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National Research Council Report Highlights Importance of “Deeper Learning”

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MENLO PARK, CA/CHICAGO, IL/QUINCY, MA — In a newly-issued report funded by several foundations across the U.S., including The William and Flora Hewlett, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur, and Nellie Mae Education foundations, the National Research Council (NRC) validates an educational approach called “deeper learning,” which emphasizes critical reasoning and a suite of other skills, and recommends that it be broadly adopted nationally even while recommending it be researched further.

The report, entitled *Education for Life and Work: Developing Transferable Knowledge and Skills in the 21st Century*, clarifies and organizes the concepts that make up 21st century competencies – a term that has been called many different things and defined in a variety of ways. The report groups these skills into three clusters: cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal. Cognitive competencies include such skills as critical thinking, problem solving, reasoning, and innovation. Intrapersonal competencies include skills such as metacognition (the ability to reflect on one’s own learning and make adjustments accordingly), flexibility, self-direction, and conscientiousness. Interpersonal competencies include such skills as communication and collaboration.

These skills allow students to master rigorous academic content as well as learn how, why, and when to apply knowledge to answer questions and solve problems. Developing content knowledge provides the foundation for acquiring these skills, while the skills in turn are necessary to truly learn and use the content. In other words, the skills and content knowledge are not only intertwined but also reinforce each other. The Hewlett Foundation’s Education Program supports the adoption of deeper learning because there is a growing consensus among education experts and business leaders—affirmed by the NRC report—that these skills are necessary for success as adults in work and life.

The report urges states and the federal government to establish policies and programs in support of students’ acquisition of these skills, and says policymakers should focus their attention on the key areas of assessment, accountability, curriculum and materials, and teacher education. As states implement the Common Core State Standards and develop new assessments, the NRC report encourages them to “devote significant attention” to the deeper learning and 21st century competencies called for by the standards. Current education policy and practice—driven by assessments that focus primarily on recall of facts and procedures—too often fails to deliver teaching and learning of transferable 21st century competencies.

“The NRC has issued a clarion call for more research and more aggressive policies to advance 21st century competencies,” said Barbara Chow, Education Program Director at the Hewlett Foundation. “Every so often, an important inflection point arrives in the never-ending debate about how to educate our children to prepare them for the world in which they will live.

This report from the National Academies highlights the need for students to acquire both knowledge and skills—a mix called deeper learning—in order to apply their schooling to meet future challenges and to succeed as adults.”

“We applaud the NRC for grappling thoughtfully with the 21st century challenges to meeting the historic goals of education—preparing young people for success as lifelong learners, civically engaged individuals, and participants in the economy,” said Connie Yowell, MacArthur’s Director of Education, who oversees the Foundation’s \$100-million initiative to determine how digital media are changing the way young people learn, play, and participate in civic life. “The argument about what is needed is now made; the next step is research and experimentation on how to nurture and assess these competencies in schools, libraries, museums, and wherever learning takes place.”

In its report, the NRC, a private, nonprofit institution chartered by Congress to provide unbiased, expert advice on matters of public policy, calls on foundations and federal agencies to fund greater research to better understand the relationships between such skills and successful adult outcomes and the effectiveness of teaching and assessment strategies.

Highlighting the importance of these skills, the report says:

The development of 21st century competencies in K-12 education and informal learning environments opens up many new opportunities. Because these competencies support the learning of school subjects, more attention to them in school and out-of-school programs could potentially reduce disparities in educational attainment. Reducing these disparities would prepare a broader swathe of young people to enjoy the positive outcomes of increased educational attainment, including greater success in the workplace, improved health, and greater civic participation relative to people with fewer years of schooling. At the same time, developing these competencies in K-12 education could also lead to positive adult outcomes for more young people, independent of any increases in their years of schooling.

“This report underscores the importance of focusing on deeper learning in order to prepare our society for the future,” said Nicholas C. Donohue, President and CEO of the Nellie Mae Education Foundation. “The basics as we know them have changed as the world has changed around us. The ‘new basics’ now include the critical skills identified in this report.”

“The NRC report validates the Hewlett Foundation’s commitment to deeper learning. As a result of this report, we will double down on these critical outcomes and continue to focus on advancing the development of curriculum and assessment strategies that support and evaluate deeper learning. We know that to succeed in a fiercely competitive and complex global economy, students must be able to apply their knowledge and knowhow to solve real world challenges,” said Chow.

Education for Life and Work was developed by the Committee on Defining Deeper Learning and 21st Century Skills, which was empanelled by the Board on Teaching and Assessment of the National Research Council. The Committee’s work was supported by Carnegie Corporation of New York, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the National Science Foundation, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, the Pearson Foundation, the Raikes Foundation, Susan Crown Exchange, and the Stupski Foundation.

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About The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation has been making grants since 1967 to help solve social and environmental problems at home and around the world. The Foundation concentrates its resources on activities in education, the environment, global development and population, performing arts, philanthropy, and makes grants to support disadvantaged communities in the San Francisco Bay Area.

www.hewlett.org

About the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

The MacArthur Foundation supports creative people and effective institutions committed to building a more just, verdant, and peaceful world. In addition to selecting the MacArthur Fellows, the Foundation works to defend human rights, advance global conservation and security, make cities better places, and understand how technology is affecting children and society.

www.macfound.org

About the Nellie Mae Education Foundation

Located in Quincy, Massachusetts, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation is New England's largest regional philanthropy dedicated to education.

www.nmefoundation.org

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