

LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

a briefing series for new england's educational leaders

I Want to Know More

A Leadership in Action Supplement

I Want to Know More is a selection of information and resources for education leaders, parents, and community members who want to learn more about the teaching and learning strategies taking place in today's high schools. This briefing describes some of the major strategies that are reinventing secondary education in the 21st century.

What Should a 21st Century High School Look Like?

In the whirlwind of the 20th century, the United States became a global economic powerhouse mainly because it had the world's most educated workforce. But America's competitive edge has since disappeared. How can we make sure our students and citizens are once again among the best educated in the world?

In the past, high school was seen as a building, a physical place where students went to learn from teachers while sitting in classrooms. In the 21st century, our conception of high school must be reinvented. We can no longer view high school as a place—we need to see it as an experience. What matters most is what students learn, how thoroughly they learn it, and how able they are to take those lessons and apply them in real-life situations. In the workplace, adults do not sit in rows of desks. They don't take multiple-choice tests. They don't do English for 45 minutes, then math, then social studies—all in isolation from one another. They work in teams. They multitask. And they take what they have learned and put it to use solving challenging problems, in diverse situations, on the fly. While school may never look exactly like a professional workplace, our schools can—and should—change the way they teach to reflect the real-life situations their students will soon face.

So what does this all mean?

In today's world, schools no longer need to be limited by building design, physical location, or traditional ways of teaching. The schools of the 21st century should be versatile community learning centers that make learning relevant to a student's interests and ambitions, that teach practical skills like group-collaboration and self-management, that blend secondary and postsecondary experiences, that provide engaging educational opportunities both inside and outside the classroom, and that offer a variety of student-designed pathways to graduation, while emphasizing—throughout the high school journey—critical thinking, problem solving, multicultural perspectives, global contexts, technological proficiency, and other real-world skills that will prepare every student for success in the colleges, careers, and communities of the future.

One common misperception is that new approaches to education necessarily entail an abandonment of "the basics"—that is, English, math, social studies, science. Not only should these subjects be taught as vigorously as they ever were, but it is now possible to teach them in ways that will more effectively engage, energize, and inspire today's student. Here is one concrete example: instead of learning about the history of American business from a textbook, students might research a consumer market that interests them, interview experts in the industry, create a detailed business plan based on their research, design a new product using sophisticated software applications, and pitch their idea to a panel of local business leaders, bankers, and investors. Which experience will better prepare our students for life?

Comparing Learning Experiences: Then and Now

The table below compares 20th century high school learning with new 21st century learning possibilities.

20 th Century Learning	21 st Century Learning
Sitting in rows of desks.	Investigating real-world problems as part of a community-centered learning project, as an extension of an internship, or by conducting scientific research on animals, ecosystems, and local natural habitats.
Reading from a textbook.	Conducting first-hand research in museums and historical archives, interviewing local experts and leaders, and using the Internet to access the world and communicate directly with students and experts from other areas of the country or the globe.
Listening to a teacher lecture.	Students co-designing their own courses and lessons in ways that tap into their individual interests, passions, and career aspirations—while also increasing their academic engagement, motivation, and life aspirations—and learning directly from community experts and mentors who bring specialized skills and help students see the connections between classroom learning and the real-world contexts and workplaces where they will be expected to apply what they have learned.
Using a pencil and paper.	Using digital technologies to make learning more relevant, engaging, and hands-on—for example, innovative software applications that teach students how to build websites, design graphic images, edit films and short documentaries, compose musical arrangements, create sophisticated multimedia presentations, or other practical skills that will have direct application in college, the modern workplace, and every area of adult life.
Staring at a blackboard.	Viewing an interactive whiteboard or multimedia presentation that utilizes Internet-based resources, videos, visual images, and cutting-edge learning programs to more effectively illustrate ideas and increase student understanding of complex, challenging concepts.
Focusing on one subject at a time.	Engaging in long-term, multidisciplinary projects that integrate several subjects (English, science, social studies, math); require critical thinking, teamwork, or the application of diverse skills; and that mirror the complexity of life, the expectations of collegiate learning, and the demands of 21 st century careers.
Viewing graduation as the end point of a high school education.	Seeing high school as one stage in a journey of lifelong learning that began in elementary school and will continue through college, postsecondary training, and the workplace, and that will enhance every dimension of adult life, from physical health and well-being to financial prosperity and professional fulfillment.

Something to Think About

Universal public education, which allowed everyone—even the poorest among us—to attend school and improve their quality of life, did not begin to take hold in America much before the turn of the 20th century. Think about it: our public education system, which we now take for granted, has only been around for roughly a hundred years. In 1910, less than 10% of Americans had a high school diploma. By 1935, that figure had grown to 40%—a pretty impressive change in only 25 years. But over the next 75 years, the United States high school graduation rate climbed to a mere 70%, which means that today—when a high school education is more vitally necessary than ever before—**nearly one in three American teenagers doesn't graduate from high school.** National surveys report that about 50% of high school dropouts leave, at least in part, because they are bored or don't feel that what they are learning is relevant to their lives and interests. When asked, however, only 20% of teachers and principals believe that boredom or disinterest are contributing factors. It's a striking difference, but it's only one of many significant disconnects between the perceptions of students and the perceptions of educators. If we are going to keep students in school and make sure they graduate prepared for life, we need to stop doing what we have always done and stop thinking the way we have always thought. And we can start by listening to students. More of the same will not get us the results we want—or what our students need and deserve.

Additional Reading

A High School for the 21st Century, a white paper by the McGraw-Hill Research Foundation, provides an accessible introduction to a few foundational ideas that are helping to improve the effectiveness and performance of today's schools.

Still Want to Know More?

If you are interested in the foundational research behind many of the ideas discussed in the Leadership in Action series, we recommend our [Global Best Practices Research Summary](#), which is available on the [New England Secondary School Consortium website](#) or the engaging report [Changing the Odds for Student Success: What Matters Most](#) by McREL and the Stupski Foundation.

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is a new england secondary school consortium resource

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