



EQUITY-FOCUSED DEEPER LEARNING: THREE KEY STRATEGIES



Teachers act as coaches and facilitators who help students develop such skills as collaboration, problem solving, creativity, flexibility, and dealing with ambiguity. These teachers assist students as they execute ambitious and rigorous projects that require multiple cycles of revision over time.

The approach has the potential to increase educational equity by focusing on each learner's academic and social emotional needs, and by providing all learners with engaging experiences that are too often reserved for affluent students or those identified as gifted and talented.

A growing research base supports the deeper learning approach. Yet, as with all educational reforms, the devil is in the details of the implementation process: A principal cannot simply walk into a traditional school and announce that the school will embrace deeper learning—and then expect it to succeed.

An [article](#) published this fall in the peer-refereed *Journal of Educational Administration* offers guidance to educators and others interested in implementing equity-based deeper learning reforms. Written by NEPC Fellow [Regina Umpstead](#) of the University of Louisville, [Nicole Hacker](#) of Central Michigan University, and [Emmanuel Akanwa](#) of Prince George's County Public Schools in Maryland, the article incorporates case studies of four school leadership teams that participated in a year-long course on implementing equity-based deeper

learning practices.

The schools were geographically, demographically, and pedagogically diverse. They included a Pre-K-Grade 7 charter school in the Eastern U.S. looking to replace a “no-excuses” approach that had failed to prepare their students for high school and college; a Midwestern choice-based high school with a technological and entrepreneurial focus and the desire to improve student outcomes; a middle school in the Eastern U.S. interested in expanding upon recently adopted progressive pedagogical practices; and a Canadian K-12 school hoping to enhance a well-established deeper learning approach.

Drawing upon interviews, observations and documents, the researchers identified three leadership strategies key to implementing deeper learning reforms:

- 1. Transforming the culture:** Successful deeper learning requires a culture in which it is possible to implement “higher rigor and relevance in teaching . . . opportunities for student ownership of their learning and [changes to the structure of the] learning environment,” the researchers write. At the (formerly) no-excuses charter school, for example, this meant creating an advisory period where teachers and students could get to know one another better, and it implemented a weekly double-block math and science class where students engaged in interdisciplinary project-based learning. It also meant shifting away from spending 80 percent of the day on the heavily tested subjects of math and English/language arts and adopting a more balanced approach with students spending only 55 percent of their time on those subjects, with the remaining time devoted to science, social studies, Spanish, and electives.
- 2. Teaching the whole child:** Study participants highlighted the importance of embracing the idea that each individual student is valuable and significant and has a voice that deserves to be heard. As one teacher leader explained, students should “feel like they have a relationship with their teacher, and it’s not just warming a seat for an hour.” In order to adopt this approach, teachers at one school shifted the focus from short-term goals such as standardized exam scores to the longer-term objective of providing students with the knowledge and skills necessary to attend and graduate from college. Educators also examined their own practices to ensure they were incorporating student voice and treating everyone fairly and equitably.
- 3. Restructuring for collaboration:** Deeper learning requires deeper levels of collaboration among educators. Approaches used to create the time and space for this teamwork included redesigning schedules to allow for common teacher planning times, helping students develop relationships with one another that were conducive to engaging effectively in groupwork, and even hiring an architect to redesign the physical spaces of a school to provide sufficient space for collaboration.

Umpstead, Hacker, and Akanwa stress that educators themselves need to engage in deeper learning if they are to provide deeper learning to their students. “Adopting equity-focused deeper learning reforms in schools requires a complex mix of personal, instructional and organizational leadership competencies typically first learned through professional development,” they write.

NEPC Resources on School Reform and Restructuring

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