The State Education Standard | March 2014

Have you seen a rise in demand for deeper learning competencies in Georgia? How are business and higher education talking about this?

Definitely. The state has been progressing toward more focused and performance standards and has been moving in that direction for the last 10 years. The transition from our previous Quality Core Curriculum Materials to Georgia Performance standards marks a change in our educational philosophy and a change in the state’s approach to the modern world. Through the adoption and implementation of the Common Core State Standards and performance standards, Georgia has really been emphasizing what students can do with knowledge. At the classroom level, this shift to performance implies differentiation and personalization.

As far as business and higher education are concerned, we’ve worked with our university system to think about what college and career means, along with thinking through the careers students need to be ready for. Georgia’s College and Career Readiness Performance Index includes a lot more than academic standards. For example, I advocated for the inclusion of pathways and earning a national certified industry credential as part of the accountability system.

How has this reached the state board, and how has the board responded?

There’s been lots of attention given to this issue by the board. It includes the Performance Index accountability system and the standards I mentioned above. What I especially like here is that with the index you get bonus points for exceeding the minimum bar. Additionally, we’ve been working on a lot of things, including technology and access to technology, that promote deeper learning, integrated math instruction, and competency-based education. And what I’m most excited about is our initiatives around STEM. If you do STEM right, you can’t help but create a process that reinforces critical thinking and problem solving.

I’ll bring some of the content back to my board, like what I learned about competency-based education and personalized learning. More importantly, I’m going to take the experience of the study group itself back. The presentations themselves were really helpful. For example, during the sessions, the presenters used sentence stems rather than lecture, and I think it created a high-quality learning experience. I got to experience what high-quality practice looks like, which isn’t always the case in professional learning opportunities. And the sessions allowed disagreement and creative thought.

Another great presentation that struck me was one by Ivory Tolston, who talked about dispelling the myths in terms of equity, saying all children can learn and meaning it when we say deeper learning.

Lastly, I heard how policies and implementation were progressing in different states. I’m more humble when I get back to Georgia because some people are doing more with less. At the same time, I can feel proud that we’ve had some of the difficult conversations in the state. My participation in the study group has been a good barometer for what is possible in Georgia, and I know our actions are fitting the recommendations of the group.

Kenneth Mason is a member of the Georgia State Board of Education. He is director of Urban Initiatives for the Southern Regional Education Board as well as a founding board member and advisory council chair for KIPP Strive Academy. Here, Mason discusses the implications of deeper learning for the work of his state board.

You were a member of NASBE 2013 Study Group on Deeper Learning—and I hope that was a productive experience for you. After participating in the discussions with presenters and peers during the meetings, what were your biggest takeaways for Georgia? What excites you most with regards to opportunities to engage more students in deeper learning?
Georgia has an appetite for types of schools that promote this learning, looking at the ways students live, and who they are. Through the study group, I’m able to pool research and examples from other board members and know how to apply it in Georgia. Sometimes things get lost in policy and politics. This helps focus me.

Are there some “low-hanging fruit” actions boards can consider with regards to promoting deeper learning?

Yes. Share resources and innovative practices, share the research and practice. Georgia can be doing a much better in this area. Some of our schools are doing a good job sharing information on really important things on social and emotional learning and student engagement. The state could do a much better job helping to facilitate that. The Department could do a better job communicating how to use some of the things we have in place. We have an instructional technology advisory committee that has a model classroom at the Department of Education that helps model different ways of learning. The state can keep building on this infrastructure to share information.

What is the barrier that concerns you most in meeting the goal of significantly more students engaging in deeper learning?

Buy-in and ownership. We need to include more people in the conversation. Beyond that, you can’t close your eyes to poverty. That’s the biggest obstacle I’m seeing out there to deeper learning: there is a large group of students and families who are going to be left behind. How do we give them high level remediation so they cannot only catch up, but thrive? How do we make sure the techniques of 21st century teaching are used with those students as well? Georgia had a huge success in dropping low-level courses. We saw those courses weren’t affecting achievement at all. Some remedial strategies don’t excite students and don’t meet them in terms of their interests. The types of strategies that promote deeper learning have to be applied in your neediest schools.

Beyond that, the conversations on deeper learning need to take place in a real way during the transitions, when students transition from elementary to middle and middle to high school. We need to have more collaborative conversations on what we teach and how we teach at these transitions. We need to be promoting healthy transitions and move away from structural, political, and territorial boundaries that hold students back.

What do you see as the greatest points of leverage for deeper learning that boards can utilize?

Boards can do much more in terms of advocacy and promotion of deeper learning practice. We need to have discussions among ourselves as a board, but also discuss it with the governor’s office, legislature, and others. We need to have these conversations. It’s a great leverage point.

Beyond that we need to gather more evidence through data, both practice and anecdotal. Every state agency has some great thinkers. Board members can have the chain of command in mind, but also interact with them.

One of the issues the study group discussed was the need to keep policies and education systems nimble to be able to more quickly respond to changes in technology, demographics, the economy and work place, and the amount of knowledge we are gaining about the learning process. Given that in a democracy the work of boards and legislative bodies is usually deliberative (not to say “slow”) and that education systems are very complex, what do you see this “nimbleness” looking like?

Being courageous to affect the necessary changes to benefit those a policy affects most. Boards must be okay with changing course, because around every corner there may be a new challenge that students have or new needs at the national picture. We need to be mindful of policies and practices outside of our own neighborhood. Think beyond the borders of Georgia. Learn from different communities and then apply it. We have access to best practices from all over. At the same time, because boards change, we need to have a voice for those groups that are affected most by policies, such as new families and new parents. As board members, we have to be open to the beliefs of those who disagree with us. Every board meeting is open to the public, and we want to encourage them to come in. People can be part of the process.

Any parting thoughts?

I think we need to be more aware of the mental health concerns of young people. And we should invest more in thinking about how deeper learning affects students with special needs, which is something that often gets left behind.