

By Jason Kiker

Move Beyond “Seat-Time” and Narrowly Defined Knowledge and Skills

PART OF A YEARLONG SERIES, THIS ARTICLE MORE CLOSELY EXAMINES THE LAST RECOMMENDATION MADE IN **ACTE’S HIGH SCHOOL REFORM POSITION STATEMENT** AND HIGHLIGHTS BEST PRACTICES FOR IMPLEMENTING THIS RECOMMENDATION.

The ninth recommendation in ACTE’s high school reform position statement is to move beyond “seat-time” and narrowly defined knowledge and skills. United States high schools operate on a well-established set of expectations for size, time of day and seasons of the year that programs and classes are offered, how instructional material is delivered, and what constitutes success in terms of the students’ knowledge and skills.

Ultimately, a true standards-based approach to education requires moving away from the time-based Carnegie Unit system, which measures inputs, to one that measures outputs—demonstrating what the student has learned and can do. Until reliable assessments of student knowledge and skills are in place and accepted, there will be difficulty in letting go of the seat-time approach. A first step toward the new vision is to continue using existing standardized assessments for accountability and exit requirements, while developing and implementing performance-based demonstrations of skills and knowledge that can give a more in-depth picture of a student’s skills.

School reform advocates, as well as business and industry leaders, generally agree that preparation for further education and the workplace requires more than traditional core academic skills like reading and mathematics. These skills are essential, but they are not sufficient in and of themselves. There must be a clear incentive for states and schools to also

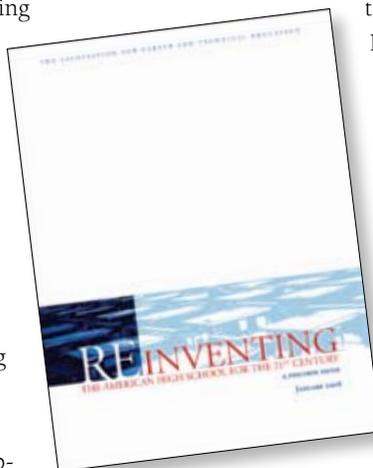
focus on the development of assessments that measure soft skills, and 21st century skills and aptitudes within students.

While nationwide moves beyond “seat-time” and more broadly defined ideas of knowledge and skills are slow in coming, there are high schools that have already made the changes necessary to teach and assess students’ true abilities through project-based and community-based learning opportunities.

Bringing Innovation to the Classroom

Until August 2006, Olympic High School was a typical comprehensive high school in Charlotte, North Carolina. With the beginning of the new school year, Olympic High School entered into a new era of education. Converting the 2,000 student high school into the five theme-based Olympic Community of Essential Schools was just the first step toward the goal of better preparing students for college and careers.

The process continued on October 26, 2006, when school officials, teachers, students, parents, community leaders and business partners met with IBM Global Innovation Outlook experts to rethink their notions of what students should be taught and how they could bring innovation to the classroom. Starting with the question “What would you change if you went back to high school today?” the answers were not all that surprising. At the top of the list were more relevance of education to careers, a greater need for teaching soft skills and a better understanding of 21st century skills, especially how the



Jason Kiker

is education research analyst for ACTE. He can be reached at jkiker@acteonline.org. To access the complete position statement, visit www.acteonline.org/policy/legislative_issues/upload/ACTEHSReform_Full.pdf.

globalization of business and the economy affect students.

Follow-up meetings were held on teaching project-based learning and how to assess students' achievements, the importance of making community connections for resources and teaching opportunities, and using community experts as evaluators of student projects.

Despite being open less than one school year as the Olympic Community of Essential Schools, Executive Principal Pamela Espinosa has already seen "remarkable

schools must use a multifaceted approach to assessments.

To measure a students' mastery of 21st century skills, Olympic Community of Essential Schools has looked to the community for experts. Students of the School of International Studies and Global Economics, as part of their education, start and run their own international business with help from Charlotte business leaders who teach and mentor the students. At the end of the school year, the business leaders then evaluate how well each of the students did

curately represent what skills students have learned and can demonstrate, whether academic or career oriented.

Long-term Success for Project-based Learning

While the Olympic Community of Essential Schools is just beginning its journey, New Technology High School of Napa, California, has been going beyond traditional educational assessments for 11 years. New Technology High School was created in 1996 when business leaders, educators and students were frustrated with the state of education. At the time, current options were leaving students ill-prepared for college or a career and leaving local businesses searching for skilled employees.

Like other schools that are looking past traditional educational knowledge and

skills, New Technology High School uses project-based learning to teach its students in both an academically rigorous and relevant-to-the-real-world manner. Projects allow students to see how what they are learning relates to what they are interested in and to real-world careers. Projects offer students more than just the traditional educational experience, and include skills such as time management and teamwork.

The typical week at New Technology High School is anything but typical. On Monday, students have six 45-minute periods to catch up on projects and meet with teachers. Tuesday through Friday, there are three two-hour blocks a day for students to work on projects and for teachers to assign and explain new ones. After the new projects are assigned, students present their ideas to the class and decide which projects they want to work on in teams. For example, one such project might be creating an interactive flash Web site that uses 3-D modeling to teach an old subject in a new way.

THE PUBLIC PERCEPTION IS THE GREATEST OBSTACLE TO MOVING BEYOND TRADITIONAL SKILL ASSESSMENTS AND "SEAT-TIME" MEASURES. "THE PUBLIC HAS TO UNDERSTAND THAT TRADITIONAL EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENTS ARE NOT WORKING AND THERE MUST BE A CHANGE."

climate changes so far" in the schools. The most obvious change is the five theme-based schools that now make up Olympic High School. Each school's theme is used to encourage students to discover and pursue their passions while meeting the rigorous learning goals they have helped set.

Based on the North Carolina Standard Curriculum, each of the five schools uses traditional, as well as project-based, learning to teach students how what they are learning is relevant to their passions and to real-world careers. Espinosa said that schools must "shake loose" the traditional ideas of what skills schools must teach and students must learn. "Schools must move to teaching 21st century skills . . . America has to do this" she says.

The greatest challenge that her school, as well as this reform, faces is getting the public to accept assessments that move beyond traditional standardized testing. Espinosa feels that the public is too worried about "what (students) can do on a multiple choice test." She feels that in order to overcome the public misperception

on the project and how business and real-world skills were demonstrated throughout the year.

Environmental sciences students faced similar evaluations for their yearlong project on fire ants. Experts from the Mecklenburg County office of the North Carolina Agriculture and Consumer Services Plant Industry Division reviewed the students' work and assessed their skills as future scientists and policymakers in ways that multiple choice tests could never do.

Sheila Lester, assistant principal of the Olympic Schools, agrees that the public perception is the greatest obstacle to moving beyond traditional skill assessments and "seat-time" measures. "The public has to understand that traditional educational assessments are not working and there must be a change," says Lester. She added that the nation is in terrible trouble and parents, students and the public at large must provide the impetus for change. Lester feels that there needs to be a restructuring of the entire education community toward assessments that can truly and ac-

As one student wrote, "I was used to cramming information just to pass the next test, only to have it dissipate the next day as the information was no longer useful. So when I came to New Tech, my standards for learning changed quite dramatically. After the lectures we are free to do what needs to be done. In any other school, this would mean free time for fooling around. But at New Tech it means getting what needs to be done, done. It means working on my group projects and finishing assignments. I was amazed with how I wasn't the only one working on my group project, that my entire group did it."

One of New Technology High Schools' core values is that its "flexible business/education environment teaches and encourages student responsibility, independence and resilience while building life skills in collaboration, project management and leadership." With 11 years of students to learn from, New Technology High School is in a unique position to see how well they have achieved this core value.

Using traditional California educational assessments, New Technology High School students perform at high standards. The California State Academic Performance Index (API) is a summary of California standardized tests. Since 2000, New Technology High School has exceeded the average local and state API scores in all but one year. Every year, 100 percent of New Technology High School students complete the full requirements for entry into University of California/California State University.

New Technology High School excels when its graduation rates and its postsecondary attendance rates are compared to local and state levels. New Technology High School graduates 100 percent of its

students. This exceeds the 94.9 percent of the Napa Valley Unified School District, the 95.4 percent of Napa County, and the 85.3 percent for the state of California. At close to 90 percent, New Technology High School's postsecondary attendance level significantly exceeds local, California and national levels.

In addition to the rigorous academic standards, New Technology High School students are learning 21st century skills at a high level as well. A quick look at the New Tech graduation requirements shows how seriously these skills are taken. To graduate, students must complete a digital media requirement, a service-learning/internship, demonstrate competencies in Word, Excel, Access, PowerPoint and keyboarding, and must complete a Web-based digital portfolio.

Since assessing 21st century skills can be hard to do, New Technology High School found an innovative way to see if the school was teaching its students skills that were useful in college or career. New Technology High School hired Rockman et al, an independent research and consulting group, to conduct a six-month study of alumni.

Of particular value, said the alumni, was the integration of real-world skills and experiences with academic skills through project-based learning. Alumni felt they gained collaboration skills, problem-solving and communication skills that they would not have gotten through a more traditional approach to school. As one former student responded, "The concepts of personnel management, time management, research and development, and presentation skills are infinitely valuable in my progress as a professional." ■

ACTE is very interested to learn about other initiatives that incorporate a broader range of skills and competencies into high school reform efforts. In addition, we are looking for information about CTE programs that work toward achieving the remainder of ACTE's high school reform recommendations. If you teach or administer such a CTE program, please send information to Alisha Hyslop at ahyslop@acteonline.org.



**CAN YOUR STUDENTS
DEMONSTRATE THEIR
WORK SKILLS?**

NOW THEY CAN.



**NATIONAL
CAREER READINESS
CERTIFICATE**

www.nationalcareerreadiness.org

WorkKeys