

Essential Learning: Essential Skills and Dispositions

Why This Topic

Today, we as a society increasingly recognize that the key to success in college and careers is not merely attainment of academic content knowledge but also possession of skills and dispositions (also called habits or mindsets) that can be applied in a variety of situations. Over the past decade, state and local education leaders have engaged their communities to raise expectations for student learning, [redefining college and career readiness](#) to include a broader set of essential skills and dispositions, such as communication, collaboration, creativity, and self-directed learning. By re-centering their education systems around a richer understanding of student success, states establish a “north star” guiding efforts to redesign how teaching and learning are experienced and supported in order to reach this goal for all students.

As school systems have embarked to incorporate essential skills and dispositions, however, many have moved little beyond lip service. Often, essential skills and dispositions are one among several competing priorities for system leaders. Limited bandwidth can force superficial attention to the skills: goal statements go up on splashy banners without anyone taking serious steps to understand what the skills really look like, how they develop, or how to embed them in the process of teaching and learning.

Further pressured by the need to collect quick data, some school systems prematurely rushed to the question of how to assess the skills and dispositions. System leaders as well as national organizations developed rubrics and surveys to ascertain when a student has reached competency in certain skills and dispositions. But in large part, these efforts have implicitly viewed essential skills and dispositions as fixed traits that students either do or do not possess. Rubrics contained deficit-based language like “no evidence” or “some evidence” of a skill without truly parsing how skills might manifest differently in more nascent forms on the way to mastery. Similarly, they often defined skills and dispositions in the same way at all grade levels or grade spans without recognizing how they might increase in complexity from early childhood through young adulthood. Few of these efforts included professional learning or other supports to help teachers explicitly grow the skills they were assessing.

Can essential skills and dispositions be understood in ways that better nurture growth and development over time? And if so, can we support education leaders to incorporate this deeper understanding within teaching and learning so that every student can become competent in them?

These questions are what C!E and partners set out to address by bringing together policy and practice communities with the leading edge of research in the learning sciences. While interest in essential skills and dispositions was growing, education researchers had been making headway defining learning progressions for academic domains including English language and math. Critical nodes in the development of language or mathematical comprehension were being laid out in ways that could

directly support student learning and formative assessment of where an individual student was located on a progression toward mastery. While the emerging field of learning progressions had been focused on academic content areas, Gene Wilhoit, Paul Leather, and leading researchers David Conley (then at the Education Policy Improvement Center) and Sarah Lench were inspired to create a learning progression-like developmental framework to describe essential skills and dispositions, and to test and refine it in partnership with leading educators in the field.

Our Learning Process

Believing it critical that school systems engage in collective inquiry around essential skills and dispositions, C!E endeavored to create a resource that could spark local conversations rather than serve as a turnkey solution. C!E enlisted Education Policy Improvement Center experts Sarah Lench (now at C!E), Erin Fukuda, and Ross Anderson to articulate a developmental progression for a select set of essential skills and dispositions. Four essential skills and dispositions – Communication, Collaboration, Creativity, and Self-Direction – were selected based on a national scan of which skills and dispositions most often appeared in new state definitions of “college and career readiness” and which were also most closely linked to in-school and postsecondary outcomes in research literature.

Several design features and assumptions set the developmental progressions apart from other efforts to define or rubric-ize essential skills and dispositions:

- They honor worthy learning at all levels, even the most beginning stages, using the Dreyfus model of “novice” to “expert” skill acquisition.
- They can be broken down and observed through sub-component skills.
- They assume that students are partners in their development of the skills and dispositions, inviting their metacognition about their progress and how they’re able to apply the skills across different domains.
- They assume a growth mindset.

Following the completion of the culminating document, [*Essential Skills and Dispositions: Developmental Frameworks for Collaboration, Communication, Creativity, and Self-Direction*](#), C!E and EPIC further refined them with teachers and leaders in four states: Wisconsin, New Hampshire, Maine, and Colorado. Educators from these states participated in design charettes, providing feedback on the underlying logic, language, and utility of the frameworks. Other partners further developed supporting resources for school systems to use the frameworks, including a blended learning course facilitated by 2Revolutions; a professional learning cohort using the blended learning course in New Hampshire facilitated by the New Hampshire Learning Initiative.

Insights

Through the creation of the *Essential Skills and Dispositions* developmental frameworks and subsequent work with educators and partners to implement them, C!E has gained critical insights into the larger-scale systems change that must take place if every student is to master the skills and dispositions that matter most. We have learned that when systems move beyond lip service and take seriously the

charge to develop essential skills and dispositions in all learners, they move beyond tack-on programs and begin to rethink and redesign the core mechanics of teaching and learning.

In particular, we've found that of the four skills and dispositions in the developmental frameworks, Self-Direction seems to most run counter to the way school systems are historically designed. Legacy school systems assume that teachers, not students, are in charge of what occurs in the classroom. While there may be nominal efforts to afford students "voice and choice" in their learning, most school systems place control over the *what, when, and how* of instruction and assessment squarely in the hands of the adults in the building. But if school systems deeply understand and internalize Self-Direction as an outcome for students, they start to rethink the respective roles of educators and students, providing more authentic opportunities for students to practice self-directed learning. For example, some teachers in New Hampshire's blended learning cohort began supporting students to co-design weekly learning goals and plans, while an entire district piloted student-led conferencing related to Work Study Practices (WSP, New Hampshire's version of essential skills and dispositions). The conferencing led teachers to provide more opportunities for students to practice and reflect on their development of the WSP – a significant structural change that is shifting how educators and students understand their roles more broadly.

Work to make meaning of the *Essential Skills and Dispositions* in New Hampshire and elsewhere has also provided valuable insights on how to support larger-scale system transformation. From the professional learning cohort on Work Study Practices led by Jonathan Vander Els at the New Hampshire Learning Initiative, we have learned how systems transformation can be scaffolded in partnership with those leading the work on the ground. Jon made considerable inroads with cohort members by providing space for them to digest complex material and to apply it in ways that matter most for their contexts. Rather than expecting participating schools to charge ahead with all four skills in the developmental frameworks, for example, he guided participants to start with the skills that currently mattered most to their stakeholders. Rather than assuming a blank slate, he also recognized that some participants already did this work well – or perceived that they did – and needed ways to talk about continuous improvement while building on efforts already underway. Ultimately Jon recognized that cohort members needed to own the work themselves, engaging in creative and productive struggle with their communities rather than having a turnkey "solution" handed to them. This insight has directly informed how we think about greater systems change and the importance of valuing and working with local wisdom.

Future Provocations and Connections

Assessment

Our work on essential skills and dispositions has extended our thinking about the role of assessment for learning. Whereas many education leaders were rushing to create rubrics and quick measures of skills and dispositions, our work centered on the hypothesis that you needed to deeply understand how the skills and dispositions are expressed and build from novice to expert manifestations before you can create a good assessment. Particularly, in places taking this the farthest, we see a greater reliance on formative and/or performance-based assessments that provide feedback loops and inform instruction.

Moreover, we have learned the importance of the student owning and participating in their development through goal-setting, reflection, and self-assessment. Such insights have directly impacted how we conceive of assessment *for* learning, shaping subsequent initiatives such as the Assessment for Learning Project (ALP). ALP's grantmaking process prioritized applicants that were philosophically aligned and willing to take a developmental approach to understanding and building essential skills and dispositions in their learners.

Equity

As CIE's work has evolved, we have come to think differently about equity in ways that implicate our future work with essential skills and dispositions. While equity had always been at the heart of this strand of work – through the premise that the skills and dispositions are critical for every child to truly be college and career ready, and that systems must shift in fundamental ways to reach this goal – we have since grown in our understanding of how to apply an equity lens throughout the work in progress. For example, when creating the developmental frameworks, we and our partners did not explicitly examine research literature for examples of bias toward a dominant cultural frame of reference. We have not yet resolved how the skills and dispositions might (or might not?) [be performed or observed differently](#) depending on various dimensions of one's identity. In any future work to refine the developmental frameworks, we would be more intentional about working with people with diverse perspectives and lived experiences when inviting feedback and review.

Additionally, we now have a deeper understanding of what it looks like when system leaders value local culture and wisdom when identifying skills and dispositions that all learners should master. Through our [Assessment for Learning Project](#), for example, we have seen the difference that can be made when local communities are authentically engaged in defining desirable skills and dispositions for their graduates and connecting to a shared, culturally-relevant purpose for education.

Large-Scale Systems Change

Lastly, this strand of work has helped lead us to a more sophisticated understanding of how system leaders can support large-scale change in partnership with local communities. For systems to undergo the fundamental shifts necessary to move beyond lip service to truly helping every child develop the skills and dispositions essential to their success in college and careers, system leaders must engage local community leaders in deep conversation and productive struggle. We cannot expect systems to successfully adopt turnkey solutions. Instead, system leaders can partner with local communities and provide resources, such as the *Essential Skills and Dispositions* developmental frameworks, that can be adapted and iterated upon based on local context. We have articulated how such partnerships might work in our [System Transformation Practice Framework](#).

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