

Classroom Innovation, State Policy Paving the Way for the Workforce of Tomorrow

By Sean Slone, CSG Senior Policy Analyst

Bellevue Big Picture School, located in Bellevue, Washington, is part of a network of schools now in 25 states that is providing an innovative approach to education. Supporters say this new approach is helping students better prepare for a world of work that's expected to be increasingly dynamic and uncertain in the years ahead. The Big Picture model focuses on shaping curriculum to the interests and goals of each student, helping them identify real world mentors and businesses from which they can learn, and measuring their abilities based on the quality of their work rather than how they perform on a standardized test.

"Models like those in Bellevue Big Picture, and other mastery-based and project-based learning models, enable students to build strong problem-solving, critical thinking, interpersonal communication, creativity, decision-making, and technology skills," said Eileen Harrity, Chief of Staff for the Bellevue School District No. 405. "Those skills are in high demand in the current workplace and also the workplace of the future. By demonstrating that mastery-based and project-based education can be used to inspire a love of learning in students, while preparing them for college, careers, and life, the Big Picture model demonstrates that schools can think creatively and innovatively in structuring learning programs without sacrificing rigor or preparation."

The Big Picture model and other education innovations are being looked at closely as part of CSG's Future of Work national task force, which began work in 2019 and which will issue a final report and national framework by year's end.

Washington state Representative Vandana Slatter, whose district contains Bellevue Big Picture, serves on the task force's Workforce of Tomorrow Subcommittee. "Innovative models spur important conversations with students and families, and this has been the case with the Big Picture school in Bellevue," she said. "There is deep support and passion for this model from students, teachers, and members of the community."

"Big Picture schools are engaging students by having them participate in judged exhibitions and community project-based, mentor-guided internships, as well as individual learning plans and self-directed study rather than traditional classes. The flagship of the Big Picture network is the Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center ("The Met" for short), a public high school district in Rhode Island. But not every Big Picture school looks like The Met or like the Bellevue Big Picture School for that matter", said Jeff Petty, a Regional Director for Big Picture Learning, who works with schools in Colorado, Idaho, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota and Wyoming, in addition to Washington.

"There is a lot of variation school to school and region to region," he said. "Though from my perspective, the variation depends less on where the schools are located, including the political climate, and more on local leadership differences, including at the building level and at the district level. ... We have schools in states that some people might perceive as restrictive that sort of show higher fidelity to our design principles." Petty said that, for the most part, a well-run Big Picture school tends to do fine regardless of a state's requirements around standardized testing. "[Testing is] simultaneously a thing we try to de-prioritize in order to prioritize other things and then also a thing that I think our

schools generally do fairly well once the schools are up and running and kids are engaged,” he said.

While standardized testing may not be getting too much in the way of what Big Picture is trying to do, the school network has benefitted from revised state policies in some places, Petty noted. For example, Washington has legislation on the books that allows schools to apply for a waiver from credit-based graduation so that the schools can have more of a competency-based approach. Some Big Picture schools in the state also operate under an alternative learning framework, which allows instructors to meet with students infrequently, so long as they are moving forward in their work. And some California Big Picture schools are considered independent study schools, which allows students to spend a certain part of their study time away from the school building.

Petty said he has also seen Big Picture schools have an influence well beyond their doors. “In a number of places, the Big Picture School comes in and starts to shift how the district around it thinks about teaching and learning,” he said. He points to a school district south of Seattle that was reshaped by a new superintendent to emphasize internships, identifying the needs of individual students and new ways of measuring competency and tracking student growth.

Need for Paradigm Shift

Of course, the Big Picture model is just one model. Recent initiatives like the Brookings Institution’s “Leapfrogging” initiative and the Clayton Christensen Institute’s Canopy project have identified numerous promising practices in schools around the country and around the world. But education experts worry it may not be amounting to much.

“I can name you a dozen Big Picture-type innovations in the U.S. doing amazing things but here’s the bottom line: it’s not translating into a shift in the system,” said Anthony Mackay, CEO and President at the National Center on Education and the Economy, who spoke to the Workforce of Tomorrow Subcommittee at the CSG National Conference in December. “I think the conversation we need to have … is to say, ‘how can we reset our learning systems to be fit-for-purpose?’” Mackay said the need for such a paradigm shift in the education system is brought into sharp relief by recently released results from the 2018 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which tests 15-year-olds in 79 countries on reading literacy, math and science. “Since the beginning of this testing in 2000, many of the countries—in fact the majority of the countries—have not moved; they have flatlined,” he said. “What’s it going to take to lift the performance and achievement of young people? It will certainly take innovation (like Big Picture). But it will take a major redesign of the learning system, not just innovations in particular locations.”

How States Can Help

Educators recognize the work it will take to accomplish such a major redesign and are quick to suggest some steps state governments and their partners may be able to take in the years ahead. “Government organizations will need to examine the ways in which current policies and laws, including funding sources, credit allocation, or enrollment requirements either support or impede innovation in our schools,” said Harrity, the Bellevue district Chief of Staff. “Colleges and universities can support paradigm-shift by reviewing and refining their entrance requirements to allow students who progress under [mastery or competency-based] programs to qualify for admission. Government and educational organizations can also codify best practices and provide technical assistance to schools or districts who want to implement innovative models to ensure those

models are implemented with rigor and are preparing students for success. The type of change desired will likely take a multi-pronged approach, including partnering with model providers like Big Picture and also learning from other states and districts who have successfully implemented innovative models.”

Petty suggests that states can pass legislation to seed and promote education innovation. “It’s not the state saying, ‘we’ll need to be different and you’ll need to do it like this,’” he said. “But it’s the state saying ‘we realize that we need new approaches to accountability. We need new approaches to student learning that are more student-centered and that involve the community. So, we invite you, districts, or we invite you, clusters of schools, to propose to us how [you’re] going to run the program and demonstrate that it’s good for students.’”

Many believe it may also be important for policymakers to reconsider how test scores are used to gage student progress, to drive education policy, and sometimes to bar the door to further education for some. “We understand that individuals are very concerned that either themselves or their children are being defined as a single number,” said Mary LeFebvre, principal research scientist for workforce policy at ACT, a private sector partner working with CSG’s Future of Work Task Force. “We have been trying at least since I’ve been with [ACT] for the last nine years to really provide more of a nuanced message to policymakers, whether that be through a state department of education or at the local level about how to appropriately use a tool like a standardized assessment to make better policy decisions. … We need to become more nuanced with our policy and not use it as a way to just provide a stick but to also provide opportunity and flexibility at a local level about how to achieve … goals.”

Mackay, the CEO of the National Center on Education and the Economy, said we should we looking for new metrics of success entirely. “If we’ve got young people graduating with a degree and taking up to three to four years to find a full-time job … you’ve got something radically wrong with the interface between further tertiary education and the world of work,” he said. “It’s not working. … One metric would be that when you graduate, you are already fully engaged in work. Why would you be waiting to graduate in order to get work? Have a look at the dual sector universities across the globe. They guarantee you that at the end of year one of your undergraduate program that you’re in some kind of relationship with employment. … You’re already there. … You’re not waiting until you graduate before you’re a part of an emerging workforce.”

Washington state is working on programs to better connect education and work thanks to a package of bills signed last spring by Governor Jay Inslee known as the Workforce Education Investment Act. The Act provides financial aid to more than 110,000 qualified students to attend college for free or at a discounted rate, as well as expanding the Governor’s Career Connect Washington Initiative, which establishes a study-and-work approach so students can get real life work experience and high school or college credit at the same time.

Bellevue-area State Representative Slatter co-sponsored the legislation and sees the initiative as essential to paving the way to new career pathways in her state. That’s because while some Washington companies are able to create worthwhile internship programs—notably aerospace giant Boeing with its longstanding Core Plus program to provide skilled trades training for high school students in the state—other companies struggle to do so. “Career Connect … is basically the group of intermediaries that work between colleges, high schools, and businesses,” she said. “They’re like the navigators and the ambassadors and

the catalysts for building programs because companies don't have time to build a program that makes sense and they don't even know what they need to be able to give someone a credential. And high schools and colleges don't have time necessarily or might be completely different from one to the other and it's not helpful to the company. So, you need people in the middle to sort of coordinate all of that and we have that. We still haven't resourced them as fully as we need to. We just didn't have the dollars to do that but if you don't have navigators through that process, then everybody's sort of stuck on their own. It's only extraordinary leaders who make it happen and that's rare. ... Recent legislation and initiatives in Washington have supported the thinking that students deserve multiple pathways to meaningful work."

The Workforce of Tomorrow Subcommittee which, along with three other Future of Work subcommittees, will contribute to the national task force report due for release in December 2020, plans to focus its policy recommendations in two areas:

- Fostering lifelong learning opportunities with non-traditional partnerships; and
- Redefining metrics of success for lifelong career readiness.

[The Future of Work Task Force](#) will meet in June in Lexington, Kentucky, as well as December at the CSG National Conference in Santa Fe, New Mexico.