

School district destination: Deeper learning

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Educators have offered instruction that goes beyond the rote for many years, but the concept of deeper learning has recently grown in scope as higher education and the economy demand a more complex blend of intellectual and social skills.

Today's deeper learning proponents urge schools to focus on six competencies: mastering rigorous academic content; thinking critically and solving problems; working collaboratively; communicating effectively; directing one's own learning; and developing an academic mindset.

In schools that emphasize deeper learning, "the first thing you see is students know what they're learning, how they're learning and what they're being held accountable for with regard to the quality of what they're producing," says Monica Martinez, co-author of the book *Deeper Learning: How Eight Innovative Public Schools Are Transforming Education in the Twenty-First Century* (The New Press, 2014).

Martinez is also a senior school support strategist for XQ, a nonprofit that offers grants to help districts create "schools of the future."

Part of the momentum results from the Hewlett Foundation's creation, in 2011, of a Deeper Learning Network, which began as a collaboration of 10 education organizations that foster deeper learning in their own schools, share ideas, and provide models to the larger community.

Each group has its own approach, ranging from operating whole-school charters to providing services to traditional public schools.

Deeper learning activities helped to develop stronger cognitive, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, according to a 2016 American Institutes for Research study of 20 high schools in the Deeper Learning Network and a matched set of non-network schools.

Many schools, even those outside the network, can point to instruction that goes beyond basic facts to engage students in thinking critically.

"I think deeper learning is happening in every school in America in little pockets where kids are diving in, where they're building excitement and passion and depth in some subjects," says Ron Berger, chief academic officer of EL Education, an original member of the Deeper Learning Network.

Powered by projects and purpose

Many low-income students don't get the deeper experiences needed for careers and postsecondary education, says Stephanie Wood-Garnett, vice president of policy-to-practice at the Alliance for Excellent Education, a national advocacy group for [at-risk](#) students.

No matter the ZIP code or whether the student is on a gifted, [special education](#) or other pathway, Wood-Garnett says, "every single one of those kids should have access to learning that prepares them to have these skills."

Deeper learning often includes project-based instruction. At King Middle School, an EL Education-affiliated school in Portland Public Schools in Maine, students participate in two "learning expeditions" that last 12 to 15 weeks.

King has 540 students; 60 percent of them receive free or reduced-price lunch, and many live in homes where English is not the native language. Most of the students are from the immediate neighborhood though about 100

from outside the neighborhood choose to attend the school.

The learning expeditions, which vary year to year, are rooted in academic standards, center on a compelling real-world topic and include research, case studies, field work, collaboration, communication and a final product.

Through this work, students become engaged, master knowledge, work with others and express their ideas, says King's principal, Caitlin LeClair.

In one expedition a few years ago, students examined small acts of courage, focusing on the civil rights movement from 1954 to 1965. The project included learning about pivotal events and interviewing community members who had played a role in the movement.

Their work became part of the African-American collection at the University of Maine. "The idea is kids are producing work that has purpose and serves our greater community," says LeClair.

The work is worthwhile, but "it's also hard and you need to be able to provide teachers with the autonomy and trust to be able to create learning experiences that are really rigorous and relevant," LeClair says.

Teachers at King work in teams that operate on their own schedules and have common planning time. The school is also working to provide some off-site planning time.

Offering authenticity and advice

Central Coast New Tech High School opened in 2012 as a school of choice operated by Lucia Mar USD in California. Part of the New Tech Network, the high school has a 1-to-1 student-computer ratio. About 330 students are enrolled, including about 50 from outside the district.

One Central Coast project focused on cancer awareness. Students learned about cell mutation and cancer prevention, and interviewed doctors and survivors.

The interviews gave students experience in communicating with and learning from a primary source. And preparing their final report, which they presented in public, gave the students a meaningful goal.

"Everything a student is learning about the different content standards or the skills directly connects to some kind of authentic issue," says Principal Christian Holst.

Most Central Coast classes work on projects that last six to seven weeks. Math and foreign language classes, however, focus on problem-based learning sets that take only a few days.

School leaders also emphasize the need to develop a culture that supports deeper learning. So Central Coast begins each week with "advisories": Groups of 20 students in mixed grade levels meet for 85 minutes with a teacher advisor. It's a time for team-building, fostering growth mindsets and developing a love of learning.

If a student is having trouble with a project, the group can help the student work through challenges and solutions. This helps them become active participants in their learning, says Holst.

"The biggest thing is the active engagement," he says. "Students are sometimes wrestling with the curriculum, but they have a reason to learn."

Also part of the New Tech Network, Cross County High School—a high-poverty rural school with about 300 students in grades 7 through 12 in the Cross County School District in Arkansas—has found project-based and problem-based learning to be more effective than traditional approaches to instruction.

"We can get a lot more out of kids if we let them do a lot more of the work and get a deeper understanding," says

Matthew Swenson, assistant principal of Cross County High School.

The Cross County staff thought creatively about how to give rural students a deeper experience in learning about college and careers.

In the 2016-17 school year, about 40 students participated in virtual internships in which they worked with professionals and college students in fields of their interest, ranging from graphic design to veterinary science. School staff used their personal connections to find mentors across the country to take part long-distance via videoconference.

Big changes start with small ‘hacks’

School Retool also focuses on deeper learning. Launched in 2014, it is a partnership of Stanford University’s interdisciplinary design school—known as d.school—along with the Hewlett Foundation and IDEO, a for-profit design firm that has an education studio.

School Retool argues “big changes start small.” It lists 19 “big ideas” from deeper learning on its website, www.schoolretool.org and urges educators to begin with small “hacks” that can change mindsets and build buy-in, says Susie Wise, director of the K12 Lab Network at d.school.

A hack aimed at increasing project-based learning could be as small as asking the first 10 students who enter a classroom what they would like to work on and then sharing that information with other teachers, Wise says. Or, a school considering advisory periods might begin with just one interested teacher and a small group of students.

“Sometimes the larger changes might seem overwhelming, but you can always start by doing these little hacks—it might take 5 minutes, it might take an hour,” says Tyler Samstag, director of instructional innovation at the Allegheny Intermediate Unit in western Pennsylvania, where leaders from more than a dozen schools are participating in School Retool.

Making large changes often requires a group effort, says Steven Rippe, co-director of EdVisions, a Deeper Learning Network member that works with schools of 300 students or less to emphasize self-directed, project-based learning.

“The biggest mistake administrators make is thinking that a working group of teachers can design and implement an innovative school and do their own professional development at the same time,” Rippe says.

“The plate’s just too big. You have to have a coaching plan that supports the team and gets them to the point of being self-sustainable.”

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