Condition of Education
IN THE COMMONWEALTH

RENNIE CENTER
EDUCATION RESEARCH & POLICY

Putting Students at the Center of Reform

When you imagine students thriving as learners, what do you see? Maybe you picture children huddled around an outdoor science experiment making careful observations, or a team of teenagers designing a proposal for accessible public transportation. Or maybe you picture an individual child curled up with a book that speaks to her heart and imagination. Whatever subject, age group, or particular scenario you envision, chances are you are thinking about young people who are actively engaged in learning, who find value and satisfaction in their work.

For too many children in Massachusetts, the daily experience of school feels like the opposite: tedious, dictated by a rigid schedule, separate from their personal interests and lived experience. It is time for us to call into question this disconnect—between what we know effective learning looks like and what we enact through education policy and on-the-ground practice in our schools. In our last two *Condition of Education Action Guides*, we called on the Commonwealth to consider education more holistically, noting that schools should not—and cannot—work in isolation and that each child's education encompasses more than academic learning. In this year's *Condition of Education* report, we offer a series of policy and practice changes that would align the Commonwealth's system of public education with what we know to be effective: student-centered learning.

Student-Centered Learning: What It Is and Why We Need It Now

Student-centered learning (SCL) is not a new concept. In fact, this umbrella term encompasses a number of well-known practices with deep roots in learning science, psychology, and educational theory.[1] At its essence, SCL is any instructional approach that begins with the needs and interests of the individual learner and engages young people as drivers of their own learning experience. In doing so, SCL fosters a stronger sense of motivation and self-efficacy, which research links to improved achievement. Students get targeted support in areas where they struggle and accelerate where they demonstrate mastery, allowing educators to focus limited time and resources where they can have the greatest impact.[2]

Toward a Frame for Common Action

Since the Education Reform Act of 1993, Massachusetts has demonstrated a sustained commitment to implementing high expectations, clear standards, and rigorous assessments of performance across public schools. However, we have yet to address the full range of skills young people need for life success or to fully engage all of our diverse students in learning that maximizes their potential. The good news is that Massachusetts has a number of assets in place that could be directed to support SCL approaches; what's still needed is a broader vision for a more student-centered education system in our state.

In this year's *Condition of Education* report, we outline three building blocks of a SCL system.

Classroom-level strategies can support every learner:

Students need **personalized strategies** to direct their own learning;[3] teachers can provide opportunities to practice self-management strategies such as setting goals, regulating effort, and self-advocacy.[4]

Student-centered classrooms are structured to foster exploration and discovery,[5] where teachers work as facilitators and **students own their learning**, exercising choice and self-awareness.[6]

Teachers use information gathered from a combination of formal and informal assessments to **differentiate instruction**, making the curriculum more accessible and engaging for all students.[7]

Teachers use **ongoing, comprehensive assessments**—including students' social-emotional skills and personal interests—to align instruction and monitor student progress.[8]

Competency-based models and other school structures can deepen learning:

Schools set **clear expectations** for what every student should know and be able to do; students can demonstrate mastery in a variety of ways.[9]

Time is used flexibly. Bells, schedules, course sequences, and school-year calendars can all be modified to meet student learning needs.[10]

Participatory assessment strategies allow learners to decide on how they will demonstrate mastery, and allow for reflection on strengths, weaknesses, and interests, to set plans for the future.[11]

School-wide **collaboration and transparency** is key for commonly-held policies and practices that can foster development of options that support student learning.[12]

Student-centered community partnerships can present opportunities for students to explore their interests while mastering skills linked to academic content:

Students may engage in rigorous learning experiences that take advantage of **flexible schedules and locations**[13]—internships, seminars at local museums, and even online courses.[14]

Students, school faculty, and community educators must have **shared expectations** for where students are headed to craft learning experiences that make sense for the individual learner.[15]

Spotlight on Massachusetts Exemplars

Massachusetts is home to a number of innovative schools that exemplify the student-centered structures and practices recommended in this report. Schools and their partners have made choices about how to build a personalized, engaging program of study for their particular student population.

The Carlton School: A Student-Centered Turnaround

The Carlton School is a small elementary school serving 250 students in Salem, Massachusetts. Five years ago, the Carlton was designated a "Level 3" underperforming school by the state, with a majority of students failing to meet proficiency on MCAS for several years in a row. Understanding the urgency of the situation, Carlton staff proposed a bold innovation plan that has already produced dramatic improvements; in 2015, 96 percent of students met targets, putting the Carlton in the state's "Level 1" performance tier.

Staff attribute this turnaround to a cohesive, student-centered approach in every classroom that includes:

Students at the Carlton Innovation School work in multi-age classrooms, where teachers craft a personalized learning plan designed to move them to the next standards-based milestone.

Students demonstrate mastery of skills in multiple ways. Based on their performance, teachers determine the next step: independent practice for those close to proficiency or an intensive intervention for those with further to go.

Brookline High School: Flexible Paths to Graduation

The Alternative Choices in Education (ACE) program at Brookline High School provides a competency-based approach for students who benefit from an alternative to traditional schooling. After just a year, the newly launched ACE program is already showing results: students' total unexcused absences were reduced by 50% or more in each subject area, and staff are observing a substantial improvement in their grades. ACE has implemented a number of SCL-based approaches.

ACE teachers have designed six-week mini-courses with milestones pegged to the high school's graduation requirements in each core subject. Students move at their own pace, taking two academic modules at a time and use an electronic roadmap to track benchmarks.

ACE students also meet twice a week in small, multi-age advisories where they have a one-on-one check-in with their faculty advisor, do team-building activities with their peers, and talk through issues of interest and concern.

Leominster Center for Excellence: Learning Without Walls

Founded in 2012 as a quality alternative learning option for local students, the Leominster Center for Excellence operates as a state-designated "innovation school" and a member of the national Big Picture Learning network, whose schools are characterized by highly individualized, real-world learning.

Students spend up to two full days per week at an internship site. Workplace mentors help students develop a project that requires deep learning of relevant professional skills.

Educators emphasize the acquisition and application of skills, rather than specific content. They work with students to develop personalized benchmarks, to determine what students should know and be able to do, which are visited each trimester.

Policy Recommendations

State

Cultivate a public-private fund to seed innovation. An innovation fund for Massachusetts schools could support the development, implementation, and refinement of new student-centered models, establishing a variety of proof points and models of effective practice for the state.

Develop a catalog of effective models. The state can create a resource bank of student-centered learning models helping schools and districts decide on programs or providers best suited to local needs.

Align teacher evaluation frameworks. Districts will need multiple, flexible measures of educator performance to capture teachers' new roles as facilitators of student learning, and will benefit from guidance from the state to do so.

Districts

Cultivate a portfolio of partners. Districts that have been successful in offering student-centered options work with the help of partners to increase the supply of expanding learning options and offer students more ways to learn important skills and earn credit towards graduation.

Create more flexibility and autonomy for schools. Multi-age groupings, and similar school structures, require flexibility to tinker with staffing configurations, and autonomy from district guidelines and budget practices.

Match resources with student-centered approaches. Schools benefit from opportunities to reflect on the effectiveness of existing approaches, and can maximize personalization by aligning resources to student needs.

ENDNOTES

1 Nellie Mae Education Foundation (2015).
2 Chuong, C., & Mead, S. (2014).
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Full citations are available in the *2017 Condition of Education Action Guide*.