Editor’s Note: As schools strive to prepare students for their postsecondary futures, questions remain on how best to define and promote career readiness. In this Spotlight, see how new tests aim to measure career readiness, explore different opinions on career-ready skills, and learn how community engagement and individualized plans can inspire students.

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Jennifer Sanchez prepares a needle with a flu vaccine at the San Ysidro Health Center on Thursday, February 6, 2014 in San Ysidro, CA. The program focuses on ways schools can get students involved in their community as a way to make learning more relevant.
ACT to Feature New Indicators for Career Readiness, Understanding Complex Texts

By Caralee Adams

Starting in the spring of 2015, high school students who take the ACT will receive more information on their performance, including indicators of their career readiness and ability to understand complex texts, officials from the testing company announced June 6.

ACT Inc., which administers the nation’s most popular college-entrance test, also plans to debut a revised writing test that will provide students with four sub-scores (ideas and analysis, development and support, organization, and language use) on the optional essay.

“We are trying to provide more meaningful insights to students to help inform instruction,” said Paul Weeks, ACT’s vice president of customer engagement.

A new “progress toward career-readiness indicator” will show students where they need to improve on specific skills sought by employers. In an email, ACT spokesman Ed Colby explained that this will be linked to ACT’s National Career Readiness Certificate, which is based on scores on the company’s WorkKeys tests (a job skills assessment system). He said the skills ACT will look at are “foundational skills that are shared by nearly every type of job out there to some level or another, specifically applied math, locating information, and reading for information skills.” The indicator is being developed based on score results of students who have taken both the ACT and the WorkKeys tests.

A “text complexity progress indicator” will aim to capture a student’s skill in comprehending passages on the ACT reading test, which measures reading comprehension. Colby said that “a key predictor of college and career success is how well an individual can read a very complex piece of writing.”

New STEM Score

ACT also will provide students with a STEM score by combining their scores in math and science. For students who take the optional writing test, they will get an English/language arts score by adding up the achievement in English, reading, and writing. (Last year, 52 percent of students who took the ACT opted to sit for the writing portion of the exam.)

This new feedback will be reported in addition to the traditional ACT scores and college-readiness benchmarks in English, math, reading, and science.

Changes are also coming to the writing test. Currently, students are given a fairly simple prompt, such as “Should students be required to wear school uniforms?” and asked to take a position on that issue, generally pro or con, and to support it in their essay. ACT is revising the writing test to focus on topics that are more complex, and on larger questions of values and core life experiences, according to Colby. Instead of asking students to take one position, the prompt will ask them to provide multiple perspectives on that topic.

News of the ACT revisions comes three months after the College Board unveiled plans for a revamped SAT to debut in the spring of 2016. However, ACT officials were quick to say the changes announced are “not radical.”

The scoring range for the ACT (1-36), the content, and the college-readiness benchmarks will not change, said Weeks. “It’s nothing dramatic in what a student will experience,” he said.

ACT will offer a computer-based version of the test, in addition to the paper-and-pencil ACT, starting in 2015. The company has been piloting the digital test this spring in selected markets.

Nearly 1.8 million students took the ACT college-entrance exam last year, representing 54 percent of the class of 2013, and surpassing participation in the College Board’s SAT, which had 1.7 million test takers.

ACT Inc. also just announced that four additional states—Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, and Wisconsin—will be offering the test to all high school juniors, bringing the total number of states contracted to provide statewide ACT testing to 17.

The SAT is currently offered statewide only in Delaware, Idaho, and Maine.

Constructive-Response Items

Weeks said that state officials like that the ACT is curriculum-based and the school-wide testing helps identify some students who have college potential, but may not have considered that pathway before taking the test.

College Board officials have said that the SAT changes make it more of a curriculum-based test that reflects what students are learning in high school. ACT officials acknowledged that may change the landscape. “It will be more competitive—and that’s a good thing.”

Jon Erickson, ACT president of education and career services
What is the IB Career-related Programme (CP)?

The CP incorporates the vision and educational principles of the IB into a unique programme specifically developed for students who wish to engage in career and technical education.

The CP's flexible educational framework allows schools to meet the needs, backgrounds and contexts of students. Each school creates its own distinctive version of the CP.

The CP enables students to:

- follow their chosen education and career pathways in life
- combine academic subjects with their personal and professional interests and skills
- engage in learning that makes a positive difference to their community
- think critically and creatively
- communicate clearly and effectively in a variety of situations
- effectively work independently and in collaboration with others
- consider new perspectives and other points of view
- develop greater self-confidence and self-awareness
- demonstrate high levels of resilience, flexibility and agility of mind
- be internationally minded and globally aware
- apply their knowledge to real-world scenarios and situations.

More than 70 percent of high school students pursuing career-technical education (CTE) went on to 2 or 4 year colleges after high school.1
For students living in poverty, high school graduation and a college diploma are often pitched as a ticket out of neighborhoods without resources. Yet empowering students to find the strengths within their communities and work to improve them also can be a powerful motivator.

After-school programs like YouthBuild have long blended public service with work skills for students, but experts say the efforts to teach students through community-engagement initiatives here at San Ysidro High School are more holistic and more localized. From learning Mexican-American music and literature to exploring—and addressing—local social and health problems, San Ysidro works to relate students’ academic studies to practical ways they can build up their community.

“There are sometimes assumptions made that our kids who are harder to serve can’t do [community or service learning], and the exact opposite is the case,” said Martin J. Blank, a community school researcher and the president of the Washington-based Institute for Educational Leadership. “Making meaning of their lives is particularly important for low-income students. If you treat them like they have nothing, you won’t get very much. You have to leverage what they do have.”

At first glance, students in this border district of southern San Diego have less to leverage than to overcome.

It is home to the San Ysidro Port of Entry on Interstate 5 from Tijuana—the busiest land border crossing in the world and, according to the investigative group CaliforniaWatch, the one the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement uses most often to deport Mexican nationals. The crossing puts the border Mexican nationals. The crossing puts the local community squarely in the path of some of the largest drug- and human-trafficking paths in the country.

The border creates a constantly shifting, high-need school population: In the 2,400-student San Ysidro High School, 4,500 students transfer in and out every year, according to Principal Hector Espinoza. Many will re-enroll several times during the same year.

More than four out of five students live in poverty, on a median family income of less than $28,000 a year—the lowest in San Diego’s Sweetwater school district. Nearly three out of four students are still learning English, and half are the children of parents who did not complete high school.

Rather than dwell on such deficits, Mr. Espinoza said. The language department, for example, offers Spanish for native and non-native speakers, as well as American Sign Language for deaf and hearing students. “At the high school level, we’re philosophically motivated to do it,” Mr. Espinoza said. “We really want to immerse them.”

Jennifer Sanchez prepares a needle with a flu vaccine at the San Ysidro Health Center on Thursday, February 6, 2014 in San Ysidro, CA. The program focuses on ways schools can get students involved in their community as a way to make learning more relevant. San Ysidro High School, which serves a high-poverty exurb (maybe 20 minutes from downtown) of San Diego, has turned its high poverty, overwhelmingly Mexican immigrant community from a barrier to a boost for its students.

Cultural Connections

One wall of the school’s library is covered in pledge cards that each student signs in 9th grade, promising to attend school every day, graduate from high school, and achieve three other goals of the student’s own choosing. Each freshman turns in a pledge card and discusses it with the principal, one on one, in the first two weeks of school. The cards remain posted throughout a student’s years in the school and are attached to each student’s diploma at graduation.

It seems to be working: For the past three years, San Ysidro 10th graders have outperformed the state average on mathematics for the California high school exit examination, and 40 percent take at least one Advanced Placement course. As of 2012, the most recent year of data, the school had a four-year graduation rate of 87 percent, 10 percentage points higher than the state average and 8 percentage points higher than the average for San Diego County. More than nine out of 10 students are Hispanic, with a smattering of Asian, black, and white students.

“I’ve been to other schools, and the students who come from higher-income [families], they tend not to care as much about higher education as we do,” said Katia Fernandez, an 11th grader at San Ysidro. “Most of our parents and families didn’t have a good childhood, and we’re very motivated to do more than they did.”

As often as possible, the school ties its curriculum to its community culture, Mr. Espinoza said. The language department, for example, offers Spanish for native and non-native speakers, as well as American Sign Language for deaf and hearing students. “At the high school level, we’re philosophically motivated to do it,” Mr. Espinoza said. “We really want to immerse them.”
During one morning here in November, the school’s concert orchestra practiced along with a student mariachi band that performs at local festivals. In the next classroom over, a physical education class practiced exaggerated horse-like prancing and cowboy swagger associated with the caballitos dance of Mexico’s northern Baja peninsula—part of the school’s 200-student ballet folklórico program.

Many students also come from very close-knit and extended families, and staff members have learned to build on those connections rather than trying to fight them.

Belia Ford, a student-program facilitator and attendance monitor, recalled cornering one girl who was starting to skip school regularly, only to find that she had become the primary caregiver for her younger brothers and sisters while her mother was in the hospital. The school identified volunteers to help her family with child care and allow the girl to do schoolwork at home.

“I could send her to court or something, but what good would that do?” Ms. Ford said. “It’s a good thing that she’s the kind of kid who cares about her family, and we need to find ways to help her and support her.”

Similarly, students who become pregnant—about eight to 12 a year—continue to attend school full time, with half their days in regular courses and half spent in parenting classes, as well as participating in a childcare cooperative with other teenage parents at the school. The program has reduced the number of students who drop out of school because they become parents—one of the top reasons young Latinas leave school.

**Healthy Start**

One of San Ysidro’s flagship programs evolved out of efforts to involve students in addressing health and social problems in the community: the medical pathway.

The lead instructor for the program and a former nurse, Sheila Krotz, said it developed out of conversations with a mobile health clinic that provides checkups on campus. Local doctors and parents complained about the lack of bilingual health workers in the mostly Spanish-speaking region and the paucity of health care in general. The nearest hospital is a 30-minute drive away, and many families do not have reliable transportation.

“This is a poor community; they need well-educated health-care professionals, so that’s the goal here,” Ms. Krotz said.

Throughout the year, students volunteer at both the local health clinic and a campus-based “teen clinic,” where students can come for confidential advice on health issues.

Each summer, students take an interim course in which they identify pressing community health issues with local doctors and plan potential solutions to tackle during the next school year. In 2012-13, when 1,000 new cases of HIV were diagnosed among local 14- to 21-year-olds, the students organized health fairs and lectures at local schools and community centers to promote AIDS testing and prevention. This year, after students found that dental problems were one of the top five causes of absenteeism among elementary students in the district, they went through a short course to conduct short dental assessments for students in the lower schools.

The medical pathway now draws 450 students a year for an intensive four-year science strand, including medical biology, biotechnology, medical chemistry, and honors anatomy, as well as phlebotomy and other medical assistant training electives. In 2013-14, the University of California, San Diego, adopted the program and now offers dual credit for several courses.

“In high-poverty areas, it’s very unusual for students to have four years of science, and I really wanted them to be competitive,” Ms. Krotz said. “Though it’s a college-prep program, we have a lot of poverty, and we need to be realistic that a lot of our students will not be able to go directly to college; they need to be able to work first. These [students] get a certificate and a lot of work experience, too.”

In the six years since the medical pathway has been offered, none of the participating students has dropped out of school, and Ms. Krotz said students who go on to college directly after graduation have so far been twice as likely to complete their first year, 30 percent versus 16 percent of peers throughout the district.

Jennifer Sanchez, who graduated from San Ysidro in 2012 and now attends San Diego State University, said completing medical-assistant training while still in high school gave her a leg up in college, both in knowledge and in cost-savings. But just as important, she said, “I think the program really helped me see that this is something I really wanted to do, because I got so many experiences,” from talking to fellow teenagers about pregnancy and disease prevention in the teen clinic to shadowing doctors at a local hospital.

“I see a lot of people come in. Sometimes, they don’t even know they qualify for health care, and I see patients walk out very grateful because they get help that they didn’t even know they could get,” Ms. Sanchez said. After graduation, she returned to work at the San Ysidro Health Clinic and plans to become a health-care worker in the community after college.

“I think people have begun to realize that school learning is about more than school,” said Mr. Blank, the community school researcher. For example, “investigating crappy food at bodegas and why there isn’t fresh food in some neighborhoods is legitimately connected to parts of the [Common Core State Standards], and it makes the common core come alive for many kids.”

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“I think the program really helped me see that this is something I really wanted to do, because I got so many experiences.”

JENNIFER SANCHEZ

Graduate, San Ysidro in 2012, attends San Diego State University
Study Finds Few Payoffs in Short-Term Career Certificates

By Caralee J. Adams

Careers-related certificates that students earn in less than a year at a community college are gaining popularity, but a new study finds they produce limited earnings gains.

Researchers discovered wide variations in wages, depending on whether students earned a short-term certificate, a long-term certificate, or an associate degree and what field they studied, according to the analysis, which looked at about 24,000 first-time community college students in Washington state from the 2001-02 to 2008-09 academic years.

Despite an increase of 151 percent in the number of short-term certificates from 2000 to 2010, the paper published last week in the journal *Economic Education and Policy Analysis* found “minimal to no positive effects” for those credentials, which make up 24 percent of sub-baccalaureate studies and are sometimes integrated into high school-based career technical education programs.

Students can earn short-term certificates in allied health, nursing, cosmetology, mechanics, welding, transportation, and other fields of study.

With more than one-third of students enrolled in college now attending two-year institutions, school counselors can use this information to help students decide on career pathways, said Madeline J. Trimble, the data analyst at the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University in New York and a co-author of the study.

“A lot of the time the K-12 world tells people to follow their dreams—and not that they shouldn’t follow their dreams and take what they are interested in—but that should be balanced,” Ms. Trimble said. “There are some very interesting programs that may not leave students in a position to earn a living wage after they graduate, and students should be aware of that.”

Wage Gains Quantified

The study in Washington state, based on college transcripts and unemployment-insurance records, found that compared with women who attended college but did not finish a degree, women who completed an associate degree had 6.3 percent higher wage returns, and female long-term credential-holders (those taking more than a year of study) had a 15 percent edge. Men earned only 2 percent more in wages with an associate degree over men leaving college with some credits.

Short-term certificates were not associated with wage gains or a greater likelihood of employment in comparison to just earning some community college credits. Where there are positive returns for short-term certificate holders, studies show the average increase in earnings is not much more than $300 per quarter, according to Ms. Trimble.

Much of the difference was linked to area of study. Students with associate degrees tend to focus on liberal arts, which may not translate into lucrative income by itself, but many such students aim to transfer to a four-year college when they’re done. Also, long-term certificates often are in high-return fields such as health care that drive up the average, the authors note.

Women’s wages increased by 38 percent with an associate degree in nursing and 29 percent for a long-term certificate in nursing, according to the study.

For short-term certificates, the one bright spot was for men who had a 22 percent wage increase after receiving a short-term certificate in protective services.

The new research is consistent with other studies in Kentucky, North Carolina, and Virginia that found only small economic returns from short-term programs. The 2010 report from Complete College America, a national nonprofit based in Indianapolis, called the rapid growth of those programs “troubling” and noted that long-term certificates were more valuable because of their greater academic rigor and their range of job-related skills.

Getting in the Door

“The Washington state study underscores the value of short-term certificates as a “stackable” credential that can lead to more training, and students should think of it as part of a broader educational program,” said Kate R. Blosveran, the associate executive director of the National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium, in Silver Spring, Md.

“It can be a foundation that gets you in the door, and it gives you something you can work toward,” Ms. Blosveran said of a short-term certificate. Alternatively, for instance, a welder already on the job can go back for a short-term program to specialize further.

Ms. Blosveran points out that this recent research does not compare the wage return to those with only a high school diploma, which could result in greater value for the certificate programs over no postsecondary education.

There can be benefits to short-term credentials for some students in some fields, said Mina Dadgar, a co-author of the paper and the research director at the Career Ladder Project, an Oakland, Calif.-based nonprofit that works with community colleges, high schools, and industries.

“For many who work full time, a short-term certificate can be a good steppingstone,” Ms. Dadgar said. “Make sure they are designed with intention and they are stackable, so credits can be applied to a long-term certificate or an associate degree.”

Kent A. Phillippe, the associate vice president of research and student services for the American Association of Community Colleges, in Washington, said the new study aligns with research showing the value of associate degrees and long-term certificates and variation by field.

“A lot of our colleges are looking at short-term certificates and saying, ‘This is not necessarily enough in and of themselves,’” Mr. Phillippe said. “To be of real value to the student, they need to put some of these together to continue their education toward a longer-term certificate or associate degree.”
The **CP core components**—Students develop personal qualities and professional skills, as well as intellectual habits required for lifelong learning. The CP core components give context to the DP courses and the career-related study and draw all aspects of the framework together.

The **personal and professional skills** course aims to develop responsibility, practical problem-solving, good intellectual habits, ethical understanding, perseverance, resilience, an appreciation of identity and perspective and an understanding of the complexity of the modern world. Emphasis is placed on the development of skills needed to successfully navigate higher education, the workplace and society.

**Service learning** is the practical application of knowledge and skills toward meeting an identified community need. Through service, students develop and apply personal and social skills in real-life situations involving decision-making, problem-solving, initiative, responsibility and accountability for their actions.

**Language development** ensures that all CP students have access and exposure to a second language. The opportunity to learn a second language is a central tenet of an IB education and increases students’ understanding of the wider world. Students are encouraged to begin or extend the study of an additional language that suits their needs, backgrounds and contexts. It develops students’ oral, visual and written linguistic and communicative abilities.

The **reflective project** is an in-depth body of work produced over an extended period and submitted toward the end of the programme. Through the reflective project, students identify, analyse, discuss and evaluate an ethical dilemma associated with an issue from their career-related studies. This work encourages students to engage in personal inquiry, intellectual discovery, creativity, action and reflection, and to develop strong thinking, research and communications skills.

**Career-related studies**—Students are provided with practical, real-world approaches to learning designed to prepare them for higher education, an internship or apprenticeship, or a position in a designated field of interest.

The career-related studies are offered by the school and should be aligned with student needs and progress toward further study or direct employment. Each school chooses the career-related studies most suited to local conditions and the needs of its students. The career-related studies must satisfy IB criteria for accreditation, assessment and quality assurance.

**Interested in learning more about the CP?**
Watch a video, download brochures and read more online at www.ibo.org/cp.
For schools interested in offering the Career-related Programme

Flexibility
A key feature of the CP is that it provides flexibility to accommodate local conditions. Schools can provide a highly respected IB education by creating their own distinctive versions of the CP, geared toward the needs and backgrounds of students while meeting local, regional or national education requirements, as well as addressing industry and government priorities.

Quality assurance
Any school, or group of schools, wishing to offer the CP or any other IB programme (i.e. the Primary Years Programme, the Middle Years Programme and the Diploma Programme) must first be authorized to do so by the IB.

The requirements are the same for all schools, and the authorization procedure is designed to ensure that schools are well-prepared to implement the IB programme(s) successfully. All IB World Schools are required to participate in an ongoing process of review and development, using the same programme standards and practices.

Services and support
As part of its ongoing commitment to the development of a highly-skilled global learning community, the IB provides a wide range of high-quality professional development opportunities to help new and experienced school leaders and educators understand, support and successfully deliver IB programmes.

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“The IB Career-related Programme is a successful and flexible programme of study that is designed to be both interesting and accessible to students, allowing them to develop and prepare skills and knowledge to take them forward in their future career paths. It has enabled students to have access to a broad and aspirational curriculum that gives them a number of pathways to follow upon completion.”

—Ms Sian Carr, Principal, Skinners’ Kent Academy, United Kingdom
By Heath E. Morrison

D o we want students to graduate ready for college or ready for careers? In the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, our answer is yes—because we see no difference between being ready for college and ready for a career. Instead, we believe we have an imperative to graduate all students with a skill set that prepares them for economic independence and their next step in life, wherever and however they choose to pursue it. Our experience has been that focusing students on goals, rather than segregating them by what those goals are, is the pathway to success.

Employers want high school graduates who can think mathematically, communicate, create, work in teams, and solve problems in an entrepreneurial environment. Colleges and universities continue to seek high school graduates who are academically prepared (in a range of subjects, including math) and can communicate, create, and think critically.

We believe there is no substantial difference here. The skills needed to succeed in the military, a trade school, or the workforce are the same skills needed to succeed at an institution of higher learning.

Every student in our North Carolina district is entitled to the same strong academic preparation throughout the continuum from prekindergarten through 12th grade. We know what elementary school students need to be ready for middle school. We know what middle school students need to be ready for high school. Why does education persist in the artificial divide between college and career for high school students? To best serve our students, we should observe a high academic standard for all high school graduates.

In the Charlotte-Mecklenburg district, we use a mix of academic programs and community partnerships to prepare our students. We use traditional measures, such as participation in Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses. We also offer dual-enrollment programs, such as middle and early colleges, which allow high school students to directly experience college classrooms and earn transferable college credits.

Our experience with career and technical education suggests all students benefit from rigorous preparation no matter what their postsecondary plans are. Higher graduation rates and high postsecondary-persistence rates have led us to expand our CTE academy program and our five small, career-focused high schools, which today enroll an average of 450 to 500 students each. These programs link high academic expectations and career-aspiration relevance. They develop 21st-century skills through strong co-curricular programs, such as career and technical student organizations.

In 2013, our 2,882 CTE students had a cohort graduation rate of 92.4 percent, well ahead of the district’s overall rate of 81 percent. The 460 seniors in our JROTC program, which prepares them for the military, had a 2013 graduation rate of 98.6 percent.

Our dual-enrollment programs for juniors and seniors have even higher graduation rates—so much so that we’re placing a big bet on them, expanding from one campus to five in three years. Cato Middle College, our first, allowed students to take a full load of college courses at Central Piedmont Community College while finishing high school—and Cato’s graduation rate for the past three years has been 100 percent. (The size of the graduating classes at Cato ranged from 55 students in 2010-11 to 99 graduates in 2012-13.)

We have expanded our collaboration with Central Piedmont, and placement of a school on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte is in the works.

Why are our CTE, JROTC, and middle-college programs so successful at preparing our students for a career, the military, or college? We believe the answer is engagement. The students in these programs, as well as those who participate in internships during school, have found something that engages them. Engaged students are successful.

The story of India Gregory, a Charlotte-Mecklenburg graduate who attended a small high school focused on science, technology, engineering, and math, is an instructive one.

India, now a sophomore at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University (also known as North Carolina A&T), was by her own account not very interested in school. Especially not in math—she barely passed state math assessments in elementary and middle school. But all that changed when she was introduced to work-based learning in high school, along with project-based study. She began building robots and Habitat for Humanity houses in high school, and she got hooked on math. She completed Calculus 2 and had internships at Siemens and Schweitzer Engineering Laboratories in her last two years of high school. Now, as a sophomore at North Carolina A&T, she has lined up her next step: She has accepted a job offer from Boeing, which will start when she finishes college.

There are many students like India—students who start out drifting and then find something in high school that becomes a passion strong enough to carry them to college and beyond. What can they tell us about shaping public education? We think they are telling us that engagement is the key: It’s about finding something students care about and following where it leads.

Academic choice, such as the small high school India Gregory attended, is one way to engage students. Real-life learning experiences, including the kind of internships India had, can also engage students.

In our district, we want every school to be a school of choice—a school for the future, not the school we fondly remember from the past. In this context, great teaching, great classes, and great opportunities can all come together.

Our focus is on customizing the learning experience for every student, using personalized plans of progress. We want students to become champions of their own learning. We are working directly with partners in the corporate world, such as Siemens, Schweitzer, and others, as well as with our counterparts in higher education, so that we can prepare our students for the future. The jobs they will hold do not exist yet, but if we can prepare them with the right mix of 21st-century skills, our students will be ready to succeed.

Whatever our students choose—whether it’s college, career, the military, or a mix of those things—the engagement has to come first. That’s why we’ve made increased academic choice and greater personalization the focus of our districtwide strategic plan. We want every student to be engaged, and we know that it’s not a one-size-fits-all proposition.

Our district is a rich, diverse mosaic of 144,000 students with 144,000 different dreams. We believe we can prepare all of them for life after high school, and that process begins with engaging them in learning.

Heath E. Morrison is the superintendent of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, the second-largest public school district in North Carolina.

This Commentary is part of a special section supported by a grant from the Lumina Foundation, at www.luminafoundation.org. Education Week retains sole editorial control over the content of this coverage.
Social-Emotional Learning Is More Than a 21st-Century Skill

By Peter DeWitt

I know. Its 2014, so we have long been into the 21st century. I could have used College and Career Readiness but it was too long for the title. The truth is, SEL is a skill for any century, and we need it for college, career, or more importantly, our personal lives.

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines social-emotional learning as “the processes through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.”

Wow! The big red “EASY” button won’t help us meet that goal.

As we all know, SEL can be a big challenge for any of us from time to time. It’s not easy to find empathy in others who may seem as though they are on the other end of the spectrum from our way of thinking. Adults who work in schools can often find empathy with children, but finding it in other adults sometimes requires us to step outside of our situations and reflect.

If you’ve spent any time in K-12 education, maintaining positive relationships isn’t easy either. Students, no matter their age, fight with each other. Best friends today can be worst enemies tomorrow...and then best friends again the next day. Adults, no matter the profession you find yourself in, have the same issues. Sometimes it feels as though if adults would focus on work rather than on what their colleagues aren’t doing, we would all get a lot more done in our professional lives.

Education Doesn’t Always Feel Good

At times I believe we live in a society that wants everyone to feel good. Too many adults try to prevent children from struggling even though we all know that there are great learning experiences in the struggle. Some grown-ups around us want an easy road to live on, but setting and achieving goals is downright difficult sometimes. It’s important to have lots of good days, but that is not when we need social-emotional learning the most.

In a recent blog for Finding Common Ground, frequent guest blogger Starr Sackstein wrote,

“When learning is still new and there aren’t negative consequences, like in early education, students don’t fear being wrong. For example, once I read to my son’s kindergarten class. After I did the reading, we went through a question and answer period. As soon as I started to ask the questions, all of the students raised their hands to answer. Without trepidation or fear of being wrong, their arms rocketed up as if by involuntary impulse and even when they answered incorrectly, they were undeterred. It was beautiful.”

Starr, a high school teacher, went on to write that she wished some of the high school seniors wouldn’t fear being wrong so much. How does that change? What makes young students raise their hands without fear of being wrong, get to fifth grade where they don’t want to raise their hand at all? Is it fear of looking foolish in front of peers? Is it a lack of engagement that prevented them from hearing the teacher’s question because they were daydreaming about something else? Is it because they simply don’t care about the subject matter? Or is it something lacking in their social-emotional learning?

Learning is not always easy, nor should it ever be. When students are given the autonomy to follow their own learning, or have a teacher that helps them negotiate their way through learning experiences, there will be times when it feels easy and other times when it feels like a great challenge. That’s a good thing. Learning should be a challenge. What should feel good is accomplishing the goal after the hard work is completed.

In the End

The buzz phrase of the century is that we have to prepare students to be college and career ready. I completely agree with that goal, and it’s a goal many of us thought we were working toward before the phrase became so popular. As grade level teachers our goal was to prepare them for the next grade, but we also were working toward helping students become independent, and that can be accomplished at a young age.

Out of the eleven years I taught, seven were at the first grade level. I strongly believe first grade is one of the hardest grades to teach. In most cases, it’s where students are learning to read, they can just about follow one (MAYBE 2) step directions, but at the beginning of the year they do not do anything without asking the teacher for input...several times a minute. I LOVED teaching first grade.

As the year went on the goal was to help them become independent. Modeling authentic independent learning in first grade is a year-long goal, but it can be accomplished. This does not mean “Death by Ditto” where children have to do worksheet after worksheet and remain silent. As the great Todd Whitaker says, “You never want to get on a plane where the pilot learned to fly by filling out worksheets.” It requires authentic learning, and lots of conversations. Have you ever talked with a first grader? It’s awesome.

The thing I found hard was finding a balance between giving students the answers when the going got too tough, and encouraging students to find the answers on their own was really hard. Working through that struggling period is a part of social-emotional learning.

At a young age, we have to teach children that not everything is going to feel good. None of us go unscathed in life. We all meet challenges and it’s what we do during those challenges that matters. School is more than just the Common Core, and it’s definitely more than high stakes testing. To truly prepare students to be college and career ready we need to continue to teach them the social-emotional skills they will need for college, career, and their personal lives.

CASEL offers the following SEL Competencies:

- Self-awareness: The ability to accurately recognize one’s emotions and thoughts and their influence on behavior. This includes
accurately assessing one's strengths and limitations and possessing a well-grounded sense of confidence and optimism.

- **Self-management:** The ability to regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations. This includes managing stress, controlling impulses, motivating oneself, and setting and working toward achieving personal and academic goals.

- **Social awareness:** The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical norms for behavior, and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.

- **Relationship skills:** The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. This includes communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking and offering help when needed.

- **Responsible decision making:** The ability to make constructive and respectful choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, social norms, the realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and the well-being of self and others.

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**COMMENTARY**

Making ‘Individualized’
Plans for a Postsecondary Future

By V. Scott Solberg & Curtis Richards

Every so often in education, new ideas are introduced and spread across states and districts as if they had a life of their own. The rise of individualized learning plans, or ILPs, may represent just such an idea. These personalized learning strategies strive to strengthen the transition between school and college or work while bolstering student engagement and family involvement in learning.

In 2005, 21 states encouraged the use of ILPs. Our research with the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth) indicates that today at least 37 states and the District of Columbia view ILPs as an anchor for their college- and career-readiness efforts. These plans, known by different names in each state, are typically required of all students, including students with disabilities and other special populations.

ILPs are different from, but closely related and complementary to, the transition plans that students receiving special education services are federally required to incorporate into their individualized education programs (IEPs) once they reach age 16.

When implemented as a whole-school program, ILPs are designed to engage all students in becoming career-ready by helping them define the secondary and postsecondary plans that will help them achieve their self-defined career goals.

In NCWD/Youth’s research, families reported that the process results in students’ taking ownership and becoming more engaged in their courses.

For students with disabilities, ILPs enable them to become more assertive in guiding their IEP meetings and ensuring that their transition activities help them develop the college-readiness and employability skills that are aligned to their career and life goals.

Based upon our several years of research in numerous states and schools, we define a high-quality ILP as:

- A document consisting of (a) course-taking and postsecondary plans aligned to career goals, and (b) documentation of the range of college- and career-readiness skills that the student has developed.

- A process that enhances the relevance of school and out-of-school learning opportunities, and provides students access to career-development opportunities that incorporate self-exploration, career exploration, and career-planning and management skill-building activities.

Students typically develop the plans beginning in 8th grade and regularly revise them with adult mentors (teachers, counselors, parents, and other family members) throughout high school to reflect their shifting interests, needs, and learning experiences inside and outside of school.

In interviews with NCWD/Youth, district officials have reported that ILPs show promise in increasing enrollments in Advanced Placement courses and applications to college, and in encouraging students with disabilities to obtain a standard high school diploma and consider college as an option.

ILPs work effectively, in part, because students, not adults, take charge of the process. One promising activity we found involved using ILPs to generate annual student-led parent-teacher conferences.

During the conference, students discuss their career and life goals in relation to the evidence they have generated from self-study and career-exploration activities. They also talk about the in- and out-of-school experiences that will keep them on pace to achieve those goals.

The process also inspires students to seek out relevant community service and
work-based learning experiences; helps them learn about job qualifications, industry standards, and postsecondary pathways; and enables them to describe how to gain access to resources to help with college planning, tuition assistance, and applications.

In focus-group interviews, families reported that the ILPs, especially when presented in the context of student-led parent-teacher conferences, increased positive regard for their schools and teachers. One family member said the schools “seem focused on launching adults” rather than only on increasing test scores.

While we have not yet released our final report, which was commissioned by the U.S. Department of Labor, we can share our findings on a number of exemplary ILP implementation strategies. These include:

- **Providing support and professional development for teachers, school counselors, and administrators on the implementation and long-term use of the plans.** This is critical to ensure that plans are implemented with fidelity and that everyone involved understands the process.

- **Establishing accountability systems to track program effectiveness.** Accountability systems provide data to verify the effectiveness of ILPs by tracking student outcomes, graduation rates, and postsecondary pursuits. They also provide data on implementation fidelity by showing how many schools are implementing the plans, how many students are participating in them, whether schools have implemented, ILPs effectively.

- **Establishing a cross-sector task force to guide ILP implementation.** In addition to state departments of education and labor, the state agencies involved can include those working in vocational rehabilitation, health and human services, and higher education. Education department representation should include school counseling, special education, and career and technical education. This allows groups to share expertise and leverage resources to support ILP implementation. It also increases access to work-based learning opportunities and preparation for postsecondary education.

  Connecticut, for example, has established a statewide collaboration that oversees professional development and supports in-school ILP-implementation teams.

- **Placing the responsibility for implementation not just on school counselors, but also on special education and general education teachers and administrators.** Because all students can use these plans, all teachers, administrators, and members of the school support staff should be trained in how to prepare to implement them. Rhode Island, for example, has established clear roles and responsibilities for students, educators, families, and district administrators in its ILP framework to ensure all departments collaborate throughout the process.

- **Ensuring long-term funding for online career-information systems that offer “ePortfolios.”** Many districts struggle to pay for access to online career-information systems. Some states, such as Kentucky and South Carolina, have provided funds for a single state system that allows for electronic portfolios that transfer with students who move between districts, data for the state to use when evaluating outcomes, and the ability to offer streamlined professional development. At a minimum, states need to strongly encourage that any system meet industry standards.

  Kentucky, for example, uses an accountability system that combines student data, program reviews, and educator data to determine the effectiveness of ILPs in schools, districts, and across the state.

  We also have learned that the best implementation comes when states have a comprehensive strategy and a multi-organization and multiyear master implementation plan. States also need to connect their online career-information systems and ePortfolio data into their own longitudinal-data systems, and pay special attention to strategies to communicate to a broad range of stakeholders what ILPs are and how they benefit students, schools, communities, and the workforce.

  If we are serious about ensuring college- and career-readiness opportunities for all students, we need to focus more effort on enabling students and their families to become more engaged in transition-readiness efforts well before they graduate. Properly designed and implemented, ILPs help students and their families strive to get the most out of their educational opportunities and successfully launch into a postsecondary training and education program and the world of work.

V. Scott Solberg is the associate dean for research and a professor at the Boston University School of Education. Curtis Richards is the director of the Center for Workforce Development at the Institute for Educational Leadership, in Washington. The writers lead the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth, a technical-assistance center aimed at improving transition-age youth outcomes, supported by the U.S. Department of Labor’s office of disability employment policy.
COMMENTARY

We Need to Expand Our View of Career Readiness

By Jean M. Evans Davila

The academic community has responded with vigor and good intentions to ensure our students will be college- and career-ready. In fact, 70 percent of our students enroll in colleges within two years of high school graduation, according to the Harvard Graduate School of Education’s “Pathways to Prosperity” research. In addition, many public school systems set district goals aimed at increasing college-enrollment figures.

But does the mind-set of college for all necessarily secure our students’ successful entry into a career? The unfortunate fact is that more than half of college graduates age 25 and under who have attained a bachelor’s degree are either jobless or underemployed in a position that requires no more than a high school diploma.

As the rhetoric surrounding the Common Core State Standards intensifies, our view of career readiness has become intertwined with the notion that all students should be encouraged to pursue a college degree or a high-tech career path, or else we as educators are shortchanging them. However, 27 percent of workers in the skilled labor force who hold postsecondary licenses or certificates earn more than college graduates with bachelor’s degrees, according to Georgetown University’s Center on Education and the Workforce.

It is time to broaden the lens through which we define career readiness to include opportunities to prepare students for careers in the skilled labor force. A vibrant, well-funded career and technical education, or CTE, program can be an outstanding asset within a comprehensive high school.

Unfortunately, my concern is that the viability of CTE programs could face an uncertain future as school budget pressures increase. A decade ago, the academic standards were challenged, and greater value was placed upon high-stakes, state-mandated assessments.

CTE's lack of prominence in the education reform conversation conveys a general belief that, if our aspirations for students were higher, we would not counsel our young adults to pursue a career in the skilled trades.

As education leaders, we have an obligation to reorient ourselves and our constituents to valuable learning opportunities offered through CTE. Many students flourish when challenged to integrate academic skills with real-world applications. The study of construction technology, culinary arts, automotive technology, and numerous other CTE offerings provides a rich context for the application of skills in literacy, numeracy, and the sciences. The project-based component of CTE is rich with examples of performance-based assessments, often more such examples than teachers in academic core subjects could ever hope to design in their content areas.

We must strengthen partnerships with local industry and corporate leaders, as well as regional trade associations, as an essential element of community outreach for any school district seeking to support high-quality CTE programs in comprehensive high schools. We must seek sponsorship from these groups to provide funding for the latest technology to equip the classroom and to support the curriculum with advanced training of faculty members and students.

We must promote the rigor that is inherent in well-designed CTE programs by meeting the 21st-century needs and industry standards of our local employers. Articulation agreements should be designed with local community colleges and other postsecondary institutions to enable students to earn advance credit toward credentials or certificates while still attending high school. In partnerships forged with care, career placement for students becomes the logical result.

Above all, we must nurture within our school communities the understanding that the skilled trades are an honorable, fulfilling, and lucrative postsecondary career option for many of our students. Then we must invest in revitalizing our CTE programs to provide these students with a meaningful exploration of the skills required to be career-ready to meet the demands of their chosen career pathways.

Jean M. Evans Davila is the district administrator for K-12 English/language arts and reading in the Norwalk, Conn., public schools. She has worked as a teacher and curriculum administrator in Connecticut for 22 years, including having served as the education consultant for English/language arts and reading in the Connecticut Technical High School System. She entered education after having worked for more than a decade as a licensed hairdresser, hairdressing school teacher, general manager, and corporate trainer in the hairdressing industry. She is a doctoral student in the instructional leadership program at Western Connecticut State University, in Danbury.
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