which ranks 26th in the world. Bill Gross, the head of Pimco, the world’s largest bond fund, sums it up: “Our labor force is too expensive and poorly educated for today’s marketplace.... Either we will raise our educational level or markets will lower our wages.”

Gross suggests that we must work much harder – longer school days and more of them. Bill Gates insists we must hire the best teachers. Remember, in Finland, the kids have shorter days and no homework, but they have teachers at the doctoral level and rank number one in the world.

Unfortunately all the changes required to increase the school days and hire and reward the best teachers are strongly opposed by teachers’ unions and other “guardians of the status quo”, says Zakaria. But he notes that there are “meta-reformers” on the outside who are trying to revolutionize the system. He goes on to describe Sal Khan’s efforts with the Khan Academy in which he has produced 3,000 YouTube videos, mostly math and science that have been viewed 80 million times!

Zakaria says he is so taken by the Khan Academy because it is a “quintessentially American innovation, a new way of thinking about education.” Traditionally kids sit and listen passively to the teacher, then go home to do the hard stuff without any help. With something like Khan, they watch and re-watch at home, then come to school to do the problems with the teacher’s help.

This process is similar to the Pinecone method. Students do all they can to figure out the concepts presented with brief explanations and examples in their daily work. Since they have mastered everything up to the new concept, they generally can get it just fine. They come to class to get specific pointers and help on just the parts that are giving them trouble. It is efficient and effective and provides much faster and more personalized progress.

Zakaria further notes that his Asian education gave him a great knowledge base and taught him how to study hard and fast. But he found, when entering a U.S. college, that he had not been prepared so well to think. “American education at its best,” he says, “teaches you how to solve problems, truly understand the material, question authority, think for yourself and be creative.” This has helped the U.S. be able to maintain an edge in creative industries and innovation.

In Pinecone, we help the students learn how to tackle word problems, apply the foundation skills they are learning, understand different ways to solve a problem and choose the best. Being fast and accurate is important, but thinking creatively about how to tackle some of the world’s problems can be the ultimate. Let’s all think creatively about how to fix U.S. education!