THE SCHOOL Administrator

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

ESSENTIAL INSIGHTS AND COMMENTARY FOR SCHOOL SYSTEM LEADERS

JUNE 2010

Readiness

The nation refocuses on college and career preparations

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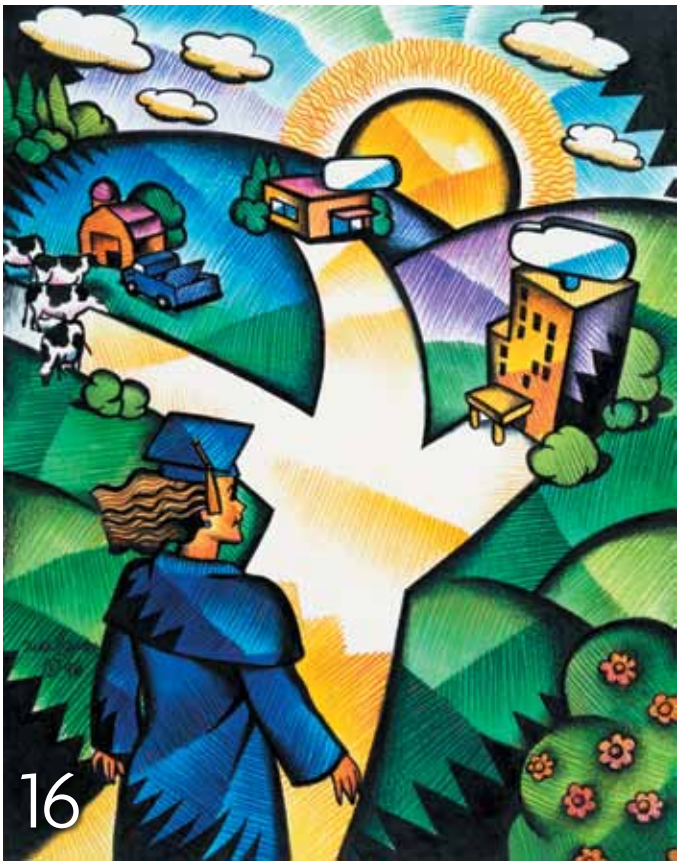
FEATURES



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College and Career READINESS

Co-founder of the Ready by 21 National Partnership asks: Even if students graduate, are they really equipped for the next stage?

BY KAREN J. PITTMAN

"I guess I need to learn what they're teaching me so I can get my grades up."

That's the response I received to a question I had posed to a panel of students at a dropout prevention summit in Richmond, Va., last fall. Four of the five students had just started their senior year of high school and shared their hopes for attending college or finding a job. The fifth panelist, a young man in his mid-20s, was enrolled in a GED program because he wanted to be a role model for his younger brother who was struggling and contemplating leaving school.

Several of the panelists had struggled with dropping out. All were now in school and had destinations in their lives. So I asked them, "As you think about where you want to be this time next year, what are some of the things you think you need to learn to be ready for college, work or life?"

The question was greeted with blank stares. Finally, the most vocal senior said, "I guess I need to learn what they're teaching me so I can get my grades up." Others chimed in, in agreement.

It's great that you're committed to keeping up in your classes," I said, "but are there skills you need to strengthen, other things you need to learn?"

"I'd like to be better at public speaking," the same senior offered after a long pause. "I'd like to manage my money better," said a second. "I'd like to do a real college visit," said a third.

We went on to discuss other topics, but when it was time to wrap up, I asked them why my earlier question stumped them. Their answer was painful.

"I don't think anyone has ever asked me that question before," answered the vocal one.

"Really," I said. "What about the rest of you?" All five shook their heads. "We just learn what they teach us."

Readiness Traits

Most likely, these young people will graduate this month. But I fear most will not be ready for the new roles they undertake next fall given they didn't even have words to describe skills they should have been honing throughout their middle and high school years. The seriousness of this readiness gap — the gap between being fully credentialed and fully prepared — is the reason why the Forum for Youth Investment started the Ready by 21 partnership and the reason why AASA joined (see sidebar on page 12).

Numerous organizations and associations interested in the K-12 system's end product — high school graduates — have offered up lists of the assets, skills and competencies needed beyond subject-matter knowledge and a high school diploma under a variety of labels (developmental

assets, social and emotional skills, character, 21st-century skills, new basic skills). What stands out are not the differences between these lists but the similarities.

The College Board has developed detailed standards that align with expectations for entrance into core content college-level courses in English language arts, science and mathematics. In addition to core subject content, however, their standards include practical skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, problem solving and technology literacy that the College Board believes are critical to success in any content area.

Two decades ago, the Search Institute brought adolescent development research into the school building with the release of its developmental assets survey, which demonstrated a powerful, straight-line relationship between the number of assets in young people's lives, their involvement in pro-social or antisocial behaviors, and their attitudes and performance in school.

The 40 developmental assets in the survey include 20 external assets that specify the types of supports, opportunities, and expectations and activities young people need to have in their lives and 20 internal assets that encompass four broad areas:

- **COMMITMENT TO LEARNING** (e.g., achievement motivation, school engagement, reading for pleasure);
- **POSITIVE VALUES** (e.g., responsibility, integrity, caring, honesty, equality);
- **SOCIAL COMPETENCIES** (e.g., planning and decision making, interpersonal competence, cultural competence, resistance skills); and
- **POSITIVE IDENTITY** (e.g., positive view of personal future, personal power, sense of purpose).

The Search Institute's surveys and tools are in wide use and have withstood the test of time. Subsets of the types of assets included in the Search Institute's list of 40 are promoted by research-based action collaboratives that have working definitions of character, social and emotional skills, entrepreneurial skills and civic competence. Most items in the more skill-focused competency lists map directly into the 40 assets.

Competencies Endorsed

In 1996, Richard Murnane and Frank Levy, the Harvard education/MIT economics duo, gained traction with education and business leaders with the introduction of what they termed "new basic skills." In their book *Teaching New Basic Skills*, Murnane and Levy identified three basic types of skills young people need to succeed in the workplace — hard skills (e.g., mathematics, problem solving, reading); soft skills (e.g., oral and written communications, teamwork); and information technology. In 2002, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills built on this momentum with the introduction of a fuller list of 21st-century skills that acknowledges the importance of the following:

- core subject matter content infused with 21st-century themes;
- learning and innovation skills;
- information, media and technology skills; and
- life and career skills.

The partnership's list is receiving endorsements from a growing number of business leaders, governors and chief state school officers. It blends a good number of the assets originally identified by the Search Institute with the "hard skills" for which educators are held accountable.

The list, however, is focused exclusively on competencies; yet competence, even when broadly defined to include a range of hard and soft skills, is not the only predictor of readiness. Competence is only one of the four internal asset

AASA's Role in Ready by 21

BY BRYAN JOFFE

The problem is the system, where we have silos and walls that go up ... The community is either going to succeed or fail, but it is going to be a community effort. Not the school's effort, not the [YMCA's] effort, not the United Way's effort, not the businesses' and corporations' [effort]. A joint effort that everybody agrees on is necessary for success.

— Dan Domenech, on Ready by 21

AASA works with the Forum for Youth Investment and the Ready by 21 National Partnership to answer the growing call for greater school-community collaboration to improve outcomes for children and youth.

The national movement to shift the focus from solely academic progress and achievement to measuring outcomes in academic, social, civic, emotional and physical well-being increases the importance of community partners and coalitions. AASA's campaign, "Educating the Total Child," advocates that schools need support from the entire community — from parents to teachers, from principals to central-office administrators, from superintendents to school board members and from business leaders to policymakers.

Ready by 21 and AASA share a holistic vision of supports for children to ensure increased engagement, development and success for youth and families.

AASA convenes a School System Leaders Ready by 21 Peer Work Group composed of like-minded superintendents from across the country committed to the mission of all youth ready for college, work and life. This work group helps provide direction for AASA to bring Ready by 21 ideas to fruition in local districts and communities. The work group is facilitated by Quintin Shepherd, superintendent in Amboy, Ill.

On the Ground

Louisville, Ky., is a Ready by 21 community, and Sheldon Berman, superintendent of the Jefferson County Public Schools, is a strong believer in the mission.

In recent remarks to the Learning First Alliance about Ready by 21, Berman described the logic and the need. "The community has programs that we do not really coordinate as well as we could, thereby not having the kind of efficiency of resources that we might otherwise have," he said. "I think by collaborating we actually can acquire other foundation and federal resources that may not otherwise be accessible. ... It is that kind of work that you can do collaboratively to both enhance efficiency and to acquire additional resources."

Ready by 21 works with communities to perform a capacity audit, which maps available services, resources and "moving trains" in the community. Ready by 21 works differently in each community by meeting leaders where they are and defining a discrete entry point for coordinating services and resources.

Berman said Louisville was just at the beginning phases of Ready by 21 in terms of doing a capacity audit. "It will essentially map our resources, map the services we provide, and give us a sense of where the gaps are and how we could better coordinate our efforts," he added. "It is a way to say, how do all these services coordinate with each other so that we can create that safety net? And not only the safety net, but a support structure that launches youth and young people into a positive future."

Collaboration Survey

Last December, AASA surveyed more than 1,000 superintendents nationwide on Ready by 21 concepts and local district/community collaborative efforts. Among the findings:

- 87 percent see a need for work similar to Ready by 21 in their district or community;
- The entities with whom superintendents are most likely to collaborate are social/community services, youth-serving agencies and higher education; and
- The top three reasons for collaborating are (1) opportunity to accomplish what can't be done alone, (2) access to additional resources and (3) shared vision and goals.

"What is really adding energy and enthusiasm to the effort now is that we are seeing that the current administration is basically putting forth the same goal," said AASA Executive Director Dan Domenech. "We see the Obama administration talking about college and career readiness and that by 2020 the United States will have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. What the Obama administration is pushing as its goal is basically Ready by 21's goal."

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categories identified by the Search Institute (commitment, values and personal identity being the others). These assets are harder to measure but no less important.

In 2008, the Gallup Organization introduced a new student poll that fills the void left by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills list. The survey, which was sponsored by Gallup, America's Promise and American Association for School Administrators, focuses on three specific assets measured by the Search Institute — hope (sense of future), school engagement and well-being. Why these assets?

▶ Hope predicts college GPA and retention, even after controlling for high school GPA and ACT/SAT scores.

▶ Student engagement in school consistently distinguishes high-performing and low-performing schools.

▶ Well-being drives academic and vocational success.

It would be wonderful to report that thought leaders have come together to create a master list, recognizing that young people need to develop both the capacity *and* the motivation to succeed.

The announcement of a broadly shared definition of readiness, however, would be of little value to educators if it was not accompanied by answers to several other questions: Do these skills and assets really matter and do they predict later success? Can we measure them in ways that have meaning for schools? Can schools contribute to their improvement given everything on their plates?

Luckily the answer to each question, gleaned across numerous studies using different definitions, is yes.

Relevancy of Readiness

We don't have to look far to understand the power that a vague idea like student readiness can have when coupled with definitions, data and improvement strategies. The concept of readiness has taken hold firmly in early childhood education, which represents the first length of pipe in the education pipeline extending through college. But what evidence do we have that readiness — defined as more than just high school graduation — matters? Lots.

No matter who is doing the measuring, the college- and work-readiness rates of high school seniors and high school graduates are appallingly low. A couple of facts:

ONLY THREE IN 10 SENIORS, AT BEST, ARE COLLEGE-READY. College readiness rates are rising slowly, but the problem is huge. Only 23 percent of high school graduates taking the ACT in 2009 scored as college-ready in all four core subjects. Earlier calculations by the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, using calculations of graduation rates, high school transcripts and National Assessment of Educational Progress reading scores, found one-third of seniors ready, with white students almost twice as likely as African-American and Hispanic students to be ready.

ONLY FOUR IN 10 HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES, AT BEST, ARE WORK-READY. In 2007, Corporate Voices for Working Families, the Conference Board and other national business organizations surveyed more than 400 employers across industries to document the skills they are seeking in entry-level workers and assess their satisfaction with high school graduates. Employers report that four in 10 high school graduates are grossly deficient in the skills listed above — all of which, notably, were important skills in the 20th century.

PHOTO BY SHANÉ GOODING/THE FORUM FOR YOUTH INVESTMENT

Karen Pittman started the Ready by 21 partnership as a strategy for using resources inside and outside schools to improve college and workplace readiness.

The results of this readiness gap are sobering:

▶ *Up to a fourth of all first-year students at four-year colleges do not return for their second year.* The dropout rates are particularly high for African-American, Hispanic and first-generation college students, according to a report by the Urban Institute and the Harvard Civil Rights Project. As many as 30 percent of students will take at least one remedial class during their college years, according to national studies.

▶ *Employers, while acknowledging the need for 21st-century skills, are not equipped to train in these deficiency areas.* According to a 2009 Corporate Voices for Working Families study, 40 percent of the business respondents that offer some workforce-readiness training have no on-the-job trainings to offer in these high-need areas.

▶ *Youth, especially low-income minorities, are having a hard time finding quality jobs during and after high school.* Teen employment is now the lowest it has been in more than half a century. Low-income, minority youth are least likely to find work, even with high school diplomas. And those jobs that are available are typically in lower-level service industries, often lacking benefits, training and opportunities for advancement, according to a study of teen joblessness by Northeastern University's Center for Labor Market Studies.

Measuring Readiness

Hundreds of school districts and communities across the country have used student surveys, such as the developmental assets survey, to create a baseline. They document the extent to which their students have the internal assets to succeed in school and life and whether schools and communities are providing all of the external supports they can.

These surveys usually reveal considerable gaps in students' internal and external assets. The average young person has only 18.6 of the 40 assets, while older youth and boys have lower numbers than younger youth and girls, according to the Search Institute.

The Gallup Student Poll zooms in on three assets that influence students' motivation and ability to build their skills. While more limited in its scope, the relative ease of generating this annual data at the school and district levels makes it a potentially powerful tool for schools and communities to use.

The communication power of this short survey as a catalyst for change seems apparent. Nationally, only one in four 5th through 12th graders is hopeful, engaged and thriving, and the results deteriorate by grade. Engagement in school drops from 70 percent in 5th grade to 35 percent in 10th grade. The percentages for 11th and 12th grades turn back up, but only because the most disengaged students have dropped out.

The New Technology 21st Century High School Model was developed in Napa, Calif., by several local businesspeople as a response to the challenge of graduating all students with 21st-century skills. New Tech High Schools use project-based learning and require their students to master eight learning outcomes: content standards, collaboration, critical thinking, oral communication, written communication, career preparation, citizenship and ethics, and technology literacy. The outcomes are made explicit to students and faculty and embedded in all projects and student assessments along with measures of student engagement, academic success and postsecondary success.

Teachable Skills

Students in the New Technology model schools have a common language about nonacademic competencies; they also understand how their teachers have incorporated time to work on these competencies into their schoolwork and receive regular reports on their progress.

In the report "Results That Matter," researchers funded by the program reported not only did all students graduate, but all felt well prepared in the eight outcome areas and all graduated in full compliance for entry into any University of California/California State University institution.

A recent study by the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools confirms that teaching 21st-century skills does not require high-tech schools. The study assessed the impact of classroom-based civic education on 9th graders' civic competencies. Two findings are worth noting:

▶ *Classroom education matters*. Ninth-grade students who had participated in formal classes scored higher on scales measuring teamwork, working with diverse peers, work attitudes and creativity than those who had no classroom instruction.

▶ *Instructional style matters*. Those whose classes included some level of interactive, discussion-based sessions scored higher than those whose classes were completely lecture-based.

I should note that the Partnership for 21st-Century Skills has come under criticism recently from education research heavyweights such as Diane Ravitch and others associated with Common Core, which is a 501(c)3 organization that promotes programs, policies and initiatives at the local, state and federal levels that provide students with challenging, rigorous instruction in the full range of liberal arts and sciences. The focus of the criticism, to be clear, is not on the importance of these skills, but on how the partnership is recommending they be taught in schools.

Common Core's argument in a nutshell is that these skills (a) cannot be taught in the absence of content, (b) do not require a complete retooling of the teaching force toward project-based learning and (c) are developed through practice, not just exposure.

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Whose Responsibility?

Schools clearly should do everything they can to promote these broad competencies. But educators and community leaders should emphasize that schools cannot do this alone. This is not just because schools are busy. This is because there are people, organizations and experiences outside of school that play equal and sometimes more powerful teaching roles whose contributions need to be acknowledged, aligned and supported.

AASA President Dan Domenech summed up this challenge well at the 2010 National Conference on Education, when he urged administrators to overcome their "edifice complex" to look for solutions outside the school walls. With these words, he brought school leaders the four-pronged challenge the Ready by 21 partnership makes to all school leaders: Build broader partnerships to support bigger goals that require better data and planning processes to implement the bolder strategies needed to fix the leaks in the education pipeline. Then, wrap the pipes with layers of community insulation so students not only come out the other end, they come out ready. ■

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