

Working to Broaden the Definition of Success

By Contributing Blogger on February 21, 2018 12:45 PM

This post is by Jennifer Ferrari, Vice President and Chief Schools Officer at Distinctive Schools, @jlferrari128.

At this time of the year, winter data days take place in schools across the country. Coast to coast, educators collectively pore over their mid-year data sets, looking for patterns and trends to predict their students' performance on the high-stakes tests coming this spring. Spreadsheets and pivot tables cluster kids into categories that place a binary value on children: those who are meeting standards and those who are not. A sense of urgency fills the space, and committed educators move full throttle to make plans for mid-course corrections and interventions. Conference rooms, clad with butcher-paper-covered walls filled with comparison charts, schedules, and color-coded lists of red, yellow, and green kids' names, are transformed into wartime strategy rooms for a good portion of the spring semester. Classrooms that just weeks before buzzed with passionate debates, complex math talks, and playful, heterogeneous inquiry and learning, become quiet, singularly-focused learning zones with emphasis almost exclusively placed on targeted, homogeneous instruction and discrete skill development. In some cases, schools take the hybrid approach, where kids who are meeting targets continue to experience the pre-data day classroom, while those who are not meeting targets experience the post-data day classroom. Sound familiar?

Despite the mounds of research that reveal the critical importance of [deeper learning](#), which develops students' conceptual understanding and ability to apply knowledge and skills in new and unknown contexts, as an American

education institution, we still place disproportionate efforts and emphasis on discrete skill development. Despite the compelling forecasts of what will be required of our students in the rapidly changing job market of the future, we still create educational experiences that mirror those of our students' parents and their grandparents. Why do we do this? When winter data stare us in the face and raise their threatening predictive fists, why do we abandon what we believe to be the [best ways to approach content knowledge](#)? I'd argue from my own experience that the education system has not yet caught up with the demands and values of 21st century education. Success is narrowly defined, and the measures that ultimately determine our value as good/bad educators do not accurately correspond to our work, our efforts to prepare our kids for bright futures.

Most accountability structures include multiple measures (student/staff attendance rates, high-stakes test results, compliance and reporting deadlines, culture/climate surveys), but not in the ways which years of research synthesized by the [NGLC MyWays Framework](#) suggests are most effective. No one will argue that students' attendance rates and performance on high stakes tests are not important. Nor will one argue that it's not important for schools and districts/networks to meet compliance deadlines. However, can we honestly claim that these measures get at the heart of what we're trying to accomplish in our everyday efforts to prepare our kids for their futures?

Our current education system fails to measure or place value on student efficacy and agency, or nuanced expertise that results from students' passionate pursuit of their interests. The system doesn't honor our kids' impressive ability to make eye contact and converse easily with others. The system doesn't consider our kids' collaboration skills and their abilities to work through conflicts and frustrations together. It doesn't place value on the ways in which our students support and genuinely care for one another, and

it certainly doesn't place special value on the fact that many of our kids show this level of empathy despite coming from communities and environments that experience regular trauma and hardship. The system doesn't measure our kids' genuine curiosity and brilliant questions they ask and explore, nor does it measure the myriad ways in which our communities of learners find answers to their questions and problems. And finally, the system doesn't measure the joyful and optimistic culture of our buildings where people want to come to school/work each day. But these things matter. I'd argue they're just as essential as the other measures--maybe even more.

The NGLC MyWays Project challenges us to transform education as we know it by broadening our definition of success and developing a deeper set of competencies in our students. MyWays places value on more than what is typically valued and measured in traditional education systems and encourages development in Content Knowledge, Habits of Success, Creative Know How, and Wayfinding Abilities. At Distinctive Schools, a [LEAP Innovations, NGLC breakthrough grant recipient](#), we took that challenge seriously. We embrace the challenges of change and continue to make steady strides in the education transformation space. With positive working/learning culture at our core, we leverage partnerships and relationships to nurture each child's social, emotional, academic, and physical development. Our personalized learning approach, which situates learners at the center, aims to prepare kids to thrive in their bright futures. When you walk through our doors, you can feel that our schools are joyful learning places where students and adults alike explore, inquire, and become better people.

So this winter, when our data stared us in the face and raised their fists, at Distinctive Schools, we fought back. With the [MyWays Student Success Series](#) as our shield and sword, we approached our winter data day a little differently. We took a "yes, and" approach. **Yes**, the measures in our current

accountability system have great importance, and we will continue to work toward meeting high-stakes testing targets and expected outcomes. We owe that to our students. However, we will use the research from MyWays as our shield to buffer the anxiety and worry that we feel in our bellies to hold off the urge to stop doing the deeper learning work we know will have a positive, lasting impact on our students and their futures. **And**, we have a responsibility to prepare our students with a "broader, deeper array of competencies, adjusted and tailored to individual interests and talents." We also owe that to our students. We will continue to use the research from MyWays as our sword to combat the confines of what Andy Calkins, director at NGLC, calls using [factory model change efforts to end factory model schools](#). In short, we are committed to playing both the short game (knowledge and skills development) and the long game (deeper learning development) at the exact same time.

We know that playing the short game and long game simultaneously will take continued hard work, dedication, development, and time. Our games are not yet balanced, but we see the value in deeper learning. We are committed to closing the opportunity gap by continuing to provide our kids with meaningful, real-world, interdisciplinary learning experiences that lead to what Jay McTighe, author of [Understanding by Design](#), describes as uncoverage, not coverage, of knowledge and skills. At Distinctive Schools, we're up for the challenge, because we know the future is asking something different of us for our kids. We have an unwavering commitment to doing what we know from research is best for our students. By incorporating things like purposeful play into our kindergarten classrooms, consistently weaving Social Emotional Learning strategies into our everyday work, developing teachers' capacity to design complex instruction opportunities for kids, and framing all we do with a restorative justice orientation, we've taken steps to broaden our definition of success. Alongside many Distinctive Schools

partners who have helped us throughout our personalized learning journey, we've glimpsed the future of education and all it can be for our kids. We're in!