

## Graduation Must Depend on Learning, Not Time

The overdue case for competency-based education

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In schools across our country, time is the constant, and the quality of learning is the variable. To get a high school diploma, students must attend school for roughly six hours, 180 days of the year, for 12 to 13 years. Some students graduate ready for the Ivy League, and others are barely able to read.

We are an alliance of urban superintendents with a combined enrollment of more than 1 million students. We know there needs to be a dramatic change to public education.

What if we flipped the current model of public education on its head and made the standard of learning the constant and time the variable? What if the goal of education was to get all children truly "life ready" no matter what the obstacle?

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Reimagining our education system might seem daunting, but, in February 2020, no one would have imagined that we could completely overhaul our schools to go entirely virtual in a matter of weeks. But we did. We did it because we had to. And it is now just as important to leave the prepandemic “normal” behind. The students we serve cannot afford to have an empty-promise diploma. All students deserve to graduate with a credential that has real value in the changing economy, no matter their plans after high school.

We are calling for a competency-based system of education that looks nothing like our current model. It would be centered on ensuring all students meet a life-ready standard. The current education system is designed to give a fraction of our children the highest quality education. It is designed for inequity. The pandemic showed us just how much.

Achieving real equity in education does not mean all kids learn the same things at the same pace, but, at a minimum, equity dictates all kids get the support they need to be educated for success in life after high school. We need to redesign our schools and systems to make that happen.

A good place to start is with local conversations about what children should know and be able to do before they graduate. These conversations could establish shared goals and an understanding of the kind of change our schools must undertake. While challenging, change is possible with the right engagement—as we’re seeing in our own systems.



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In districts both large and small, a life-ready standard would mean students are competent in reading and math but also able to demonstrate critical-thinking skills, mental and physical health, creativity, collaboration, leadership, and effective communication. It would mean students have engaged with a rich curriculum that asked them to think deeply, make connections across disciplines, where assessments encourage them to explain their reasoning and show what they know.

Rather than courses being a semester or a year long, courses would be as long as necessary for each student to gain the competency needed to take the next course in the sequence. That will require rethinking the master schedule, how we group students, and how we assign teachers.

Instead of all students taking an algebra course in the same grade but at different levels of rigor, all students would learn the same algebra, but some might do so earlier than others. Because every student would need to reach proficiency in reading and math to graduate, we would no longer tolerate students falling multiple grades behind. We would intervene early and often, so interventions would be common and lose their stigma.

There would be no need for “honors” courses; some students would just progress at a faster rate than others. Students who need more time to reach the life-ready standard would receive more resources, more focused



academic interventions, or increased mental- and physical-health services.

Some students would reach the life-ready standard years before the 12th grade. Those students could earn college credits, associate degrees, or industry-recognized certificates, or they could participate in meaningful job-shadowing opportunities before they graduated. Such a system would breed both excellence and equity.

To support this new system, the work of teachers would be transformed for the better. Educators would get more time in their workday to collaborate with their colleagues, work individually with struggling students, and engage with families. Here again, the constraints of a “normal” school schedule can be stifling. We will need to provide teachers with time *away* from formal teaching to accomplish this. We will need to also rethink how we deploy our talented educators.

Rather than being assigned to honors classrooms, our best teachers would work with students furthest behind. In this reimagined public school system, teachers would be treated like the professionals that they are, with greater autonomy and more specialized professional support—a powerful combination for improving not just teaching and learning but also addressing COVID-19-induced teacher shortages.

This is not a leap into the great abyss. A report from the Council of the Great City Schools in June, “Mirrors or Windows: How Well Do Large City Public Schools Overcome the Effects of Poverty and Other Barriers?,” shows that certain districts are taking significant strides in making their schools more equitable. But it is challenging work made more complex by the pandemic.

As superintendents, we are facing unprecedented challenges from the pandemic, as are the educators and families who make up our school communities. We have been focused on the foundational challenges of opening and operating schools safely and providing quality learning despite difficult circumstances. At the same time, we have an enormous amount of new resources from the federal government and an openness to new approaches to education from our families.

We cannot, however, simply tinker within the current broken system. We need to completely reimagine what is possible in education by designing and building a system that is centered on the needs of students. The influx of federal education funding gives us just three school years and three summers to thoughtfully do it. If we simply reinvest the federal stimulus windfall in the current system, we will produce nothing more than inequity that is more expensive and an educational divide that is deeper. We need to redesign our education system for the 21st century and beyond and leave behind the outdated 20th-century system we currently have.

Let’s make time the variable and learning the constant. And let’s ensure that every one of our students graduates from high school truly life-ready.

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