

REIMAGINING LEARNING IN THE CLASSROOM



FEATURING

Building 21, PA

Concord Community Schools, IN

Roanoke County Public Schools, VA



Reimagining Learning in the Classroom

How Competency, Transparency and Purpose Are Reshaping High School Classroom Instruction

Walk into most American high school classrooms and you'll find a familiar arrangement: a teacher at the front, students in rows, a textbook or screen between them. The lesson may be standards-aligned. The teacher may be skilled. But ask the students what they're learning and why it matters, and the most common answer is some version of: because it's on the test. This isn't a failure of individual teachers: It's a failure of design. For decades, the architecture of American secondary education has separated what students learn from why it matters — fragmenting knowledge into isolated disciplines, measuring achievement through point accumulation, treating skills like collaboration, critical thinking and self-direction as extras rather than core outcomes.

The Carnegie Foundation and XQ's Future of High School Network (FHS Network) brings together 24 school systems working to move American secondary education beyond the limits of the Carnegie Unit — the century-old system that measures learning in seat time rather than demonstrated competency. Across the network, systems work together, undertaking R&D to tackle shared challenges.

This story follows three systems in the network addressing a shared set of questions to reimagine learning in the classroom, where educators are redesigning daily instruction so that rigorous, real-world, competency-rich learning isn't an add-on or a pilot: It's what school has become.

In north-central Indiana, a district with 5,200 students is using Understanding by Design to weave durable skills into every unit and bring employer challenges directly into classrooms. In southwestern Virginia, a division (or district) that started its transformation a decade ago is asking high school seniors to stand before a panel and defend their growth as thinkers, communicators and collaborators. In Philadelphia, a nonprofit has built an entirely new competency-based system with learning progressions, a custom learning management platform, and a studio model designed to make learning transparent, motivating and impossible to mistake for compliance.

Concord Community Schools, Indiana:**MAKING IT MEAN SOMETHING**

Concord Community Schools sits in Elkhart County in north-central Indiana, serving 1,600 high school students. Superintendent Dan Funston is direct about what prompted the district's redesign: The gap between what students were learning and why it mattered had grown too wide — and the tools to close it already existed. Proven, research-based instructional approaches had been available for years; they just hadn't taken hold.

The approach Concord chose is Understanding by Design, developed decades ago, which asks teachers to start with what they want students to be able to do — not just know — and work backward to design learning experiences that get them there. The difference at Concord is the decision to make this the operating system for the entire district. Every unit is built around transfer goals: the ability to apply knowledge across disciplines and beyond the school walls. And every unit embeds the district's Portrait of a Graduate — 11 skills and dispositions, from civic engagement to deep questioning — that Concord has committed to developing in every student.



Kendra Divine, who leads the district's instructional design work, describes the logic in practical terms: A student developing critical thinking in social studies should recognize those as the same skills they'll use in science, and eventually when navigating an insurance form or a job negotiation after graduation. In a government class, for example, rather than ending a unit on the structure of government with a multiple-choice test, the Understanding by Design version asks students to communicate a reasoned position to an actual civic leader. The assessment is the real-world application.

Concord has been deliberate about bringing teachers along. The district redesigned its teacher evaluation model so that the instructional practices it values — such as student ownership, deep questioning and checks for understanding — are the same ones on the rubric. Instructional coaches are embedded in every building to support the shift. And rather than introduce everything at once, the district rolls out one core practice at a time, giving teachers training and support before layering on the next. Concord is also finding ways to bring the real world into the building. Through EPIC, a national program connecting employers with classrooms, biomedical students are tackling a challenge from their local hospital: What do you do when insurance says a patient can stay only two days, but ethically, they aren't ready to be discharged?

Indiana's policy environment has helped: The state now allows employer partnerships embedded within coursework to count toward work-based learning requirements. But Concord has gone further. The school board mandates one-on-one advising meetings for every student and their parent or guardian during eighth and ninth grade, so families understand the system and can become partners in planning.

The impact shows up in individual trajectories. Divine describes a student who arrived as a freshman — “completely average, doesn't stand out in the data at all” — who mentioned to a teacher that his family assumed he'd work at the local RV supply factory. He wanted something more but didn't know what. Through the district's apprenticeship program, he found a field he was passionate about, earned industry certifications, accumulated most of the credits



Concord Community Schools

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toward an associate's degree, and graduated with a job offer and an employer willing to pay for the rest of his degree. The question now is scale: Concord's board has passed new graduation requirements, which are effective with this year's freshmen and will require students to demonstrate competency in the Portrait of a Graduate skills through a capstone project. The learning experiences have to be in place before the requirement takes effect.

Roanoke County Public Schools, Virginia:

FROM POSTER TO PROMISE



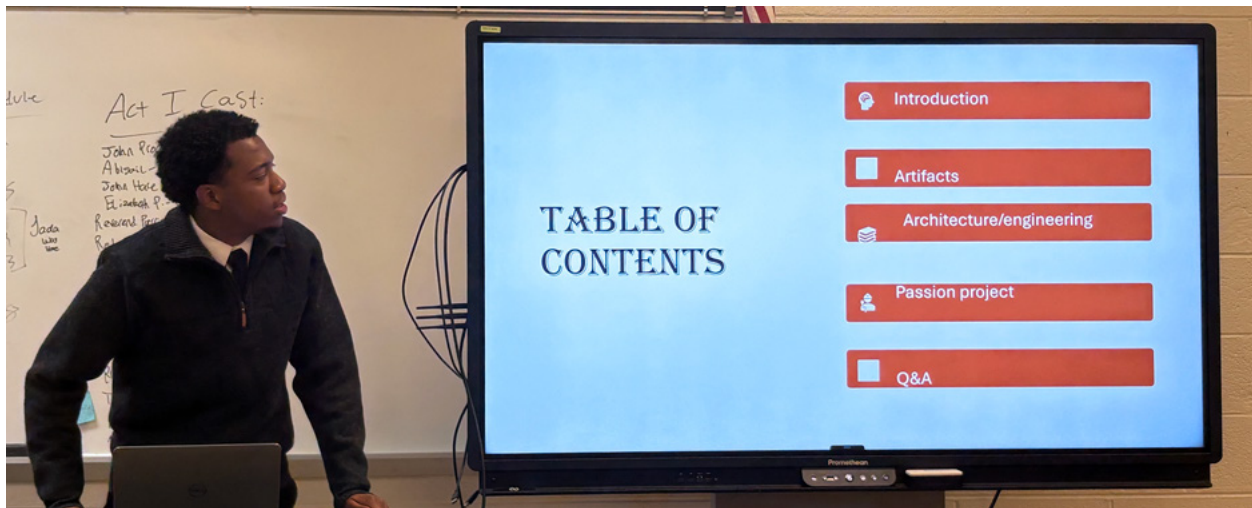
When Roanoke County Public Schools first introduced its C-Change Framework more than a decade ago, Superintendent Ken Nicely asked for feedback. At a summer leadership retreat, principals placed sticky notes on a wall listing one hope and one fear. The number-one hope: that the vision could be made real. The number-one fear: that it would turn out to be another flavor of the month. That was 2013.

The framework emerged from a recognition that Roanoke County was good at a particular kind of success — standardized test scores — but that this success was too narrow. When the district surveyed parents, teachers and community members, hardly anyone mentioned test scores. The things they cared about were transferable skills, hands-on application and classrooms where students felt respected and intellectually engaged. The framework defines deeper learning as learning that is engaging and purposeful — not just emotionally engaging, Nicely is careful to add, but intellectually and cognitively engaging. It balances standards alignment with learning culture, school climate and the resources teachers need to teach differently.

The turning point came when leadership decided to shift the district's Opportunity Ready Graduate Profile from aspiration to promise. Mike Riley, who leads the division's secondary innovation work, puts it plainly: "A lot of divisions have them. But unfortunately, when you talk to a lot of divisions, it's a beautiful poster."

Roanoke County wanted something measurable. The profile includes six skills, but the team focused on three: collaboration, critical thinking and communication. They built “I Can” statements describing what each skill looks like at every grade-level band from K–2 through high school — conceived from the start as a K–12 continuum, not a high school initiative with an elementary add-on.

The capstone is a senior portfolio defense. Students curate artifacts of their growth that are drawn from classwork, extracurricular activities, jobs and volunteer experiences — and then they stand before a panel of adults to tell the story of their learning journey. The panel scores the defense and asks probing questions designed not to trip students up but to draw out evidence they may have undersold.



The defenses have proven to be the single most powerful tool for converting skeptical teachers. “And then they sit, and they hear the kids tell their story,” Riley says. Not a single teacher who has participated on a panel has come away unconvinced. One student, a weekend volunteer EMT, described the communication, collaboration and critical thinking required to manage an accident scene. Another talked about skills built as a night manager at a local restaurant. The defenses create a space where the student council president and the restaurant night manager are both valued for the same thing: transferable skills demonstrated in real contexts.

Student feedback has reshaped the work. Early on, the division emphasized the artifact. Students pushed back, noting they didn’t realize how far they’d grown until they started reflecting on the journey. So the team deepened the reflective component, asking students to trace not just what they produced but who they

Roanoke County Public Schools



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became. Nicely describes one of his proudest moments: hearing two students casually mention that they'd failed their defense the first time, received feedback and came back to pass. For him, this was proof of two things at once: The standards were real, and the students had the resilience to meet them.

Last year, approximately 300 seniors earned the Opportunity Ready diploma seal across the division's five high schools. This year, Roanoke County is aiming for close to 80% of graduates. Nicely remembers the father who approached him during the early design process, hopefulness visible in his eyes: "This is all so wonderful, but do you think we can actually make it real?" A decade later, he now has an answer.



Building 21, Pennsylvania:

TAKING THE MYSTERY OUT OF LEARNING

When the Building 21 Leadership Team set out to build a competency-based instructional model in 2013, they expected to find one they could adopt. The field wasn't ready, so they built their own. In the process, they created a system that now operates across public, charter, independent and alternative education schools in multiple states and countries.

The model starts from a deceptively simple insight: Traditional grading systems are opaque. Students rarely know what goes into a grade, because every grade is assembled from a different mix of inputs: some measuring skills; some measuring compliance; some measuring whether you brought in a box of tissues for extra credit. Building 21's response is a set of K–12 learning progressions built from national standards frameworks but rewritten to describe what learning looks like at every level, not what students failed to do. “The progressions have no deficit language,” explains Sandra Moumoutjis, Executive Director, Learning Innovation Network. “It's not what I didn't do. It's, at this level, I can do this. At the next level, I can do this. It's a roadmap.” This shift transfers ownership of learning from teacher to student.

The progressions live inside Beacon, a learning management system Building 21 developed because no existing platform could do what they needed. Beacon is designed as the student's gradebook, not the teacher's. Every piece of evidence, across learning experiences flows into a portfolio-based structure. Students see their progress over time and against clear performance targets. If a student exceeds targets, the system can award honors credit: making advanced recognition available to anyone who demonstrates higher performance, not just those rostered into an honors track.

The instructional model animating the progressions is the studio model, which is a marriage of project-based learning and competency-based instruction that addresses a common critique of project-based approaches: that the learning is often unintentional, an afterthought to the project. The studio model starts with the competencies students need to reach and an essential question that gives the work meaning, ending with an authentic impact that answers the question students shouldn't have to ask: Why do I need to learn this?

The model also embeds what the field now calls durable skills — collaboration, conflict management, goal-setting, time management — as equal to academic competencies. This changes school culture in unexpected ways. When students have conflicts, the response becomes an opportunity for skill development rather than purely a discipline issue. The Philadelphia school redesigned its personalized learning plan so that the focus isn't on how many conflicts a student has had — it's on whether they've been restored. A student with a difficult semester can still see a record that reflects growth, not just infractions.

Because grades reflect current performance rather than an average of all attempts, students aren't penalized for learning slowly at first and accelerating later. Revision is built in: Students receive feedback in the language of the progressions, self-assess and then revise — a cycle that teaches self-advocacy as a byproduct of assessment. Early correlation data from one of Building 21's founding schools suggests that the approach is working: Over 10 years, students performing at the highest levels on the progressions are enrolling and persisting in college at rates that correlate more strongly than standardized test scores or SATs.

Building 21

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Alumni come back regularly to say they finally understand what the model was trying to do. One student texted on her first day at community college—her foundations class was covering growth mindset and the skills needed for success, and she kept raising her hand. The professor asked where she'd gone to high school. Her message to the Building 21 team: "I know we pushed back on you all the whole time we were in high school, but you made me stand out on my first day in college."

The Common Thread

North-central Indiana, southwestern Virginia, Philadelphia and a growing national network. There isn't a shared curriculum or a common platform that connects these three systems. It's a shared diagnosis: that the traditional classroom model of "content delivered, content tested, grade assigned" fails to develop the skills students most need and fails to help them see themselves as the owners of their own learning.

What they share is structural: Each system discovered that the classroom could not change until the systems around it changed first — evaluation models, grading policies, advising structures, technology platforms. And each system also discovered that when students can finally see what they're working toward, something shifts. They stop being passengers, and they start navigating.

None of these systems claim to have it figured out. Concord needs more time and coaches to reach every classroom. Roanoke is still working to ensure that classroom experiences show up in portfolio defenses alongside the extracurricular ones. Building 21 is still wrestling with how to overlay competency progressions onto mathematics. But in each case, the incompleteness is the point — the work is designed to be iterated, not installed.

In Concord, a student who never imagined taking a college class discovers a career path and graduates with a job, credentials and an employer investing in their future. In Roanoke County, a student who failed their defense comes back, tries again and earns the cord that says they're opportunity-ready. In Philadelphia, a freshman pushes back on the whole model for four years and then texts their teachers on the first day of college to say: You were right!

These are not stories about programs. They are stories about what happens when the classroom itself becomes a place where students learn who they are.



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LEARN MORE



Building 21

Building 21, a nonprofit founded in 2013 and based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, is dedicated to redesigning learning environments. Our mission is to support districts, schools, programs and communities in building learner-centered pathways so all young people can have the future they want. We accomplish this by providing differentiated levels of support for implementation and ongoing operations to programs, schools and systems. Based on identified needs, we offer a student-centered learning framework, intensive leadership coaching, professional development, change management support, and technology and systems uniquely designed for student-centered learning.

Learn more at: <https://building21.org>.



Concord Community Schools

Our mission is to ensure all students' academic success in a safe and connected environment.

Concord Community Schools is a public school district that serves approximately 5,200 students across seven school buildings. Concord is known for high-quality educational programs, top-notch music and athletic departments, and a family-friendly environment that promotes the development of the whole child.

Learn more at: <https://www.concord.k12.in.us>.



Roanoke County Public Schools

Our mission is to invest in our community's future by preparing our students with Opportunity Ready skills as defined in the RCPS Profile of a Graduate. We are preparing every student, in every school, and in every classroom to be Opportunity Ready, to successfully meet the challenges and take full advantage of opportunities that lie ahead. We strive to ensure quality learning experiences equip all students with skills to adapt and thrive in a changing global environment.

Learn more at: <https://www.rcps.us>.



Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

The mission of the Carnegie Foundation is to catalyze transformational change in education so that every student has the opportunity to live a healthy, dignified and fulfilling life. Established by an act of Congress in 1906, the Foundation has a rich history of driving significant change in the education sector, including the creation of TIAA-CREF, the Education Testing Service (ETS), the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), Pell Grants and the Carnegie Classifications for Higher Education. Today, the Foundation is dedicated to the transformation of the American high school and making the postsecondary sector a more vital engine for economic mobility.

Learn more at: www.carnegiefoundation.org.

