

Emerging Innovative Practices that Prepare Today's Students for Success

From Within School to the World Beyond School

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Introduction

There is a growing belief among many in the education and business communities that our schools are so focused on assessment scores that we have lost sight of the skills, knowledge, and abilities that our students will need to succeed after graduation—all of which are rapidly diverging from what schools traditionally focus on.

A recent U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics report has heightened that concern for many, including state and federal elected officials. That report notes that over the last three years, the number of people seeking employment was fewer than the number of available jobs. This labor shortage is not a short-term issue; it represents a long-term demographic challenge expected to worsen as the American population ages. In 1960, 39 percent of the population was under 19 years of age, and only 13 percent was over 65. But by 2034, projections indicate we will have more people over 65 years of age (24 percent) than under 19 (23 percent)ⁱ. This creates a narrowed workforce, and businesses are increasingly depending on technology to fill their employment gaps.

Additionally, global think tanks like McKinsey & Company, Deloitte, and the World Economic Forum reveal that business leaders nationwide are increasingly frustrated with a labor market deficient in workers who possess the skills demanded by the modern workplace. Specifically, these think tanks have identified a critical need for our high school seniors to graduate with higher cognitive, interpersonal, self-leadership, and digital skills. These competencies transcend traditional academic knowledge, instead elevating problem-solving, decision-making, creativity, communication, teamwork, and adaptability over content knowledge.

Not only is the world we are preparing students for changing but so are the students themselves. Today's students have grown up in a screen-based environment, which shapes their experiences and brain development differently from previous generations. For example, while they are the most digitally connected generation, they often lack the face-to-face interpersonal connections that strengthen their sense of belonging and collaboration. This has led to changes in students' brain development, altering how they learn and engage with

traditional school ecosystems. Their immersion in screen-based environments has affected them in two profound ways. First, they are increasingly disengaged by instructional practices at school that are disconnected from their experiences. Second, they struggle to remain resilient in the face of inevitable setbacks.

The explosive growth of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has also contributed to our evolving workforce and our changing students. The increasing dependence on AI by business and industry executives has alarmed political leaders, state commissioners, and district superintendents enough to understand that our seniors are not graduating with the skills and abilities to succeed in today's AI-dominant workplace. In schools, AI creates game-changing opportunities to tackle some of education's toughest challenges. The current stage of AI can personalize instruction to meet the needs of every student. Today's version of AI contains Apple Intelligence, which allows interaction through text, audio, video, and imaging on iPhones. It offers a personalized, conversational experience that feels like interacting with another human. This leap forward means students can now tap into AI to grasp complex concepts in ways that match their own learning levels, interests, and unique skills — all on their own devices. However, instead of integrating AI skills into curriculum and instruction, most schools are more concerned with AI's impact on cheating, plagiarism, and ethics. These are important considerations, but they must live alongside innovative applications of AI that mirror the real-world environments being reshaped by this technology.

Emerging National Models of Success

The widening disconnect between the education and business communities has shown leaders **why** we need to do some things differently in our schools. Working with the nation's most successful districts at both making students successful in school and preparing them for success in the world beyond school the Successful Practices Network (SPN) has seen firsthand the most innovative instructional practices and instructional designs specialized to help schools prepare students for success at school and in life after graduation. We have been fortunate to work with these districts because of our leadership role with AASA's *Learning 2025 National Commission on Student-Centered, Equity-Focused, and Future-Driven Education*, as well as the National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC) — a division of SPN. Because of these organizations, we have been able to study several hundreds of the nation's most trendsetting districts for the development of the resiliency skills necessary to attend school, stay engaged with school, and receive an education that prepares students for the rigors of life in the constantly evolving, technology-driven workplace and society.

Reforming a school system must be accomplished while dealing with immediate challenges such as discipline, attendance, staff turnover, and graduation rates. SPN understands that reform initiatives are most effectively implemented if current issues are simultaneously

resolved. SPN, through NDPC, offers a range of current issue resources such as practice guides, issue assessments, and professional development. These resources may be utilized independently but are best integrated with Rigor, Relevance, and Resilience reform.

Having worked with the nation's most rapidly improving schools, SPN has identified **what** they need to do differently. This paper describes how successful districts are making this happen in their schools and classrooms.

Shifting Content from the Primary Objective to an Enabling Objective

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act championed standards and state testing, thereby placing outsized emphasis on content knowledge, especially in middle and high schools. As a result, content became the primary objective in many classrooms, and standardized tests measured how well students mastered that content. However, with the rapid rise of AI's ability to access and use content faster than any human and synthesize it into new understandings, focusing only on content is no longer sufficient for our students.

While content remains necessary, it should serve as an enabling tool that supports the development of higher-order skills like critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity. Consequently, districts such as Naperville, Illinois; Baldwin, New York; Parkway, Missouri; and Mason City, Ohio have shifted their focus to transforming instructional practices. They emphasize that skills—not just content—are crucial for preparing students to become independent adults. For example, while content is still important in each of these districts, its application has evolved such that students use their content knowledge to craft prompts for and become proficient editors of AI tools. This shift—from content being the primary objective to an enabling objective—allows schools to prepare students for the realities of the modern world.

SPN has worked with a wide range of school systems across the nation to redesign their instructional programs so that they better prepare graduates to succeed and thrive in the modern workplace. In short, that process involves moving from the traditional approach of developing basic skills and knowledge that students apply in a single course or discipline (e.g., on a state assessment) to being able to apply higher-order skills and abilities to real-world unpredictable situations (e.g., as required in the modern, high-tech workplace). Once the school or district sees **how** it needs to transform, we guide them through the change process to get them from where they are currently to where they want to be in two years.

The HOW

We have documented and collected many case studies from which we can make general inferences about school systems and how they operate. For example, SPN's work with AASA's *Learning 2025: National Commission on Student-Centered, Equity-Focused*

Education, and Future-Driven Education looked at the future of public education in the U.S. by examining 120 “Demonstration Districts” that exemplified cutting-edge education systems. Simultaneously, NDPC’s long history of working with schools and districts to help their most at-risk and trauma-impacted students is research-based and respected nationwide. A common thread our team has discovered is that 1) it is hard to change school policy and procedures, and 2) people need to be convinced why change is needed. In other words, you can’t implement change successfully before and unless:

- Stakeholders understand why change is necessary
- The culture is such that people are ready for change
- Everyone trusts that leadership will implement change fairly.

In partnership with SPN, districts like Naperville, Illinois; Davie County, North Carolina; and Douglas County, Colorado have embraced this complex change process and have had dramatic success. One of the changes they have managed is their willingness to use AI to assist in developing student IEPs, writing lesson plans, creating assessments, and communicating with parents. This use of AI frees teachers from time-consuming tasks, allowing them to focus more on personalizing learning experiences for their students and freeing up some time for themselves on nights and weekends. Introducing AI in manageable steps helps teachers see it as a tool that enhances their role rather than as one that threatens their work. As a result, educators become more willing to integrate AI into their instructional practices, to facilitate personalized learning, and to make education more responsive to each student's needs.

Redesigning Instruction

In reality, most workers won’t be replaced by AI, but they will be replaced by other workers who have the skills and abilities to do the jobs that AI can’t. McKinsey & Company has organized 56 foundational skills that students will need to thrive in the future into four categories: **Cognitive** (e.g., creativity, planning, problem-solving, etc.); **Interpersonal** (e.g., teamwork, empathy, collaboration, etc.); **Self-Leadership** (e.g., self-control, coping, persistence, etc.); and **Digital** (e.g., digital ethics, programming literacy, smart systems, etc.)ⁱⁱ.

American education is good at teaching and assessing basic cognitive skills such as literacy and mathematics, but it does not do so well in teaching and assessing the creativity, planning, and problem-solving cognitive skills identified by McKinsey & Company as crucial for our students. Additionally, business leaders and classroom teachers both claim young people today are deficient in McKinsey’s Interpersonal and Self-leadership skills. The primary issue they cite is a lack of resilience. This deficiency goes beyond having poor coping skills and low perseverance. It is primarily a matter of not being resilient in the factors that

define Interpersonal and Self-leadership mindsets and skills, none of which are curriculum-based.

One of the most impactful changes school systems can make is to establish a school culture and instructional practices that promote the following resilience factors:

Connection: Every student/employee should have at least one connection with an adult (teacher or supervisor) who is committed to adding value to the relationship.

Belonging: School/work should be a place where individuals are accepted, understood, and safe. Rituals, routine, and a sense of predictability and belonging are key.

Achievement: Every student/employee needs a sense of achievement. A strengths-based approach, rather than solely assessing deficiencies, can aid in the development of this factor.

Autonomy: Students/employees can feel trapped, helpless, and out of control. Providing options and choices can build an internal locus of control, a sense of responsibility and self-management, and collaborative skills.

Fulfillment: The capstone of these skills is the awareness of and concern for others. Students/employees need opportunities to assist and meet the needs of others.

At SPN, we believe these resilience factors are more about instructional practices than they are about curriculum. Our consultants have seen firsthand how school systems manage their instructional redesign efforts. Remember, schools can't move faster than the rate of readiness and trust. Therefore, when we begin working with clients, our first questions are, "Where are you now? Where do you want to be in two years? Are you comfortable with the status quo? Do you feel the need to adapt? Do you want to achieve true transformation?" No matter the answers, transformation can't happen quickly and be effective and sustainable. It's an evolutionary planning process rooted in small, actionable steps.



Rigorous instruction and content are essential to instruction, but they are no longer adequate on their own. The application of relevant content is also important, but it does not guarantee preparedness for the world beyond school. Our mission as educators is to provide learning

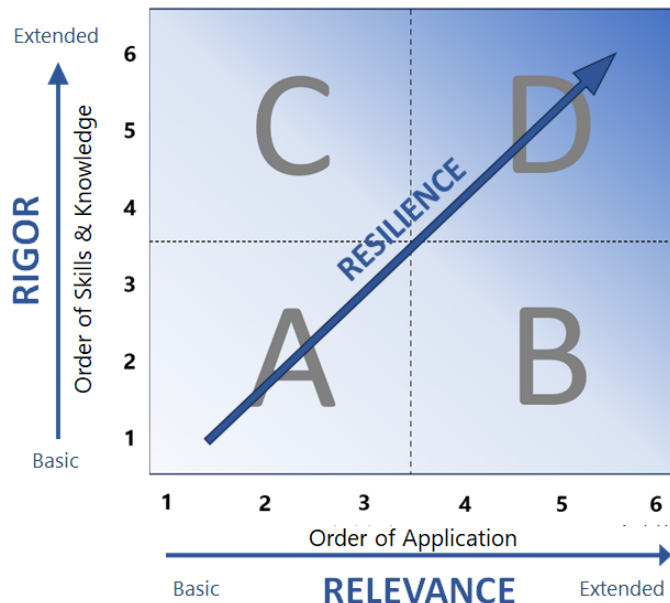
opportunities and experiences for all students that will ensure the best possible outcomes after they graduate.

In today's culture, where it is common for every child to receive a trophy or where kids expect to receive A's in exchange for minimal effort, resilience becomes relevant for higher-achieving kids as well as those who are struggling with their schooling experiences. Higher-achieving kids don't have the resilience to deal with coming in second place or getting a B on

a report card. This has been apparent when SPN consultants engage with community college leaders and faculty, who report that receiving a B is a crisis for some students, so much so that some quit their programs. Having the mindset to view failure as progress that will lead to eventual success is an essential step for students. This resilience will allow them to persevere, survive, and succeed throughout life and in the workplace of the future.

As students go through the education system, it is not enough for schools to provide learning experiences that focus on the strict application of content knowledge, students must develop skills to become resilient. Resilient students are more likely to attend school, positively engage with school, behave well, and benefit from rigorous and relevant instruction. SPN's Rigor-Relevance-Resilience (R³) Learning Model™ depicts this complex concept in a simple visual.

The Rigor-Relevance-Resilience (R³) Learning Model™



The Rigor-Relevance-Resilience (R³) Learning Model™ depicts **RIGOR** as six increasing levels of skills and knowledge on the vertical scale:

1. Know
2. Understand
3. Relate
4. Investigate
5. Analyze
6. Design

Most state testing programs end at level 2 (Understand); some will touch upon level 3 (Relate); and none test in levels 4, 5, or 6 (Investigate, Analyze, Design).

The application taxonomy for **RELEVANCE** accounts for the changing impact of AI on work and society. The Rigor-Relevance-Resilience (R³) Learning Model™ depicts relevance as six increasing levels of skills and knowledge application on the horizontal scale:

1. Develop basic skills and knowledge within a discipline
2. Apply basic skills and knowledge within a discipline
3. Apply basic skills and knowledge across disciplines individually and in teams
4. Apply higher-order skills and knowledge to predictable situations individually and in teams
5. Apply higher-order skills and knowledge to examine and evaluate predictable situations individually and in teams
6. Apply higher-order skills and knowledge to create original solutions to unpredictable situations individually and in teams

Currently, AI can do many of the applications described in levels 1–5. However, AI cannot yet do level 6, which requires the ability to create something completely original and new—something only humans are currently capable of.

The Rigor-Relevance-Resilience (R³) Learning Model™ is partitioned into four quadrants that outline the instructional practices and models found in schools:

- A:** Develop basic Academic, Interpersonal, and Self-Leadership skills and knowledge
- B:** Apply basic skills and knowledge to real-world predictable problems and situations
- C:** Develop higher-order skills and knowledge
- D:** Apply higher-order skills and knowledge to real-world unpredictable problems and situations

Generally, quadrants A and C depict what schools can do now (test basic content). AI is well-suited for quadrants A and B; however, human intelligence is required to work in quadrants C and D. But the world beyond school requires people to function in quadrants B and D. An employee, for example, will be expected to work well as part of a team. They will need to adapt to things they haven't seen or done before. That is where resilience will be a person's greatest quality and asset, which is why **RESILIENCE** is plotted diagonally across all quadrants. Once attained, resilience is typically life-long and equips individuals for success in interpersonal and workplace situations; even those that today's educators do not envision.

Most schools work primarily in quadrants A and C, and AI operates in quadrants A and B. Therefore, what must students do to become independent adults in our rapidly evolving

workplace and society? What do business and industry leaders want graduates to be able to do on the job? The answer lies in quadrant D, the pinnacle of the Rigor-Relevance-Resilience (R³) Learning Model™.

To move schools, instruction, and students into quadrant D, the role of the teacher must move away from **delivering instruction** to **managing learning**. Students must be participants in their educational experiences; they must find value in personalized learning; they must see their classrooms reflected in the real world. To that end, teachers must evolve into dynamic coaches, and their students are players on their teams. With this coach-player dynamic, the fundamental resilience factors of Connection, Belonging, Achievement, Autonomy, and Fulfilment become easier to develop along the axes of rigor and relevance.

Learn More and Connect With The Nation's Pacesetting Districts

Fortunately, a few school districts are lighting the path for all to follow. They have successfully made the necessary changes to their instructional strategies and design so that they now prepare students to thrive both in school and in the relentlessly evolving workplace and society. If you would like to connect with these districts to learn more about their successful practices and processes, please contact us at (518) 723-2063 or info@spnetwork.org.

These districts will be showcased at our **Future-Focused Learning Summit** in Orlando, Florida, from October 10-12, 2025. The Future-Focused Learning Summit brings together leaders and teams from the nation's most innovative K-12 schools and districts, offering a unique opportunity to learn from their successful strategies and practices. This summit is designed to provide actionable insights that leaders and educators can apply directly to their schools or districts. You'll hear from those who have pioneered approaches that work and leave equipped with the tools and a clear plan to make a meaningful impact in your system. For more information, visit <https://spnetwork.org/ffls/>.

Sources

ⁱ *From The Great Upheaval: Higher Education's Past, Present, and Uncertain Future*, by A. Levine and S. Van Pelt, 2024, Johns Hopkins University Press. Copyright © 2021. Data was originally published by the U.S. Census Bureau

ⁱⁱ Marco Dondi, Julia Klier, Frederic Panier, and Jorg Schubert; *Defining the skills citizens will need in the future world of work*; McKinsey & Company, June 2021