International Center for Leadership in Education

RIGOROUS LEARNING FOR ALL STUDENTS

INNOVATING FOR IMPACT

Innovation: The Key to the Nation's Most Rapidly Improving Schools

OVERVIEW

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This paper introduces our upcoming 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 rigidness that has been holding us back from real change for decades.

ARE WE TEACHING WHAT OUR STUDENTS NEED TO KNOW?

Take a look at the following graphic. It is a graphic visualization of the mobile industry, where different colors represent different players in the industry at large, such as hardware makers and software makers.
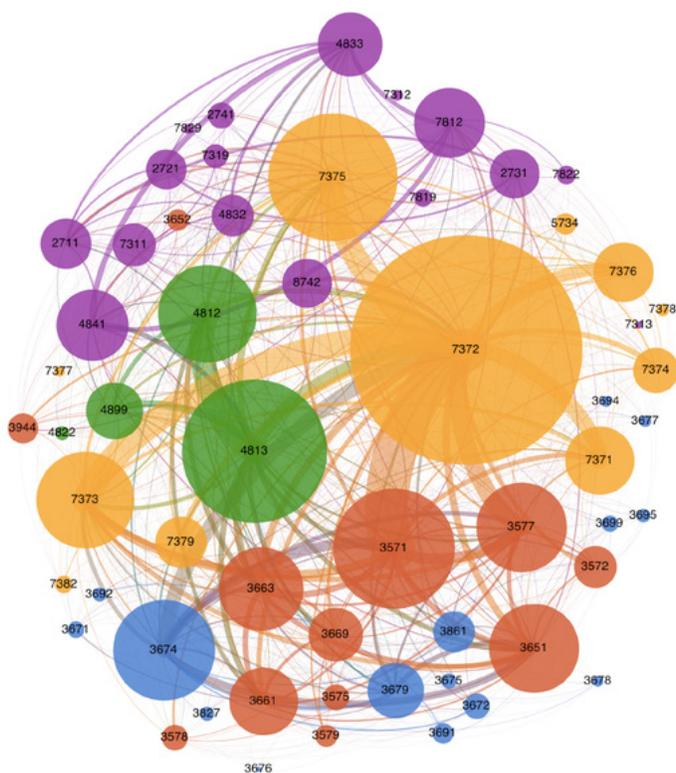

Image credit: The New York Times

What skills does a person need to understand and know what to do with this chart? Reading skills? Or statistics skills? Or is it logic? Probability? Measurement systems? Writing?

The answer is, to varying degrees, all of them. This chart is big data visualized. Big data refers to data that exceed the processing capacity of standard databases or software. More and more companies and industries rely on big data to make smarter decisions and improve operations. These companies expect some

workers to write code for data collection and processing and expect many workers to understand and use the data.

Big data is changing how we work and live, and the kinds of technologies transforming our worlds are many. But their impact on schools is consistent and clear. Students today need specific skills for success tomorrow—and they're often not the skills we were taught as kids. Unfortunately, not much has changed in schools since then.

Computer engineers must apply technology skills to write code that automates all aspects of data processing. The collection of all that data in that chart is automated. Algorithms calculate and process the data. Computers generate conclusions, patterns, and anomalies. With technologies handling that work, what's left for the human worker to do? Today's employees take action with that data. Doing so is collaborative and interdisciplinary. They need to analyze the findings; discuss the analysis with colleagues from other departments, sometimes across the globe; consider the findings relative to other information, research, constraints, or needs; and determine a path forward that meets all company priorities and goals.

Put another way, **employees will need to work together and smartly share and use resources.**

Every day—on the job, at the airport, waiting in line at the store—we're all on our smartphones. Your students are always on their smartphones. That is, until they walk into your school. After all, if they were to use them while taking a test, they'd "cheat" by looking up answers or texting friends to compare information. **In other words, they'd work together and smartly share and use resources.**

Is this cheating? Or, for those who know the [Rigor/Relevance Framework®](), is it rigorous and relevant Quadrant D learning? The fact is that most of our schools have not caught up to the world around them. There is a major disconnect between what we are teaching and what our students need to know and do to be successful in their lives beyond school.

My colleagues and I have the privilege of working with and analyzing the practices in our nation's most rapidly improving schools. Central to our findings is that these schools use innovative successful practices to connect their instructional programs to the world beyond school in a way that resonates with their students. They are focused on preparing students for success in that world and have made a transformational shift. How did they get there? These schools came to the realization that they had to adapt, or else their students simply weren't going to have what's needed for success after graduating. They understood that district- or school-wide innovation was not an option, but an urgent need. They identified what had to change. And they put together leading edge, systemic plans to make that change happen with buy-in from everyone involved.

Rapid improvement, we have learned, always comes from successful and productive innovation. However, we have learned just as much from innovation initiatives that have failed.

In many ways, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has taken the shackles off, freeing up all schools to do what our nation's most rapidly improving schools are doing. The stream of standards and regulation in recent decades has steadily taken our profession out of our own hands. ESSA puts much control back in our reach—so long as we innovate and put college and career skills on equal academic footing.

ESSA is allowing us finally to take bold steps in the name of *real change*—the kind of change we've been craving, but have been blocked from achieving due to rigid standards and regulations. As you and your teams set

out to seize the ESSA opportunity in the name of improved instruction and student outcomes, I urge you first to understand and discuss with your teams why innovation succeeds—and why it fails.

A great place to start is one fact of successful innovation we at ICLE have seen again and again: **Culture trumps strategy**.

Many educators feel very disempowered. They've lost control of their districts, schools, and classrooms because of regulations that were at odds with their "DNA," or what makes each district, school or classroom unique. If innovation is going to work, everyone on your campus or in your district must feel empowered. *Everyone*. This is only possible through a *culture of empowerment*.

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Is this cheating? Or is it Quadrant D— rigorous and relevant— learning?

From there, successful innovation requires that schools be future focused. Begin with the end in mind: The end goal gives clear purpose to all decisions you will make and actions you will take to innovate for impact. It creates a vision.

What's the end goal? Arming graduates with skills relevant to tomorrow's career landscape. Every facet of your district or school must then be built to meet that end. A future focus must permeate every corner of your world as an educator. In other words, vision drives decisions, including all those around innovation. That vision must be future focused.

THE SOLUTION IS EVOLUTION

From our decades of collaboration with the nation's most rapidly improving schools and our own research on innovation in education, we at ICLE have pinpointed nine interrelated areas that must evolve to make room for future-focused innovation:

1. **Goals:** The end goal must be to guide students toward success beyond school, not just in school.

2. **Focus:** The focus must move beyond incorporation of technology in the classroom to how technology is used authentically in the world beyond school.

3. **Outcomes**: In the Rigor/Relevance Framework®, all outcomes must reach Quadrants B and D; focusing on Quadrants A and C outcomes will not help students be career ready.

4. **Instructional Focus:** The focus of instruction must be achieving Quadrants B and D. The most future-focused schools use The Learning Criteria to vet all instruction for Quadrants B and D alignment, but they do so in an innovative way: they are using the Learning Criteria backward, starting first with an emphasis on interpersonal skills and finding that student engagement, stretch learning, and foundation learning happen organically.

5. **Data-Driven:** School improvement begins and ends with data. Quantifiable data around instructional programs and student performance needs to be collected and monitored frequently, used to inform the decision-making process, and adjusted as needed.

6. **Emerging Skills and Knowledge:** Educators must teach skills necessary for establishing successful careers and thriving in tomorrow's workplace, including reading, writing, data analytics, innovation and creativity, and wise social media skills.

7. **Instructional Programs:** For schools to align with the careers of tomorrow, how we deliver instruction must change to include academies, problem-based learning and interdisciplinary lessons. This frees teachers to do what they do best—build relationships and connect with students to nurture interpersonal skills

8. **Instructional Practice:** Educators should look to low-cost and high-impact technology tools that leverage gamification and augmented reality to increase learner engagement and relevance. A blended approach is needed, which includes a combination of emerging technology practices and traditional instruction. It is not an either/or approach. It is a blending of both.

9. **Professional Learning:** With systemic innovation comes big change. Successful innovation is only possible when people feel supported through professional learning. Therefore, instructional coaching for teachers and executive coaching for leaders is essential. To innovate is to ask all staff, from teachers to superintendents, to do things they didn't experience as students, learn in teacher education programs, or practice on the job. A one- or two-day professional development program will not provide the skills they need. The nation's most rapidly improving schools have taught us that ongoing, on-the-job coaching at all levels is critical if you are to successfully transform your schools.

In this series on innovating for impact, I will go further into the context of why the need to transform the education industry is so urgent. I will outline specifically what needs to change and, finally, how you and your teams can make these changes, with success and total buy-in. The series will be personified with those who've pulled off this big, but doable feat at the 2017 Model Schools Conference. We hope you'll join us then to connect directly with educators like you who've crossed the finish line in our shared goal: helping our students—those who matter most in this conversation—live confident, joyful, successful lives.

THE NATION'S MOST RAPIDLY IMPROVING SCHOOLS
Nine interrelated areas that must evolve to make room for future-focused innovation

Goal

Focus

Professional
Learning

Instructional
Practice

Leadership

Outcomes

Instructional
Programs

Instructional
Focus

Emerging
Knowledge
and Skills

Data-Driven

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