As a center for Catholic Charities Refugee placement, Portland, Maine, regularly receives a large influx of new immigrants, particularly from East Africa. Seventh grade English language learners from King Middle School decided to do something to help them.

Over an eight-week period in 2006, the students researched services available to immigrants, interviewed people who work with them, took digital photographs, and compiled a small book, entitled *Access Portland: A Resource Guide for New Immigrants and Refugees*. The guidebook was sent to the placement center and widely distributed to the arriving refugees.

*Transforming State Policy to Transform Student Outcomes*

by Robert Rothman
In producing the guide, the King students demonstrated considerable mastery of English language arts knowledge and skills. They showed they could conduct research and write an informative document, as well as demonstrate their understanding of academic vocabulary and language conventions, and, as English language learners, they exhibited their proficiency in English as well.

But beyond these more obvious achievements, their work demonstrated even more about the students’ abilities. They showed they could use their knowledge to think critically about their research findings and solve problems in order to produce a document that would be useful to a real-world audience. They showed the ability to communicate, both verbally and in writing, and to collaborate with peers. And in revising the document to perfect it for publication, they demonstrated that they could reflect on their understanding.

These deeper learning abilities are increasingly important. College professors and employers say they are vital for students’ success after high school. But they also warn that too few students currently demonstrate those abilities, putting their future at risk in an increasingly complex world.

The good news is that there are a growing number of schools like King Middle School, which is part of the Expeditionary Learning school network, that are committed to developing students’ deeper learning competencies and have organized their school program to do so (see textbox on Expeditionary Learning Schools on page 20). But these schools remain exceptions. Enabling larger numbers of schools—and larger numbers of students—to focus on deeper learning will require policy changes at the state level.

Specifically, states need to revise or remove policies that currently inhibit the development of deeper learning—such as accountability policies that focus on a narrow range of knowledge and skills—and institute new policies to allow deeper learning approaches to flourish.

This article will describe some of the policy changes necessary for deeper learning. It will also provide some examples of states that are moving in this direction.

THE NEED FOR DEEPER LEARNING

Although they are sometimes called “21st century skills,” deeper learning competencies—the ability to use knowledge to think critically and solve problems, to communicate effectively, to collaborate, to reflect on learning, and to develop positive academic mindsets—are not new. Schools have taught them, and students have learned them, for centuries.

However, for most of that time, only an elite few had school experiences that enabled them to develop deeper learning competencies. Most students were taught basic skills only, and tests reinforced this emphasis by asking students simply to recall facts and apply simple procedures. And for much of that time, this two-tiered system worked effectively. Young people could get well-paying jobs with minimal skills.

That situation is changing. There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that deeper learning abilities are necessary for all students, not just the elite who developed them in the past.

For example, Richard Murnane and Frank Levy have found that technology has transformed the workplace by reducing the demand for routine manual tasks, such as filing expense reports and accepting bank deposits, while sharply increasing the demand for tasks that involve solving complex problems and working with new information, such as diagnosing illnesses and teaching biology. In order to provide students with opportunities to succeed in growing careers, then, all students need to develop deeper learning competencies.

A landmark 2012 study by the National Research Council provided further evidence of the importance of deeper learning. The study found that deeper learning competencies are critical to enable students to transfer what they learn to new situations, a key goal of learning, and that they are associated with positive outcomes in employment and health.1

What does it take to develop those abilities? Many schools have shown dramatic success in doing
King Middle School is one of nearly 200 schools that are part of the Expeditionary Learning national network, originally formed in 1992. Expeditionary Learning has received funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and from the U.S. Department of Education through its Investing in Innovation (i3) awards program.

Most importantly for deeper learning, the schools offer a **compelling curriculum** through which “content and skills standards come alive for students by connecting learning to relevant issues, identified needs, and authentic audiences. Academic content is charged with rigor through the curricular structures of learning expeditions, case studies, projects, field work, consultation with community experts, service learning, and exhibitions of student work.”

*Other components of the Expeditionary Learning model are:*

- **Dynamic leadership** through elective, collaborative teams;
- **Engaging instruction** supported by on-site institutes and on-site professional development sessions, as well as one-on-one work with teachers;
- **Continuous assessment**, with teachers equipped to infuse ongoing formative assessment into their lessons and build elective summative assessments to track student learning;
- **Positive school cultures** built around respect, responsibility, courage, and kindness, where students and adults are committed to quality work and citizenship.

Source: http://elschools.org/about-us.
so, including schools that educate students who have traditionally been underserved in schools, such as low-income students and students of color. But to spread this kind of learning in large numbers of schools requires changes in state policy in the following areas: standards, assessments, accountability, teacher development, instructional support, time, and support for innovation. The following sections outline what those changes might look like.

**POLICY CHANGES TO SUPPORT DEEPER LEARNING**

**Standards**

For two decades, standards have been at the heart of state education policy. Standards define the expectations for student learning, and drive—or ought to drive—curriculum development, testing, and professional development. By signaling that all students are expected to develop deeper learning, standards can help spur changes in instruction and school organization that produce that result.

The good news is that standards in most states do in fact call for deeper learning. As the 2012 report from the National Research Council (referenced above) made clear, the Common Core State Standards overlap substantially with deeper learning competencies. For example, the English language arts standards place a strong emphasis on using evidence to justify conclusions in writing. That is a clear call for critical thinking. Likewise, the mathematics standards ask students to justify their responses and to communicate their understanding of mathematics.

Similarly, the Next Generation Science Standards, which have been adopted by eight states, also include numerous deeper learning expectations. The standards place a strong emphasis on constructing and evaluating evidence-based arguments, the ability to solve non-routine problems, and systems thinking, for example.

The challenge for states now is to ensure that these standards get implemented in classrooms. That means developing and adopting new instructional materials, ensuring that teachers are prepared to teach the standards, and providing support for students who may be struggling. States are moving in this direction, but their efforts have varied widely.

**Assessments**

Assessments are essential to ensure that the expectations embodied by the standards are realized in classrooms. Assessments make standards concrete by showing students and teachers the kinds of performances students need to demonstrate to show they have met the standards. And traditionally, assessments have exerted a strong influence on classroom practice; in some cases, teachers paid more attention to assessments—particularly assessments with high stakes attached to them—than to the standards.

Two consortia of states are currently developing assessments to measure student performance against the Common Core State Standards. The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC, a partnership of 19 states, and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, a group of 24 states, are designing new assessments that are expected to be administered in the 2014-15 school year. These assessments are expected to be delivered on computer and to include performance tasks and other formats that enable students to use knowledge to solve problems and demonstrate critical thinking.

A study of the consortia’s designs by Joan Herman and Robert Linn of the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST) at the University of California, Los Angeles, found that the new assessments are likely to measure deeper learning competencies far more extensively than current tests do. The study examined the “depth of knowledge” called for in the consortia’s prototype items and found that they ask students to apply content knowledge to solve problems, demonstrate complex thinking, and communicate effectively. By contrast, only a handful of items on current state tests demand that students demonstrate such abilities. [Note: for more information, see Linda Darling-Hammond’s article on “Assessments for Deeper Learning” on page 32 of this issue.]

States are also supplementing state tests with assessments that measure additional deeper learning competencies. For example, New Hampshire is designing a performance assessment system as part of its competency-based system, under which students are expected
to demonstrate a set of prescribed competencies in order to graduate from high school. The assessments are aimed at promoting “deeper levels of understanding important academic content and skills,” according to state officials.

**Accountability**

Accountability systems are intended to create incentives for schools to improve performance for all students. Accountability systems that measure schools’ success in developing deeper learning competencies would encourage schools to strengthen their efforts to address those competencies.

The systems states have put into place under waivers from the No Child Left Behind Act suggest some ways that states can redesign accountability to focus on deeper learning. For example, Florida’s system measures schools’ progress in improving students’ college readiness as well as accelerated curricula. While these factors are not direct measures of deeper learning, they do provide some indication of the extent to which students are developing the knowledge and skills they will need in post-secondary education.

**Teacher Development and Support**

Deeper learning requires skillful teachers who can guide students through engaging projects that enable them to demonstrate their competencies and support them through deeper and deeper levels of learning. While some teachers have shown great success in developing deeper learning among their students, most teachers were prepared for a different era, when deeper learning was not expected for most students.

State policies can help ensure that all teachers are capable of eliciting deeper learning and help provide them with continual support so they can improve their effectiveness throughout their careers. The process begins with teacher preparation. State boards play a critical role in approving the requirements for teacher licensure and the content of preparation programs. One promising step toward ensuring that new teachers are capable of teaching deeper learning outcomes is the Teacher Performance Assessment (edTPA), which about half the states are piloting. This assessment measures teacher-candidates’ effectiveness in the classroom using evidence that includes student work and teacher reflections. [Note: more information about edTPA can be found in “Collaborating in Teacher Preparation to Improve Outcomes for Students with Disabilities,” by Sharon Robinson, in NASBE’s August 2013 issue of the State Education Standard, available at http://www.nasbe.org/wp-content/uploads/Collaborating-in-Teacher-Preparation.pdf.]

States are also implementing new systems to evaluate practicing teachers. To date, few of these systems measure the extent to which teachers are able to teach to deeper learning competencies. But a few states, New York, for example, explicitly cite the deeper learning competencies as indicators they expect to examine in observations of teacher performance. New York’s teaching standards, on which evaluations are based, expect teachers to:

- Have required content knowledge;
- Use instructional techniques that encourage higher-order thinking in students;
- Incorporate a variety of formal and informal assessment techniques into their planning and instructional delivery to ensure that all students are grasping the content;
- Address common student misconceptions about the subject area; and
- Design learning experiences that foster student understanding of key disciplinary themes.

**Instructional Support**

In addition to adequate preparation and professional development, teachers also need tools to help guide and support their ongoing instruction in the classroom. For deeper learning, these tools are particularly important, because teachers who teach for deeper learning seldom rely exclusively on textbooks. Rather, they create engaging projects (often using original-source documents) that ask students to use knowledge to solve real-world problems, like the guide for newcomers produced by students at King Middle School in Maine.

Thanks to technology, instructional support tools are increasingly available and thanks to the Common Core State Standards, which apply to teachers in most states, these tools are useful for large numbers of teachers. The American Federation of Teachers, for example, has created a website called “Share My Lesson” that enables teachers to post lessons for other teachers to use that indicate their alignment with the Common Core. In addition, individual state departments of education have created similar web
portals. For example, the New York State Education Department has created EngageNY, which includes curriculum modules, videos of exemplary classrooms, and assessments. The state has also formed a support team of “ambassadors” to provide technical assistance.

Use of Time

Educators have long recognized that students learn at different rates, yet schools are structured so that all students stay in classrooms for a prescribed amount of time, moving on when they get to the end of a school year. This mismatch between learning needs and school structures is problematic for deeper learning because students need time to engage in extended projects that enable them to demonstrate their competencies effectively.

Over the past decade, New Hampshire has pioneered an effort to do away with a time-based structure and replace it with a competency-based structure in which students move on once they have demonstrated a set of prescribed competencies. As noted above, this system requires performance assessments that measure the competencies; it also requires changes in how schools are financed, how teachers are prepared and supported, and other policies.

Significantly, the competency-based system also acknowledges the learning that students do outside the regular classroom. Students can learn what they need to learn in online courses, in after-school programs, at home, or in a workplace.

Other states, such as Oregon and Ohio, are also moving toward a competency-based system.

Support for Innovation

Many of the schools that are committed to developing deeper learning competencies among their students have implemented their programs in the conventional system. However, there are many ways to approach education to develop deeper learning. In order to provide students with opportunities to learn in new ways, states need to provide some flexibility to allow educators to develop and implement innovative approaches.

To this end, Kentucky has created “districts of innovation,” which are exempt from many state regulations and local board policies, in order to test new models of schooling. Districts must apply to the state for this status and, if granted, it can be renewed after five years. Schools in participating districts must agree to take part in the innovation district.

PUTTING IT TOGETHER

All of these policies—standards, assessments, accountability, teacher development, the use of time, and support for innovation—are essential for deeper learning to take root and for states to ensure that all students have access to the kind of learning they need to succeed. But the challenge for states is to adopt all of these policies. A piecemeal approach will not work.

For example, if states adopt new assessments without providing support for developing teachers, they will find that students fare poorly on the new tests because they have not had the opportunities to learn what they needed to learn. Likewise, failing to expand the use of time or create opportunities for innovation will hamstring schools in their efforts to provide additional support to students and teachers.

One group of nine states, known as the Innovation Lab Network, is trying to create the conditions for state policy to support deeper learning. These states, operating under the auspices of the Council of Chief State School Officers, are working to adopt new state policies that support and encourage innovations at the school and district levels. They are also working collaboratively to share ideas and develop new approaches—in assessments, for example—that can be implemented across states. [Note: for more information, see NASBE’s May 2013 edition of State Innovations, “The Innovation Lab Network: Bold State Approaches for a New Era of Education.”]

The experiences of the Innovation Lab Network can provide a great deal of information for states as they move to support deeper learning for students. But states need not wait for these states to demonstrate what they are learning. States can move ahead right away to transform policies to ensure that all students have opportunities for deeper learning. The world has changed, and students cannot wait.

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