

We Know How To Prepare Students For Life — Now, Let's Do It

February 24, 2017

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COMMENTARY

Over the past few weeks, the American people have focused particular attention on public education – a topic we didn't hear much about during the presidential election. With a new education secretary come new ideas and renewed discussion on how best to invest in the success of all children. As this discussion unfolds, we absolutely must look beyond narrow debates on school choice and vouchers in order to address an issue of much larger importance to our future success and global competitiveness: Are our schools preparing our children for life?

A recent poll points toward a troubling answer. The [poll](#), conducted by the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy and released by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, finds that New Englanders overwhelmingly believe that students across the region are graduating from high school unprepared for college or a career. Overall, nearly 70 percent of respondents believe we are falling seriously short in preparing young people for life after high school.

It turns out they are right. Across New England, [only half](#) of our high school students are graduating fully ready for college and a career. In Massachusetts – the highest-performing state in the nation – about a third of graduates from the state's public high schools are required to take developmental or remedial courses when they arrive on one of the state's public campuses. For those in traditionally marginalized communities, the numbers are even worse. The good news is that the public not only understands the magnitude of the problem but also recognizes the path forward.

We've reached a tipping point in awareness. People now generally agree that high-quality, student-centered learning plays a critical role in preparing young people for life beyond high school. Ninety percent of New Englanders agree that this innovative approach, which includes more personalized and flexible learning options, is critical to building on the high expectations and rigorous academic content that have driven past improvements in education.

Student-centered environments reflect the understanding that learning doesn't just happen in the classroom. By questioning the traditional concepts of where, when and how learning happens, we can help students advance according to what they know, not how long they've sat at a desk.

High-quality teaching and effective school leadership still matter tremendously, but these assets can be directed toward more diverse and carefully structured learning experiences that are tailored to individual students' needs and interests. Instead of sitting through lectures, for example, students use class time for interactive projects and thoughtful discourse, run their own parent-teacher conferences and complete internships for credit. Such approaches help students develop real-world problem-solving skills, increase their perseverance and take ownership over their continued learning.

Student-centered programs are already improving schools and helping communities around New England. For example, Charlestown High School's Diploma Plus program, an Innovation Academy within

Boston Public Schools, has reimagined learning for students who have not found success in traditional high school settings.

The program uses a competency-based model: Students pursue personalized learning pathways and advance only after they've mastered content. Instead of repeating a whole course if they fail, students spend their time on the material they did not yet master, while continuing to move forward in other academic areas. Educators empower students to take ownership over their learning, making it more relevant and meaningful. As a result, dozens of Diploma Plus students — many from disadvantaged backgrounds or with a history of trauma — have graduated or earned their GED and are enrolled in college.

This approach works in elementary schools, too. At the Carlton School in Salem, which was highlighted in recent Rennie Center [research on student-centered learning](#), students work in multi-age elementary classrooms, where teachers create personalized learning plans to move them to the next milestone. Students demonstrate mastery of skills through performance-based tasks. This innovative approach has helped the Carlton improve from a Level 3 to a Level 1 school in just a few years.

All of these success stories have something in common besides their student-centered focus: They also depend on well-supported, expert educators to implement this approach successfully.

But, of course, educators cannot bear the sole burden of reforming our public education system. It's imperative that policymakers and community leaders work together with educators to manage such efforts to transform learning.

Teachers, as our poll shows, are highly trusted when it comes to educational decision-making, and the public places great confidence in their ability to improve education. As we move forward, it's essential to take the lessons learned from local efforts in student-centered learning and use them to build broader reform strategies that will equip *all* students for success in our global economy.

New Englanders are asking that we fully prepare our future leaders for the nation they will inherit. It's time we start listening.

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