

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Students  
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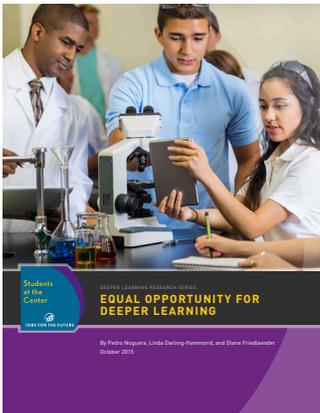


JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

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## EQUAL OPPORTUNITY FOR DEEPER LEARNING

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Out of concern that the nation's schools—particularly those working with traditionally underserved populations—are not adequately preparing all students to succeed in college and careers, education policymakers have launched a series of major reform efforts in recent years. Most prominent among these are two initiatives that call for fundamental changes in the areas of curriculum and assessment: the Common Core State Standards and new common assessments that measure college and career readiness.

In the face of these changes, which call for a shift to deeper learning, many schools will need to transform their teaching methods, organizational systems, and approaches to leadership. When it comes to creating a rich learning environment, schools serving low-income students and students of color tend to have the furthest distance to travel. Many have struggled to maintain a broad curriculum and felt forced to focus on test preparation in the face of budget cuts, high-stakes exams, and increased segregation of students on the basis of race and socioeconomic status. Successful implementation of these major new policy initiatives will thus need to overcome inequities in funding, learning opportunities, and learning conditions that are pervasive in the American educational system and that contribute to the persistence of the so-called “achievement gap.”

This report addresses the issue of equity in a crucial dimension: teaching and learning. We argue that to ensure equity in access to deeper learning, practices and policies must address the context for education both outside and inside of schools. To enable low-income students to learn deeply and

successfully, schools that serve them must offer a high-quality instructional experience and the wraparound services that can help ameliorate the stressful conditions they experience in their communities.

### RESOURCE EQUITY FOR DEEPER LEARNING

In this paper, we define equity as the policies and practices that ensure that every student has access to an education focused on *meaningful learning*, taught by *competent* and *caring educators* who are able to attend to the student's social and academic needs, and supported by *adequate resources* that provide the materials and conditions for effective learning.

As numerous studies have shown, family income and parental education are two of the strongest predictors of student achievement and educational attainment. Children in schools where poverty is concentrated underperform their counterparts in more economically mixed settings. Poverty also limits the amount and quality of academic and social



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support students receive outside of school. In addition, the current high-stakes testing environment has inadvertently reinforced long-standing tracking systems that deny students of color and low-income students access to a thinking curriculum, instead relegating them to remedial, rote-oriented, and often scripted courses of study.

Equity-based reforms in teaching and learning will thus be central to expanding access to deeper learning. These reforms must pay attention to the ways in which poverty negatively influences academic outcomes, ensure that our schools provide the academic and social supports that enable students to thrive, and address inequalities in public spending on education.

## WHAT EDUCATORS NEED TO KNOW TO ENABLE DEEPER LEARNING

Studies consistently find that highly effective teachers support the process of meaningful learning by

- ▶ Creating *ambitious and meaningful tasks* that reflect how knowledge is used in the field
- ▶ Engaging students in *active learning*, so that they apply and test what they know
- ▶ Drawing *connections to students' prior knowledge* and experiences
- ▶ Diagnosing student understanding in order to *scaffold the learning process* step by step
- ▶ Assessing student learning continuously and adapting teaching to student needs
- ▶ Providing clear *standards*, constant *feedback*, and opportunities for *revising* work
- ▶ Encouraging *strategic and metacognitive thinking* so that students can learn to evaluate and guide their own learning

In recent years, educational policymaking has diverged from contemporary knowledge about child development. As the focus on holding schools accountable for student

achievement (as measured by performance on standardized tests) has intensified, policymakers have paid less heed to research showing that children develop at different rates and that development is influenced by the interaction between the individual and the social environment.

Schools and academic programs that are committed to deeper learning and equity must resist the tendency to teach all students in exactly the same way, or to make judgments about their ability based upon a few arbitrary measures of progress. Rather, our understanding of learning and development makes it clear that to really bring deeper learning to all, we need a student-centered approach.

## SCHOOLS THAT ENACT DEEPER LEARNING

Schools that engage low-income and minority students in deeper learning have stronger academic outcomes, better attendance and student behavior, lower dropout rates, higher graduation rates, and higher rates of college attendance and perseverance than comparison schools serving similar students.

These schools, which operationalize simultaneous commitments to equity and deeper learning, provide:

- ▶ **Authentic instruction and assessment** in the form of project-based learning, performance-based assessment, collaborative learning, and connections to the world beyond school
- ▶ **Personalized supports for learning** in the form of advisory systems, differentiated instruction, and support for social services and social-emotional learning along with skills
- ▶ **Supports for educator learning** through opportunities for reflection, collaboration, and leadership, as well as professional development.

Many of these schools also have developed personalized systems of in-school support for students, along with access to health care, mental health services, and social supports.

## **INQUIRY-BASED PEDAGOGY AND GROUP LEARNING**

Inquiry-based pedagogy and group learning prepare students for college, career, and life by promoting transferable skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, and communication. To help students develop these skills, teachers must create opportunities for them to engage actively with course content, grapple with real-world problems, explore core questions, develop and test hypotheses, make generalizations, and communicate with audiences beyond the classroom.

## **MASTERY AND PERFORMANCE-BASED ASSESSMENTS**

A student-centered deeper learning approach uses performance assessments that diagnose student learning needs, promote skill acquisition, and move students toward mastery. These assessments reflect the kinds of literacy, mathematics, and analytical tasks found in higher education and the work world. They can include Socratic seminars, exhibitions, projects, and portfolios, which encourage learners to draw on multiple kinds of knowledge in order to demonstrate higher-order and integrated learning. A focus on mastery is fundamentally student centered, for it ensures that students acquire the essential skills they will need in order to acquire more complex skills and abilities.

## **PERSONALIZED LEARNING PRACTICES**

To achieve high levels of success for all students, schools must accompany high expectations with the academic, social, and emotional supports students need to span any gaps between those expectations and their own preparation levels. This is especially important for low-income students and students of color, who often enter high school underprepared for a college preparatory curriculum and lacking confidence in their own abilities.

### **Student support through differentiated instructional practices**

Student-centered schools emphasize the use of varied instructional strategies that accommodate the wide range of skills young people bring to the classroom. They often provide differentiated materials, extra tutoring in and out of class, and other kinds of individualized support, including the creation of an explicit, personalized learning plan for every student.

## **Advisory programs: The core support for personalized learning**

Advisory programs, in which groups of students meet daily with a teacher, provide a structure to facilitate deep and lasting relationships between teachers and students. Within advisory, teachers focus much of their attention on building a safe and caring community, which provides crucial peer support. Advisors themselves play a critical role in advocating for students, connecting with their families, and ensuring they do not slip through the cracks.

### **Support for students' social-emotional development**

Some obstacles to the success of low-income students and students of color are not academic but psychological, consequences of facing the daily injustices of poverty and racism. Student-centered schools tend to make proactive efforts to help students learn to manage their emotions, develop an academic mindset, interact with others productively, and persist through obstacles. In many schools, advisory becomes a key setting for such social-emotional learning.

## **PRACTICES THAT SUPPORT EDUCATORS**

Creating and sustaining schools committed to deeper learning requires a substantial investment in staff capacity, which can include efforts to: create a shared school-wide vision; support grade-level teacher collaboration; build teacher expertise in pedagogy, content, curriculum, and assessment; provide opportunities for staff to reflect on their practice; and foster district and community partnerships.

## **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

When educators and policymakers align educational practices with what they know about child development and learning, and when they adopt strategies to mitigate adverse conditions in impoverished communities, they can significantly enhance the ability of schools to promote equity and deeper learning. Three areas of policy support will substantially influence the ability of all schools to engage in student-centered practices that support deeper learning:

- **Funding policies** that ensure adequate resources are provided and are used productively

- > **Human capital policies** that ensure highly effective educators are available to a broad range of schools so they can enact student-centered practices that support deeper learning
- > **Instruction and assessment policies** that influence what is taught and how student learning is measured

## A POLICY AGENDA FOR EQUITABLE ACCESS TO DEEPER LEARNING

### Funding Policies

1. Adequate and flexible K-12 funding based on pupil needs
2. Incentives to develop new school designs that can support deeper learning
3. Resources for wraparound services that support student success



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### Human Capital Policies

4. Educator standards that focus preparation programs on how to engage students in deeper learning
5. Supports for educator preparation and induction that enable strong pedagogical skills
6. Time for collaboration
7. Meaningful professional development and evaluation

### Instruction and Assessment Policies

8. More supports and fewer constraints for instruction so that schools can innovate
9. New systems of assessment and accountability that support deeper learning
10. Systemic learning that enables educators, schools, and agencies to learn from one another



**Students at the Center**—a Jobs for the Future initiative—synthesizes and adapts for practice current research on key components of student-centered approaches to learning that lead to deeper learning outcomes. Our goal is to strengthen the ability of practitioners and policymakers to engage each student in acquiring the skills, knowledge, and expertise needed for success in college, career, and civic life. This project is supported generously by funds from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation and The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

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