Is the biggest challenge facing schools today the need to provide students with an education based on rigorous core content in reading, writing, math, social studies, and science?

Or is the biggest challenge to find engaging ways to involve students to learn and then apply what they know?

The answer, as with so many either/or questions in education, is “Yes.”

How best to address both these challenges is the topic of this issue of the State Education Standard.

All students have the right to a motivating, challenging education that will prepare them to succeed in college, careers, and life and become engaged citizens. Now, more than ever, they are asked to learn more...to master new technology...and to apply what they have learned. A technology-driven global economy requires a skilled and deeply literate workforce.

And that means that education has to change. Helping students and teachers make those changes is the goal of what the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation calls “deeper learning.” With Hewlett’s help, NASBE and our state boards of education have focused on what policies can best help students master core academic content, like reading, writing, math, and science, while learning how to think critically, collaborate, communicate effectively, direct their own learning, and believe in themselves.

This issue opens with the findings of NASBE’s Study Group on Deeper Learning. It focuses on the three key recommendations: creating a foundation for learning, deeper learning experiences, and a system conducive to innovation. Other articles highlight different dimensions of deeper learning (assessments, social and emotional learning, and personalization).

As you read through the contents of this issue, you will recognize that the basic concepts of deeper learning are not new to education. Deeper learning practices are embedded in the educational practice of accomplished individual teachers...and in some high-performing schools. These successful practices are now being confirmed by increasing bodies of evidence underscoring the necessity for deeper learning as an integral part of the education process for all students.

What is changing is the focus on providing deeper learning experiences to all students, from all backgrounds. And what’s also changing is the way schools engage today's technologically literate students. “The essence of deeper learning is changing the manner in which we work with young people,” says Superintendent James Merrill of the Virginia Beach Public Schools.

This concept of deeper learning is a natural partnership for state boards. Equity and excellence have been the hallmarks of state boards of education from their earliest days. But ensuring that all students have access to the most rigorous content, presented in the most engaging way, is the challenge of the 21st century.

State boards are stepping up to the challenge. They are working on ways to enable graduating high school students to be college and career ready and then make maximum use of their knowledge in life and work.

Students still need to master challenging content. Teachers still are critical to helping students engage with that material. Understanding and supporting deeper learning is one way state boards can ensure that all students graduate from high school ready for success in college, their career, and as a citizen.