

# IMPROVING ADOLESCENT LEARNING:

## *An Action Agenda*

*At a recent national forum at the Ford Foundation in New York, 140 education and youth development professionals discussed how to better support adolescent learning. Drawing on the discussion and the latest research in neuroscience, psychology and cognitive learning science, TASC presents an action agenda that can be tailored to circumstances in your own city and state.*

### INTRODUCTION

Every September, thousands of American children enter kindergarten, perhaps anxiously, but still eager and confident about learning. But for too many middle and high school students, the start of the school stirs different emotions. Much of that early optimism about their potential and the value of schoolwork has dimmed.

To rethink the education of adolescents, TASC recently held a national forum at the Ford Foundation in New York that drew 140 educators, researchers, policymakers, non-profit and foundation leaders, and youth advocates. Experts on adolescent development and learning shared the latest research in neuroscience,

psychology and cognitive learning science while participants discussed how that research might be put into practice on a large scale.

The growing body of research on adolescent development has demonstrated that young people learn best when they study only a few topics in-depth, when their learning involves direct experience and active participation, and when the purpose of each activity is clear.<sup>1</sup>

Research also shows that declines in academic motivation are not inevitable, but rather a mismatch between adolescent development and classroom practice. As young people

become ready to take more control of their learning, instruction often becomes increasingly restrictive and teacher-driven, with more whole-class activities and fewer opportunities for small group or independent work.<sup>2</sup> Think of the "learning centers" with hands-on activities found in elementary schools and the rows of desks and passive listening more prevalent in the 6th to 12th grades.

Adults often interpret students' lack of effort as a sign that they don't care about their learning. But research finds that there are a complex mix of beliefs and thought processes associated with student disengagement, and educators can address and alter these mindsets with changes in their own practices.

This document draws on conversations from forum participants and represents the views of professionals who advocate for a variety of models for improved schooling. We hope that this agenda serves as a call to action that unites these separate advocacy efforts.

Below we've described three ideas to improve adolescent learning, each with practical action steps for significant impact in the near term. We recognize that these ideas will be realized in different ways in different cities and tailored to each location's specific needs and resources.

### **1. Guide educators and their community partners to redesign school practice so that it's consistent with research on adolescent learning.**

Teaching students how to learn is as important as teaching them what to learn. For instance, youth who believe that intelligence is fixed, rather than something that grows with effort, are much more likely to abandon a difficult task. Some may even fear that having to work hard means that they aren't smart. But attributing academic success to hard work rather than innate intelligence has a

motivating effect, as does praising effort rather than achievement. In one study, 7th-graders who were taught that the brain is like a muscle that grows with use outperformed a control group in learning math skills. Having learning strategies to tackle difficult work also boosts motivation, research finds.<sup>3</sup>

In one New York City middle school, the faculty decided to foster better learning habits in its students by focusing on a new behavior every six weeks, such as persistence, good organization, engagement, communication and self-regulation. Teachers discussed the skills, recognized students who exhibited them, and at the end of each six weeks, awarded a student who had best demonstrated the new habit.

School discipline policies also affect students' connection to school and learning. According to the National Association of School Psychologists and others, discipline policies that focus primarily on harsh punishment—such as out-of-school suspension and expulsion—are ineffective, bar participation in learning activities, foster a negative school climate and can further alienate troubled young people from school. Harsh discipline policies disproportionately affect African American students, causing many to miss valuable school time. In one recent national study of 9,000 middle school students, African American boys were 10 times more likely to be suspended than white boys, and African American girls four times more likely to be suspended than white girls.<sup>4</sup> The organization advises that schools would see more improvement in student behavior if they taught kids how to manage emotions and conflicts.<sup>5</sup>

Rethinking discipline can change lives. When Baltimore City Public Schools revised its school discipline policy and reduced out-of-school suspensions by 35%, the percentage of black men dropping out of school decreased by 58%.<sup>6</sup>

## ACTION STEPS

**Disseminate the research.** Familiarizing principals with the research can be accomplished through existing channels for professional development including district-led forums and events organized by foundations, non-profits and principal unions, educational leadership magazines, principal institutes and conferences led by professional associations such as the Association for Middle Level Education, National Association for Secondary School Principals, and the ASCD. Similar training needs to be available for teachers, school counselors and community educators.

Training should be led by both the researchers, whether their specialty is psychology, neuroscience, education or medicine, and by those who have successfully implemented teaching strategies consistent with the research, including principals, teachers and youth development workers.

Longer term, the coursework in adolescent development and learning required in each state for administrative and teacher certification needs to be carefully examined. Where the requirement is weak, or missing altogether, advocates must work to strengthen it so that educators receive a better grounding in the research from the start of their careers.

**Promote explicit instruction to develop social and emotional skills.** Schools can be encouraged to identify and adopt programs that help them explicitly teach social and emotional skills. However, they should be guided to select from well-tested programs with a proven track record for improving student well-being and behavior.<sup>7</sup>

After Cypress Hills Community School P.S. 89 in New York City adopted The 4Rs Program, which integrates language arts with the teaching of social and emotional skills such as managing

feelings, resolving conflicts, and cooperation, the school made significant gains on a district administered school climate survey. Teachers, parents and students reported a greater sense of safety, improved communication and higher academic expectations.

**Guide changes in school behavioral policies.** Schools should be encouraged to replace punitive discipline policies with strategies such as restorative justice and peer-mediated conflict resolution, which help adolescents learn to reflect and self-regulate. Revising school policies to be consistent with the research will require planning time at each school site and possibly guidance from the district or an outside provider.

School teams need planning time to visit school-level policies that affect instruction. For example, students might help shape the curriculum or discipline policy. At one Chicago K-12 school, students helped interview and select the principal.

## 2. Build school, district and city structures that support experiential learning and enrichment for every child.

Adolescence is a time when young people develop advanced reasoning, which allows them to grasp abstract concepts, analyze complex systems and monitor their own learning. At the same time, they are becoming increasingly interested in how the adult world functions and their place in society.<sup>8</sup>

Yet education is rarely structured to allow young people to develop all of their emerging powers of reasoning or to use those powers to explore the adult world. Well-structured enrichment activities that allow students to pursue their own interests and engage in meaningful, long-term projects with peers build these advanced reasoning, executive functioning and interpersonal skills. Service learning

and internships can be especially valuable. Immersing themselves in the workplace not only strengthens these skills but builds vocabulary and background knowledge that bolsters academic learning. At the same time, the experience can increase interest in schoolwork by clarifying how academic skills are applied in real life.

Many schools can and do offer experiential learning and enrichment through elective courses, internship and community service requirements, after-school programs or even club periods during or after the school day that allow young people to pursue their particular interests. In New York City, for instance, district credit policy allowed students at participating high schools to earn credits for an apprenticeship at the New York Hall of Science. Students design their own hands-on science lessons that they then lead with younger students.

In many urban schools these programs—whether sports, chess, videography, service learning, science clubs, debate or salsa—are provided at least in part by outside organizations. Some high schools organize internships for interested students with business or non-profit partners.

But these opportunities fall short of providing what every young person needs. First, classroom electives seldom immerse youth in the workplace or community, allowing them to carry out challenging, real-life projects. Internships are rarely available to every teen, and clubs tend to attract students who are already academically successful and engaged with school. Conversely, learning opportunities by community partners are often seen as separate from school and formal learning. Not all schools are structured so that adults can ensure that every student participates in an activity that is meaningful to them, promotes their personal and intellectual development, and is perhaps connected to future goals.

## ACTION STEPS

Making enrichment and experiential learning available to every child will demand a dramatic expansion and deepening of partnerships between schools and outside partners.

**Create structures for city-wide collaboration.** Managing a city-wide youth development movement presents many challenges. One is coordinating discussions by coalitions with overlapping agendas.

New York, for example, has a multitude of organizations focused on adolescent learning, including a Community School Advisory Group, a Children's Cabinet for city agencies, and a middle school task force, among many others. To avoid confusion, as well as exhaustion among those who belong to multiple coalitions, city leadership should consider guiding them to clarify the mission of each and divvy up responsibilities to avoid overlap.

To facilitate communication among them, coalitions might also select trusted members to act as liaisons and report the results online of each meeting. Liaisons could also help build relationships between coalitions with different agendas, such as city agencies and parent groups.

**Align funding opportunities.** State and local funders that support education and youth development should arrive at common reporting requirements and start dates for grants. That would make it easier for schools to combine funding streams to support programs that are large enough to require multiple grants. It would also allow for comparisons between the impact of different programs and spur further conversation about best practices and the most effective use of funds.

**Promote city-wide collaboration.** Mayors can encourage collaboration among city agencies and youth-serving organizations to

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ensure that young people in all parts of the city and from all racial and ethnic groups have access to high-quality out-of-school time programming that is connected to school. Publicly extolling the benefits of school and community partnership and visiting schools with strong partnerships can serve to draw attention to them and their impact on students.

An "all-hands-on-deck" city-wide youth development initiative would generate excitement and create a motivating force for change. A sense of common purpose can spark new innovation and collaboration among providers. It can promote an interest in sharing expertise and pooling resources and spur the creation of higher-quality programs.

Coordination would also help organizations share best practices and common goals. Boston accomplished this with a common set of youth development goals known as the ACT (Achieve-Connect-Thrive) framework. One project organized around this framework is an annual summer science program which now partners 30 youth-serving organizations with teachers and students at 57 sites. Guided by the Outward Bound Expeditionary Learning Center, community partners and teachers collaborate on lessons that have kids plan and carry out their own outdoor science investigations. Kids learn about science, and youth workers about standards-based instruction, while teachers develop strategies

for engaging students and building critical thinking that they can carry over into the school year.

**Reorganize district-level responsibilities.**

Districts must become better organized to support school partnerships. One important step would be designating school-community partnerships as a core responsibility of the district's instructional leadership. Typically districts create an office for external partnerships that is separate from the office leading curriculum and instruction. But linking those two responsibilities could help facilitate collaboration between educators and community partners to deepen classroom learning. Leaders from different districts also need opportunities to share the benefits of partnerships and how they structure them.

First, teachers will more readily accept outside organizations as partners if the instructional leadership can articulate their vital role in adolescent learning. Next, teachers need a forum to hear from outside organizations about what they have to offer students in the way of skills, knowledge and personal growth. All could benefit from guidance in figuring out specifically how classroom learning might be extended through out-of-school experiences. Once partnerships are established, teachers and providers would benefit from coaching on how to best coordinate their lesson plans and projects.

Administrators will also need district guidance to select worthwhile partnerships. For instance, school administrators need to know how to determine whether a potential partner has compatible goals and priorities. Schools and partners may need some direction on how to lay the foundation for a healthy working relationship with clearly articulated rules and responsibilities, a roadmap for reaching mutual goals and a plan for on-going communication.

When the New York City Department of Education and Department of Youth and Community Development launched after school programs at 271 middle schools in September, it provided clear guidelines for schools partnering with outside providers. For instance, providers were required to work with school principals on aligning learning in the afterschool program with the school day and on creating a structure for on-going communication. Schools were also required to make a special effort to recruit at-risk students.

To support schools in funding extended-day programs, district leaders will need to educate each other as well as school and community leaders on potential funding sources. In many cases, it is important to clarify use of funds. For instance, budget compliance officers are sometimes unaware that Title I and Title III dollars can be used to pay for outside organizations to offer after-school enrichment.

**Rethink credit policy.** Credit is traditionally awarded for completing "seat time" in a classroom. But awarding credit in new ways, such as for competence demonstrated through a portfolio of work, would significantly increase opportunities for experiential learning. High school students might be permitted to earn credits through off-campus internships, supervised research or civic engagement projects, for example. Credit might also be awarded for courses pursued in non-traditional

settings such as a botanical garden, museum or theater companies. Innovative school models that make use of flexibility in granting credit should be adapted in more schools.

In New York City, students can earn elective high school credit through an apprenticeship with non-profits. At Studio in a School, students not only develop their own skills at painting, sketching, print-making and sculpture but learn, through lessons on child development and arts instruction, to teach art to K-5 students. At the end, they practice teaching art in after-school programs using lesson plans that they've developed themselves. Students create portfolios of their artwork and sample lesson plans.

**Allow flexibility in school schedules.** The length of a school day may be governed by district, city and state regulations as well as by union contract. But ensuring that every student participates in experiential learning and enrichment may require introducing more flexibility into requirements. A longer school day could allow outside providers, such as an artist-in-residence or scientist, to work with groups of students at different times during regular school hours. Teacher start times might be staggered to accommodate the longer schedule.

**Advocate for a later school start.** A growing body of research confirms that biological changes during adolescence naturally incline teens to fall asleep later and wake later than at any other point during their lives. Later school start times, especially for high school, support their natural sleep patterns, resulting in less sleep deprivation, fewer missed classes, better school performance, fewer car accidents and lower rates of depression. The American Academy of Pediatrics recently released a paper summarizing the research and urging school districts to delay start times for middle and high school students until at least 8:30 a.m.<sup>9</sup>

### **Engage parents, staff and students.**

Operating on a non-traditional schedule will require buy-in and input at all stages from all constituencies—students, teachers, parents and other adults, including custodians and bus drivers. Forums held at each school would allow all interested participants input on the school schedule. Parents, students and teachers should play an active role in designing the opportunities for experiential learning and enrichment. Schools should make sure to recruit a diverse group of parents to participate in the redesign, and not just the core group of parents who are the most active.

### **3. Create effective data systems to measure student learning and share them with school and district partners.**

All youth-serving agencies need good data to figure out how to best meet student needs and to monitor the success of their strategies. Schools and districts are often unwilling to share student data because of privacy concerns. However, the federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) is more flexible about data sharing than many schools and districts realize. Schools are in fact permitted to share individual student data with contracted outside organizations that support the academic progress of their students and also meet some additional requirements, such as parent consent.

The data currently collected on students, however, is inadequate to ensure that all of their most vital learning needs are addressed. Social and emotional competencies can better predict future success than tests scores, yet information about students' ability to self-regulate, solve conflicts and work in teams, for example, is rarely collected and systematically analyzed. Neither is participation in the full range of out-of-school time activities.

## **ACTION STEPS**

**Collaborate on new data-sharing policies.** Districts need to work with contracted youth-serving agencies to discuss the kinds of student data that could help drive quality, such as daily attendance, standardized test score data and interim assessment results, which can provide real-time feedback on student progress. Community partners should be ready to articulate which data they need and why, and how they will use it. To protect student privacy, safe data-sharing policies need to be in place. Community organizations will also need to share data on students with schools.

**Measure social and emotional learning.** Accurately measuring social and emotional skills is a challenge that researchers have begun to take on. The University of Chicago's Consortium on Chicago School Research is developing a way to measure "student agency," which includes mindsets (belief in one's academic potential) and learning strategies, such as goal-setting and study skills, that support academic motivation. Another example is The Holistic Student Assessment by PEAR (Program in Education, Afterschool & Resiliency) based at Harvard Medical School.

**Share student data among city agencies.** City agencies responsible for children's welfare, such as the school district, child and family welfare agency, offices that manage foster care and homeless services, and the office of juvenile justice and health agencies, also need to share data on students. Currently a school might not know that a student was arrested or is homeless, and therefore misses an opportunity to provide appropriate support services.

**Track out-of-school enrichment.** A comprehensive data system at a district, city, county, or state level could help track the kind

of out-of-school experiences that students are engaged in and identify gaps in service for certain neighborhoods, ages, genders or racial/ethnic groups. It would also help home in on the skills that children are developing or lagging behind on and what additional services are needed.

## LOOKING AHEAD

We hope that this action agenda provides a useful framework for building new coalitions among those who have not previously aligned themselves, and for beginning to think about how to tackle barriers to adolescent learning in communities across the country. As a next step, consider gathering local advocates for adolescent learning from different sectors and approaches—community schools and expanded learning, school districts and youth agencies, parent groups and foundations, businesses and non-profits—to develop common goals, strategies and work plans. Your energy, innovation and persistence are crucial to unlocking the potential of our nation's youth.

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>5</sup>NASP 2013 Congressional Briefing, <http://www.nasponline.org/advocacy/updates/2013-congressional-briefing.aspx>
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## ABOUT TASC

The mission of TASC is to expand the school day to give disadvantaged students more opportunities to discover and develop their talents; more support to overcome the challenges of poverty; and more time to achieve at the high levels essential for success in the global workplace. Since our founding in 1998, we have helped more than 621,000 kids, supported more than 564 public schools, partnered with more than 404 community and cultural organizations and colleges, and trained 23,000 community members to work in schools. This Action Agenda was written by Elizabeth Duffrin, a Chicago-based freelance writer.

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