

## EDUCATION WEEK

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### The Quest for 'Deeper Learning'

By Barbara Chow

When I joined the **William and Flora Hewlett Foundation** last year as the director of its education program, my colleagues and I took a hard look at public education in the United States, our own grantmaking, and the lessons we've learned. In the process, we talked to lots of smart people, read everything we could get our hands on, and visited schools—all kinds: high-performing and low-performing, private and public, the widest possible diversity. We saw schools to make your heart sing and others to break it. We observed classrooms where the teachers and students did not say a single word for an entire class period and others where the din of questions and energy of learning were palpable. After months of research, and consulting with more than a hundred top thinkers in the fields of education, business, and public policy, we asked ourselves one question: What could we do to make the biggest impact for students and teachers?

Our answer was to focus on a set of skills and knowledge that reinforce each other and together promote rigorous and deeper learning. These include:

- Mastery of core academic content.
- Critical thinking and problem-solving.
- Working collaboratively in groups.
- Communicating clearly and effectively.
- Learning how to learn.

These are the competencies that today's students need to succeed in higher education, earn wages that will support a family, and participate fully as citizens in the new century.

Unfortunately, too many students are not taught to develop them. The weight of school tradition—with its emphasis on lectures and rote memorization—combined with the demands of state and federal education policies often provides students leaving high school with an education that is, at best, the proverbial mile wide and inch deep. They can regurgitate facts and concepts, but have difficulty applying this knowledge in new and practical ways.

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

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being assumed by machines, those emerging from school must be able to think analytically, find reliable information, and communicate with others.

Recent studies debunk old theories that students must first learn the basics before developing critical-thinking skills. The answer to the long-standing debate about whether to teach content or analytical skills is "yes"—students need both to succeed in the new century.

To be sure that we will work toward specific outcomes, the Hewlett Foundation has set as its goal that at the very least 15 percent of public school students will be assessed for mastery of these skills by 2017, when the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (now awaiting reauthorization) will again be up for renewal. Our hope is that by then a critical mass of states will have demonstrated the benefits of deeper learning, and that it will be incorporated into the act's renewal.

We've also identified what we call the "three P's" as a guide to our grantmaking. The first is policy; we will support organizations that are working to align state and federal education policies with the goals of deeper learning. The second is practice; we will make grants to help develop high-quality assessments, curricula, tools, and teacher training in deeper learning at scale. The third is proof points; we will support efforts to develop 100 high-performing community colleges and school systems to serve as beacons for deeper learning.

We recognize that this is a challenging undertaking. While educators have long acknowledged the importance of these competencies, to date very few of the nation's K-12 and community college students receive an education that could be characterized as including all of them. But there are good reasons to think that the time is ripe for progress.

For one thing, there are already many strong examples of this approach throughout the country. These innovative schools now scattered throughout the nation are demonstrating every day that instruction focused on these values can provide real gains for students from even the most disadvantaged communities. At the San Francisco Bay Area's four Envision high schools, which are deeper-learning communities founded by Bob Lenz, more than 90 percent of graduates go on to attend a two- or four-year college, compared with 50 percent of graduates of all California high schools. And they arrive there with solid skills. Three Envision Schools achieved the highest gain of any high schools in their respective school districts on California's standardized Academic Performance Index tests. In 2007, the three gained over 90 points while the average San Francisco high school lost 6 points on its API score. And in these urban student bodies more than half the students will be the first in their families to attend college. As Lenz succinctly put it, "Meaningful college preparation is less about teaching facts than empowering students to think." He might have said the same about education in general.

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Growing out of grants made by several influential foundations committed to this broader concept of learning, a number of important assessments have been created to prove the concept. These include the Collegiate Learning Assessment, which is now used by more than 175 U.S. colleges and universities. Internationally, the Program for International Student Achievement, or PISA, exam provides a well-accepted and reliable measure of key aspects of deeper learning. (It's worth noting that on the 2006 PISA test, 15-year-olds in the United States performed 24th out of 29

industrialized countries in mathematics literacy, and 17th out of 29 in science literacy.) Getting the new tests right is crucial if this approach is to be accountable and to spread.

Add to these examples of successful schools and innovative tests a growing policy momentum toward deeper learning. So far, 36 states and the District of Columbia have adopted a common core of education standards, and more may join them. Momentum has been further fueled at the national level by President Barack Obama, whose administration has embarked on a path of educational reform with \$330 million in federal support available to develop new student assessments that could advance deeper learning and hold school systems accountable to build the skills and knowledge students will need to succeed in 21st-century work and life.

Every so often, an important inflection point arrives in the never-ending debate about how to educate our children to prepare them for the world in which they will live. The movement for national goals and accountability was one. Growing evidence suggests to us that this is another. With carefully targeted, and relatively modest, investments, we think this is a time when significant change can occur. We want to be part of that movement. With clear goals and determination, the United States can emerge from our current difficult economic times with an educational system truly primed for the new century.

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