October 25, 2022 • Grade K, Grad, SE • No. 5

Developing Self-Directed Learners by Design

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By following four key actions, educators can prepare students for a lifetime of continuous and autonomous learning.

Abstract ▾

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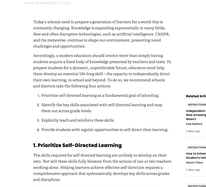
Teaching Strategies | Assessment | Student Motivation | Curriculum Development

Today's schools need to prepare a generation of learners for a world that is constantly changing. Knowledge is expanding exponentially in many fields. New and often disruptive technologies, such as artificial intelligence, CRISPR, and the metaverse, continue to change our environment, presenting never-ending challenges and opportunities.

Accordingly, a modern education should involve more than simply having students acquire a fixed body of knowledge presented by teachers and tests. To prepare students for life in the twenty-first century, schools should emphasize and then develop an essential life-long skill—the capacity to independently direct their own learning, in school and beyond. To do so, we recommend schools and districts take the following four actions:

1. Prioritize self-directed learning as a fundamental goal of schooling.
2. Identify the key skills associated with self-directed learning and map them across grade levels.
3. Explicitly teach and reinforce these skills.
4. Provide students with regular opportunities to self-direct their learning.



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1. Prioritize Self-Directed Learning

The skills required for self-directed learning are unlikely to develop on their own. Nor will these skills fully blossom from the actions of one or two teachers working alone. Instead, to develop these effective self-direction requires a comprehensive approach that systematically develops key skills across grades and disciplines.

Here's one example of such a coordinated approach: The Ramsey School District in New Jersey formed a team of school and community members to formulate a profile of a graduate that articulated desired competencies students should possess upon leaving high school. The team then developed a rubric for each of these key competencies. In regular school experiences, the district designed posters highlighting each of the competencies and displayed them prominently throughout schools. The poster in Figure 1 contains the description of four elements of self-direction and a set of associated essential questions meant to guide the development of this competency across grade levels and subject areas.

Of course, the creation of a poster is insufficient to ensure that all students develop the capacity for self-directed learning. An independent poster component must be cultivated throughout schools. Let's examine how schools can do just that.

FIGURE 1. Posters for Self-Direction

Creating a Self-Directed Learner Poster

SELF DIRECTION
Self-Direction is the ability to set goals, make plans, and persevere in the face of challenges. These skills and habits of mind can be cultivated by design.
Self-Direction is the ability to set goals, make plans, and persevere in the face of challenges. These skills and habits of mind can be cultivated by design.
How can I persevere in the face of challenges?
How can I manage my time and organize my work?
What strategies do I use when I don't know what to do or when I get stuck?
How can I make sure I am on a pathway to success?
How can I be a self-directed learner?
How can I be an independent learner?
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