



**International Center for  
Leadership in Education**

RIGOROUS LEARNING FOR ALL STUDENTS

## **INNOVATING FOR IMPACT**

WHITEPAPER SERIES

# Preparing Our Students for Their Futures: WHAT Needs to Change for Innovative Instruction

PAPER THREE

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This paper is the third in our five-part series on effective innovation, the kind of innovation that moves everyone in education—from administrators to students to the community—out of the twentieth-century paradigm of a focus on teaching to a focus on learning. Innovation that empowers every last person in the system. Innovation that helps us break free from the regulatory rigidity that has been holding us back from real change for decades.

In the first installment of this series, [\*Innovation: The Key to the Nation's Most Rapidly Improving Schools\*](#), I outlined nine interrelated areas that must evolve to make room for future-focused innovation in our districts and schools:



In the second installment of this series, Preparing [\*Our Students for Their Futures: WHY Innovative Practices are Needed\*](#), I explained why the need to innovate in our schools is so urgent. Technology is transforming our world and changing the career landscape. The businesses that are successful in the twenty-first century are those that let technology transform them. The people who thrive in these companies

are lifelong learners—adaptable and capable of developing new skills when technology changes their job description. Similarly, schools must let technology transform them, so that they can mirror the environments that students will encounter as they set out to build self-sufficient, successful careers.

One of the joys of my work is that for decades, I've had the opportunity to travel all over the country and connect with educators from all different kinds of districts. In recent years, the conversation I've heard most frequently at every school is about standards. Similar to my view from the plane as I've flown from state to state, observing this debate within varying environments has given me a bird's eye view of how standards and content are discussed and approached at large.

The great standards debate started around 2006. The introduction of Common Core State Standards (CCSS) ramped up the dialogue. Would your state participate? Were these standards right for your students? Or should they actually be learning something else?

Eventually, states came down on one side of the debate. Some opted into CCSS, others opted out. As the dust finally began to settle on the great standards debate, I noticed something interesting. CCSS-participating or not, most every public school in the country I observed ended up looking nearly identical

in terms of what was taught and how it was taught.

We spent years debating what students need to learn. Some of us took one path while others took another. But more or less, we all ended up in the same place, which was not too dissimilar from where we were before.

Think about why this may have been the case. It's not that we had the wrong debate; what we teach matters. It's that we had the debate from the old mindset—and a fixed one at that. What I have been able to deduce from my bird's eye view is that when the debate remains stuck on what we teach, nothing can change. Staying stuck on what we teach will keep our instruction and everything that goes into it stuck in the twentieth century. It's where our students' knowledge and skills will get stuck as well.

If we're going to innovate instruction for twenty-first-century relevance, we have to innovate everything that goes into the development and delivery of twenty-first-century instruction. As noted in this series' first paper, goals must expand to make room for impactful innovation. The goal cannot be merely to advance our students to the next grade; it must be to guide students toward success in the future that awaits them upon graduation—which is not the future that awaited us when we graduated.

Mired in the minutiae of standards, we missed the big picture. Had we taken the bird's eye view, had we stepped back to look at the changing world around us and consider what our students will need to know how to do for

future success, we would have seen the forest for the trees. In other words, had we shifted away from just what students need to know ([Quads A/C](#)) and toward what they need to know how to do with that knowledge ([Quads B/D](#)), we would be far closer to future-focused instruction.

Our schools must mirror the ever-changing world we live in so that they can prepare our students to navigate continuous change. They must reflect our technology-driven world so they are relevant and engaging to today's digital native students. This means that instruction can no longer emphasize only the what. Future-focused instruction must also inform the practices and strategies that will most optimally connect with the twenty-first-century learner and how that instruction gets organized.

Consider these three components the steps that must be covered for twenty-first century instruction:

The businesses that are successful in the twenty-first century are those that let technology transform them. The people who thrive in these companies are lifelong learners—adaptable and capable of developing new skills when technology changes their job description. Similarly, schools must let technology transform them, so that they can mirror the environments that students will encounter as they set out to build self-sufficient, successful careers.

## Approaches to Instruction



Figure 1

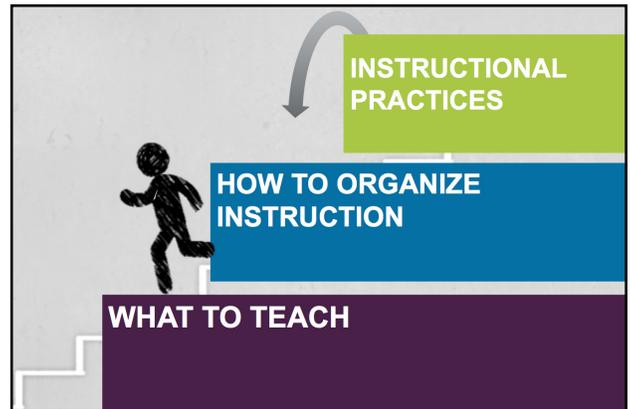


Figure 2

1. **What to teach: standards and content knowledge and skills.** To meet the demands of twenty-first century education, when thinking through what we teach (Quads A/C), we must also think through how students can apply relevant knowledge and skills to real-world scenarios (Quads B/D).
2. **How to organize instruction: looping, interdisciplinary instruction, academies, project- or problem-based instructional models, career pathways, and other interdisciplinary approaches.** Before choosing the model of instruction, a school or district must have a culture that supports change and then a future-focused instructional strategy.
3. **Instructional practices: The strategies and tactics that will most resonate with, engage, and feel relevant to the twenty-first-century learner.**

Now consider *the order* in how we approach instruction, as noted in the above figures. Consider how each step provides a different view, particularly of the end goal: future-focused instruction that prepares students for success in life and careers.

From this perspective, in *Figure 1* above, it becomes immediately clear that too much focus on what we teach is far too myopic. If our schools are to mirror our twenty-first-century world, then we can see that environment is created through instructional practices and how that instruction is organized and delivered. What we teach does not create environment. Creating a specific environment must come first.

The view from that third step is the one that offers the bird's eye view of what a student needs in school today to be successful tomorrow and how to create an environment

for those needs. It's from this step that our goals are future focused, our conversations are future focused, and our decisions can be future focused. It's from this step that we grow our mindsets to be ripe for innovative thinking.

It's from the first step that our mindsets stay stuck in last century, in the old ways of teaching.

The nation's most rapidly improving schools left the great standards debate behind years ago. They knew it was too small in relevance to warrant that much time. They recognized that it ignored the bigger, twenty-first-century picture. Instead, they climbed to the top step, took in the view, and then tracked backward (*Figure 2*).

From the top step of *Figure 2*, these schools ask themselves what kinds of instructional practices are most likely to connect with today's learners. They consider which tools, strategies, and tactics are needed to mirror an always-shifting technology-driven working world that awaits graduates. Only then do they move onto how to organize instruction. After all, what good is an organizational structure if it cannot accommodate their future-focused instructional practices?

Once these debates have been had and decisions have been made, they move onto discussing what to teach. I've observed that in the nation's most rapidly improving schools, this is the topic that gets the least amount of

airtime. These educators know that coaching students through how to apply what they know with dexterity and under unpredictable circumstances is far more important than the facts and figures. To these educators, the what is important, but far less important than the instructional decisions that will allow their students to become sophisticated lifelong learners, capable of adapting and thriving in an ever-evolving technological world.

How do these schools do this? Stay tuned for the next and final two installments in our innovating for impact series.

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