Walk into a typical classroom in most schools today and you’re likely to see instruction and learning taking place. The question is, what kind of learning is it? While knowledge is and always will be a critical foundation to higher-level thinking, it is not an end in itself. As our society and economy have turned the page and begun a new chapter—one marked by constant innovations in technology and the need for more students with postsecondary credentials, one in which the U.S. faces heightened competition for business from developing countries in a worldwide marketplace—many education experts contend our students should be more than warehouses of information.

The future of education will be one where students also can apply knowledge and solve complex problems. They must be able to work not only independently, but also with each other and be able to communicate ideas effectively. In short, to be successful in today’s world, every student must graduate from high school college- and career-ready. Every state has developed its own definition of what it means to be college- and career-ready. Many of them articulate students will have the knowledge and skills to enroll and succeed in credit-bearing courses at postsecondary institutions without the need for remedial coursework. These definitions, however, require us to ask a more basic and direct question: What are those skills students must possess to be college- and career-ready? Some advocates for these reforms refer to them as “deeper learning skills.” When students have mastered deeper learning, they will have the skills and knowledge to succeed in a world that is changing at an unprecedented pace.

What is Deeper Learning?

Think about the skills students must have to succeed in postsecondary education or to earn a decent living. They must be proficient problem solvers, be able to share their knowledge with others and listen to others’ ideas. It is important they have the skills to be able to take a problem assigned by a college professor or work supervisor, analyze it and develop a solution or propose a range of options for solving the problem.

Unfortunately, those skills often are overlooked as schools try to cram information into students’ heads that they will later be asked to regurgitate on standardized multiple choice tests. Barbara Chow, in The Quest for Deeper Learning, has noted, “The real world rarely offers us multiple-choice questions. Employers clamor for staff members who can solve problems by designing their own solutions and then telling co-workers how they did it. To thrive in an increasingly complex and dynamic world where routine manual and cognitive tasks are being assumed by machines, those emerging from school must be able to think analytically, find reliable information, and communicate with others.”

Deeper learning is directly linked to college- and career-readiness. It achieves this by shifting the focus of education to one in which students:

- Master core academic content;
- Develop the ability to think critically and solve complex problems;
- Work collaboratively;
- Communicate effectively; and
- Learn how to learn, such as through self-directed learning.

Deeper learning provides a dramatic shift in the way teachers instruct their students. It focuses on helping them learn how to learn, not just helping them acquire or access information. Deeper learning involves a personalized approach to education, one that discards the stale one-size-fits-all model and provides a robust and engaging, student-centered learning environment, tailored to meet the needs and learning style of each pupil.

"We are what we learn,” U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan has noted. If that message is true, what does it say that many of today’s children are learning essentially the same content in substantially the same way as their parents and grandparents? They are 21st century students who are still receiving a 20th century education.
The Deeper Learning Focus Group

In March 2012, The Council of State Governments’ Center for Innovation and Transformation in Education, with the support of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, appointed a national focus group to recommend state policies that will drive this type of learning. The focus group was comprised of state legislators, leaders of state boards and departments of education, educators and other experts in the field of education policy. Their charge was simple: Advise CSG which policies and practices need to be in place to support college- and career-readiness outcomes.

Their voices were unanimous that deeper-learning skills are vital to increase college- and career-readiness. Consider this: By 2018, approximately two-thirds of all jobs in the U.S. will require some postsecondary education. That doesn’t mean they will necessarily require a four-year degree. The new norm, however, requires some education beyond high school. Many students leave high school, diploma in hand, yet they are unprepared for postsecondary education. Roughly 40 percent of all college students—and 60 percent of students at community colleges—are required to take at least one remedial course because they lack the skills for credit-bearing coursework.

“We spend too much time talking about what teachers do and not enough time talking about the work that students need to be doing and what does that work need to look like, what do the outcomes need to be and what does the process that the students go through to reach those outcomes look like?” Bill Harrison, outgoing chairman of the North Carolina Board of Education and a member of the focus group, said.

The framework prepared by CSG’s Center for Innovation and Transformation in Education provides policy options in five broad categories: curriculum and instruction; teacher and leader effectiveness; assessment systems; accountability; and the use of time.

Curriculum and Instruction

The focus group recommends states should adopt and implement college- and career-readiness standards, such as the common core state standards or other rigorous academic standards. Some of the other recommendations include:

- Empower the state board of education to waive state regulatory requirements—except those relative to the health, safety or rights of students—for schools that are implementing innovative practices; and
- Fund and provide resources for teachers and leaders to receive embedded, collective and high-quality continuous and ongoing professional development opportunities that include personalized learning, differentiated instruction, inclusive strategies, the use of technology, project-based learning, authentic research and other strategies that prepare students for college and careers.

Idaho Rep. Jeff Thompson, a member of the Deeper Learning Focus Group, believes the latter recommendation is particularly vital.

“We get a good return in what we invest in and we need professional development across-the-board, and especially when it comes to common core state standards,” he said. “This is a whole different dynamic, a whole different mindset, a whole different culture and we want the teachers and administrators to buy into this, so we need to invest in it and we need to train them before they’re required to begin implementing it.”

Teacher and School Leader Effectiveness

States should develop more rigorous teacher pre-service programs connected with high academic standards so teachers enter the classroom prepared to guide all students to deeper-learning outcomes, according to the focus group. Members also believe states should require prospective educators to be prepared to teach using new teaching methods and assessments to ensure students achieve the deeper learning outcomes they need to be college- and career-ready. Preservice teachers must participate in intense fieldwork, a long-term practicum, such as clinical models or residencies, or a supervised internship as a prerequisite to licensure. Preservice teachers also must receive training to support the diverse range of learners they will encounter, including students with disabilities and English language learners. Other recommendations include:

- Create a high-quality educational leadership development system, including master teachers and mentoring, induction programs and collegial networks. Leadership training should ensure administrators have a fundamental understanding of deeper learning principles;
• Require schools and districts to adopt teacher and school leader evaluation models that are valid and research-based, that incorporate measures of student achievement, including more than a single standardized test; and to include demonstrations of teacher and leader performance that reflects deeper learning aligned with college- and career-readiness goals;
• Require the use of performance-based contracts as a means of retaining highly effective teachers; and
• Create career pathways to reward educators who deepen and reflect on their own learning and show high proficiency in helping all students achieve deeper-learning outcomes.

“In all professions, the key to success lies in the measures of accountability. In education practice, accountability measures for teachers and school leaders determine student growth and potential,” said Henry Johnson, Maryland’s assistant superintendent for instruction and a member of the focus group. “An emphasis on accountability systems is by far the most important recommendation and will have the greatest positive impact on students, teachers and school leaders.”

Assessment Systems
State policymakers should offer flexibility for districts to develop multiple measures of student learning as evidence for course credit, promotion and graduation. They should do this by:
• Requiring districts to develop assessments of deeper-learning knowledge and skills in all classes;
• Requiring a variety of assessments that include standards-based performance assessments aligning to individual student needs that support deeper-learning outcomes;
• Replacing traditional point-based grades with standards-based grading that measures students’ proficiency on well-defined course objectives; and
• Requiring alignment between the preK–12 system and postsecondary education to determine a common measure for placement into credit-bearing coursework for the collegiate freshmen year based on standardized assessments.

Accountability
The focus group recommends state policymakers should amend state accountability systems to use multiple measures to assess the success of individual schools and school districts, with a focus on achieving the desired deeper-learning outcomes. Specific policy recommendations include:
• Develop an accountability system that evaluates schools and districts on college- and career-readiness measures, including but not limited to mastery in core subjects, annual student growth, closing achievement gaps among all student groups, attendance and improved graduation rates; and
• Use measures of student performance that include demonstrations of mastery of deeper learning, including a culminating project involving a substantial project(s), internship or portfolio with a presentation to a panel.

Use of Time
State policymakers should develop strategies to maximize school time for student learning, and professional development. This can be done by:
• Awarding educational credit for learning inside and outside the classroom based on demonstrated mastery rather than seat time;
• Providing seamless routes to college to students who achieve early competency on college- and career-readiness standards;
• Providing flexibility to schools to utilize schedules that enable team teaching, project-based learning, work-based learning and interaction with the community and the world; and
• Encouraging schools to include time in the school day and year for teachers’ professional development, including observing other classes, meeting with instructional coaches and collaborating in professional learning communities.

Framework Unveiled
CSG introduced the policy framework at a special legislative briefing prior to its national meeting in Austin, Texas, in December 2012. It marked the first opportunity to vet the recommendations with policymakers in positions to act on them. Although the report was well-received, several legislators noted an important piece of the puzzle was missing—how to pay for implementing the recommendations.

“I do not doubt the need for this,” one legislator commented, referring to the framework. “But we’re recommending policies without figuring out how we’re going to pay for them. Because right now, the drive in state after state is to pull money out of education. So, how do we proceed to change the paradigms if we have no money to do it?”
In March, 2013, CSG responded by reconvening the focus group to examine funding issues. Knowing that no state will experience a windfall of education dollars, the group’s recommendations focused on reallocating existing revenues by establishing spending priorities and providing flexibility for categorical funds with parameters to local districts. Members also targeted creating partnerships with businesses and between school districts and colleges and universities to implement policy recommendations. An increased emphasis on collaboration between K–12 and postsecondary education is vital to providing opportunities for students to gain credit while in high school and ease the transition to college. Additionally, some recommendations have no fiscal impact but will take creativity and innovation at the state and local level for implementation.

In an always-evolving education landscape, the type of learning called for by the focus group has already taken root in both individual schools and school networks, both charter and non-charter alike. Taking these proposals to the next level, however, will require policymakers and stakeholders to create a vision of what they want their students to accomplish in order to devise the best course of action to get there.

Notes

About the Author
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