Why do students need deeper learning?

In today’s rapidly changing and complex world, students need far more than traditional academics to be successful. To tackle the social, environmental, and economic problems of tomorrow, our students will need a broader set of knowledge and skills that enables them to understand, navigate, adapt, and thrive in response to novel and complex problems and contexts. Referred to as “deeper learning,” this broad set of transferable knowledge and skills—including deep content knowledge, critical thinking and problem solving, and interpersonal and intrapersonal skills—is increasingly recognized as the essential competencies that students need for success in college, the 21st-century workplace, and as future citizens.1-3

### The What and How of Deeper Learning

The term *deeper learning* refers to the competencies students need for 21st-century success—the *what*—as well as the approaches educators can use to build these competencies—the *how*.

### The What of Deeper Learning

What do students need to know and be able to do to thrive in the 21st century? The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation defines deeper learning as “a set of competencies students must master in order to develop a keen understanding of academic content and apply their knowledge to problems in the classroom and on the job.”1 Similarly, the National Research Council (NRC) defines deeper learning as “the process through which an individual becomes capable of taking what was learned in one situation and applying it to new situations (i.e., transfer).”4 As shown in Figure 1, key to deeper learning is how content knowledge, thinking skills, and interpersonal and intrapersonal skills work together to enable students to continuously expand, strengthen, and propel their learning forward as they adapt and thrive in our rapidly changing and complex world.5
How can educators promote deeper learning competencies in students? The Study of Deeper Learning conducted by American Institutes for Research (AIR)\textsuperscript{6–8} outlined a theory of action to explain how students build deeper learning competencies. As shown in Figure 2, AIR researchers theorize that educators can use a range of approaches to help create opportunities for students to build deeper learning competencies. Although there is no simple recipe to promote deeper learning in students, research examining the link between instructional strategies and learning for transfer (i.e., the ability to apply what is learned to novel problems and contexts) provides additional supporting evidence for the approaches associated with the development of deeper learning competencies.\textsuperscript{9,3,10–14} Deeper learning approaches offer students the opportunity to engage in content-rich, challenging, applied, and collaborative experiences and the chance to receive meaningful feedback, reflect, and take responsibility for their own learning. By engaging in these deeper learning opportunities, students can build the broad knowledge and transferable skills they will need to continuously learn, adapt, and thrive in the 21st century.

Figure 2. Deeper Learning Approaches to Outcomes Theory of Action
How can states help promote deeper learning?

State education agencies play an important role in promoting deeper learning for all students. Across the Great Lakes and Midwest regions, several states are already engaged in efforts to promote deeper learning through competency-based education initiatives, alternative assessment, personalized learning, flexible learning pathways, and expanded definitions of college and career readiness. The Great Lakes and Midwest Deeper Learning Initiative aims to further support these state approaches to deeper learning through state-level tools (e.g., policy, guidance, incentives, resources, supports) in key action areas likely to enable local educational agencies to create deeper learning opportunities for students. The following Framework for Action (Figure 3) outlines four focal areas to guide state efforts to implement deeper learning approaches.
Deeper Learning Resources & Supports

VISIT THE DEEPER LEARNING WEBSITE FOR RESOURCES, EVENTS, AND NEWS

The [website for the Great Lakes & Midwest Regional Deeper Learning Initiative](http://deeperlearning-cc.org/) contains a variety of curated deeper learning resources, including information on deeper learning competencies, personalized learning and competency-based education approaches, and research. The website also lists upcoming events and shares updates from the initiative’s Twitter feed. Visit our website at [http://deeperlearning-cc.org/](http://deeperlearning-cc.org/). We welcome requests for specific deeper learning resources. To submit a request, contact Jeremy Rasmussen ([jrasmussen@air.org](mailto:jrasmussen@air.org)). To post an event or share news for our website, contact Emily Wray ([ewray@air.org](mailto:ewray@air.org)).

JOIN OUR CROSS-STATE DEEPER LEARNING CONVERSATIONS

The Deeper Learning Initiative will host four Cross-State Conversations during the 2015–16 year. These facilitated online meetings will be a relaxed opportunity for states to connect with one another on deeper learning topics of shared interest, share strategies and resources, and speak with experts in the field. Potential topics might include promising approaches and assessments for measuring deeper learning competencies, strategies for building educator capacity to promote deeper learning, and state-level strategies for personalized learning. To learn more or to request a topic, contact Wendy Surr ([wsurr@air.org](mailto:wsurr@air.org)) or Frank DeRosa ([fderosa@air.org](mailto:fderosa@air.org)).

SHARE A STATE SNAPSHOT OF YOUR DEEPER LEARNING WORK

Across the Great Lakes and Midwest regions, states are exploring, piloting, and shaping state-level systems to support deeper learning. We are compiling information and samples of state deeper learning work to create a series of State Snapshots that illustrate the variety of strategies that states use to support deeper learning. These Snapshots will be posted on our website as a resource for others in the region. Please send information and updates on your deeper learning initiatives to Nara Nayar ([nnayar@air.org](mailto:nnayar@air.org)).

STAY INFORMED AND CONNECTED THROUGH TWITTER

The Deeper Learning Twitter feed ([@CCDeeperLearn](https://twitter.com/CCDeeperLearn)) shares research, events, articles, and resources related to deeper learning. Follow [@CCDeeperLearn](https://twitter.com/CCDeeperLearn) at [https://twitter.com/CCDeeperLearn](https://twitter.com/CCDeeperLearn) to stay informed and to connect with others sharing deeper learning news and resources. To submit content or share ideas for the Deeper Learning Twitter feed, contact Emily Wray ([ewray@air.org](mailto:ewray@air.org)).

For more information on the Great Lakes & Midwest Regional Deeper Learning Initiative, contact Wendy Surr ([wsurr@air.org](mailto:wsurr@air.org)).
NOTES


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