Deeper Learning Audience Research Insights

2017

Deeper Learning Audience Research Insights

This report offers insights and ideas for communicating about deeper learning based on research done with key audiences.

Hattaway Communications conducted 16 in-depth interviews with key decisionmakers and influencers, including policymakers, business leaders, school administrators, journalists and social justice leaders. Concurrently, we held six total focus groups with teachers, parents and students in Manchester, New Hampshire and Denver, Colorado.

These conversations helped us learn more about the opportunities and challenges for communicating with these audiences about deeper learning practices and outcomes. They led to insights about what different audiences need to know and feel about deeper learning, as well as ideas for how to reach them.

Executive Summary

This memo is organized into three main sections, which contain ideas and insights for 1) defining deeper learning; 2) raising awareness and changing attitudes toward deeper learning; and 3) motivating audiences to take action.

Below, we have outlined the main ideas from each of these sections. The body of the document details the insights that drive these ideas, including quotes from the interviews and focus groups.

Defining Deeper Learning

Current stakeholders across all audiences lack a common definition of deeper learning, and tend to explain it differently. In addition, some audiences such as policymakers, parents and teachers don't find the term intuitive.

As we continue audience research to explore the specific language that resonates with them, our initial ideas for communicating about deeper learning are:

Focus on the competencies rather than trying to define deeper learning as a whole. The competencies are clearer and more intuitive, and audiences—including parents, teachers and students —generally agree that students need to be developing these skills in school.

Show what developing these competencies enables students to do, rather than trying to define what each of the competencies are. Describe what students can do when they have these skills, or what different classrooms look like when teachers implement deeper learning practices.

Avoid jargon and "eduspeak." Complex language and jargon inhibit understanding and can create skepticism among nonexperts, such as parents and teachers. To facilitate understanding and build trust, use clear, everyday language that makes messages as intuitive as possible.

Explain how deeper learning helps students both in and out of the classroom. Sharing stories of students applying the skills they learn in different classes to other areas of their lives helps audiences value the deeper learning competencies as life skills that help students succeed in future careers as well as in the classroom.

Raising Awareness & Changing Attitudes

Most audiences agree that education in the United States is outdated and that students don't all get the same educational opportunities. To build demand for deeper learning practices in all classrooms, advocates must communicate not only what deeper learning is but also why it is important and why audiences should care about implementing it. Again, we will continue to explore the ideas and language that resonate with different audiences, and some initial ideas are as follows:

Start with an aspirational message about the vision of education as a gateway to equal opportunity. In particular, show how deeper learning practices help schools update their approaches and provide students with the skills they need to prepare for the jobs of the 21st century, even the jobs that don't exist yet. Many interviewees saw economic opportunity and jobs as a key way to achieve a more equal society.

Advocates should articulate the benefits of deeper learning for students, economies and our democracy. Showing how supporting deeper learning can have a tangible effect on local communities, economies and even our democracy can motivate more audiences to care about deeper learning. This may be most effective if done through student or school success stories.

Show how deeper learning practices help teachers and schools do more with the resources they have. When talking about changes to classroom practices, advocates should share tools and resources that would help teachers implement them, and show how even small changes to existing curricula can make an impact.

Motivating Audiences to Take Action

The education space is crowded, and motivating the three main audiences for deeper learning—teachers, parents and policymakers—to take action requires breaking through the noise and engaging them in meaningful ways. Initial ideas for how to motivate our audiences to take action are:

Meet audiences where they are. Identify trusted messengers among your target audiences or their influencers and empower them to champion deeper learning by sharing information and resources with their networks.

Focus communications and outreach on grassroots leaders at the state and local level, including community leaders, youth leaders and local business leaders. Engage partners, including community leaders, youth leaders and local business leaders with experience working at local levels, by clearly communicating how implementing deeper learning practices in schools in their community can help them achieve their larger goals.

Share success stories while also being transparent about integrating deeper learning as a process that is different for every school. Provide resources for administrators and policymakers at the state and local level that help them understand why deeper learning practices might look different for different schools and explain how they can measure and evaluate their progress over time.

Defining Deeper Learning

> **Audiences familiar with deeper learning don't have a shared definition for it or a common language to explain it.**

When asked to define deeper learning, stakeholders came up with very different descriptions, often only touching on one or two of the competencies.

> "Deeper learning is an opportunity for you to learn how to proverbially get yourself up, dust yourself off and get back in the game. Propose a new hypothesis and try to go after the next thing."
> – *Administrator*
>
> "The ability to use not just content but those dispositions in a variety of settings where a student is going deeper into their learning, the whole issue of depth of knowledge. It's also the ability to apply learning into a much deeper, richer variety of settings through project-based learning, through a variety of means." – *Policymaker*

Those with a stronger understanding of deeper learning outcomes often described them by focusing on individual students. Some said that rather than trying to define the term, they always try to show deeper learning in action.

> "When I hear deeper learning I think about students engaged in meaningful work. I think about student voice and choice, student agency as a part of the learning process. I think about interdisciplinary connections so it's not just about teaching science in the 45 minute block that is allotted to science, but it's about a more flexible schedule that allows kids to think more deeply about what they're learning. I think about specific and strategic self-reflection and self-monitoring where kids and teachers together are owning that learning and paying attention to how things are going." – *Administrator*
>
> "Developing a whole child in terms of their ability to function and deal with complex issues of society, being able to address large-scale problems in the community that are authentic, and the ability to work with others, to express creativity, complex problem-solving all of those issues. That's how I look at deeper learning." – *Policymaker*

Those unfamiliar with the term didn't understand deeper learning intuitively, and some were even skeptical of it.

Audiences unfamiliar with deeper learning are either unsure of what it might include or think it simply means going deeper into content knowledge.

> "Taking that one subject and really diving deep into it, to get the kids to really think deeper. Not multiple subjects, where things change every other week, but it's one, like the project approach." – *Teacher, Denver, Colorado*
>
> "I think the idea is going deeper, not just surface level stuff, which is like comprehension and when you're thinking about the hierarchy of learning. You're getting to more complex ideas." – *Civil rights leader*
>
> "Getting more into a subject than just surface." – *Parent, Manchester, New Hampshire*

Some teachers were skeptical of the new terminology, and policymakers said that having different terms makes it confusing to navigate ideas in the education space.

> "The experiences I've had are: Somebody comes along with some great idea, it's got some terminology that you use. [It's really] something else from 20 years ago, they called it something else and somebody is trying to get a promotion somewhere or something." – *Teacher, Manchester, New Hampshire*
>
> "Part of the problem with a lot of these terms is [they] become buzzwords that don't really mean anything." – *Policymaker*

Once introduced to the six competencies, all audiences agreed that students need to be developing these skills and strengths in school in order to succeed in their careers and lives.

When introduced to the competencies, nearly all audiences, including parents and teachers, found them intuitive and easy to understand. They recognized the skills they had previously identified as critical for success in at least one of the competencies.

> "I think this is the way that districts are going to go because I think there is recognition that doing only the academic piece is not enough. We have to have children who can grow up to be global citizens who can meet the demands that employers are making." – *Parent, Denver, Colorado*
>
> "I like it. I think it sounds like a great way to learn. I think this would help students be more involved." – *Parent, Manchester, New Hampshire*

Parents and teachers weren't sure about packaging the competencies under a single term, and stakeholders expressed a desire to focus more on the competencies rather than defining deeper learning as an overarching idea.

Stakeholders familiar with deeper learning also expressed a desire to communicate more about the competencies themselves rather than deeper learning as a whole.

> "I understand the desire to take these six competencies and put them into a bucket of deeper learning, but some aspects I feel like we should just say what we mean. Let's talk about these six things…if you take each of these things individually, they're probably less controversial than some of the terminology that's unloaded." – *Policymaker*

When asked to come up with their own term to describe all of the competencies, teachers and parents struggled to boil them down to one idea.

> "That's why it's hard to come up with what are we going to call this—because it's like different things." – *Parent, Denver, Colorado*

Teachers and parents also felt that the current descriptions of the competencies use too much educational jargon to define the competencies, and wanted the definitions to use simpler language instead.

> "There are so many pedagogical terms here…are we bogged down by all of this need to categorize every single thing that every single kid does?" – *Teacher, Manchester, New Hampshire*
>
> "Academic, the idea of just academics like, 'Sit in your desk; read these books, spit out this information on this test.' It sort of turns me off." – *Teacher, Manchester, New Hampshire*
>
> "I crossed out 'academic mindsets' because…I thought that was very limiting and very restrictive. These could be accomplished under a number of different mindsets." – *Parent, Denver, Colorado*

IDEAS

Focus on the competencies rather than trying to define deeper learning as a whole. The competencies are clearer and more intuitive, and audiences—including parents, teachers and students—generally agree that students need to be developing these skills in school.

Show what developing these competencies enables students to do, rather than trying to define what each of the competencies is. Psychology tells us that it's easier to understand what something does than what it is, and the strongest deeper learning partners and champions already communicate in this way. Describe what students can do when they have these skills or what different classrooms look like when teachers implement deeper learning practices. Rather than trying to define critical thinking, for example, explain how it helps students grapple with and solve challenging problems. This is especially useful for helping audiences understand more abstract concepts, such as academic mindsets.

Avoid jargon and "eduspeak." Any terms that have specialized meaning in the education field, such as "character" or "project-based learning," cause division in the field, as well as confusion and fears of "just another education idea" among administrators and policymakers. Nonexpert audiences trust language that they can easily understand. Complex language and jargon inhibit understanding and can create skepticism among nonexperts such as parents and teachers. To facilitate understanding and build trust, use clear, everyday language that makes messages as intuitive as possible.

Explain how deeper learning helps students both in and out of the classroom. Many parents and teachers clearly saw the value of the deeper learning competencies as life skills that would help students be successful in their future careers as well as in the classroom. Sharing stories of students applying the skills they learn in different classes to other areas of their lives helps audiences make those connections.

Raising Awareness & Changing Attitudes

While audiences see education as a gateway to opportunity and equity for students, some struggle to articulate the benefits for society as a whole.

All audiences agree that the purpose of public education in the United States is to prepare young people to succeed throughout their lives. Audiences also view education as a means to create a more equal world and understand that educational attainment has implications for many different outcomes.

> "[Education] is just trying to get them prepared for being a citizen, being a responsible member of society, at a bare minimum. Ideally though, it should be a whole lot more than that."
> – *Parent, Manchester, New Hampshire*
>
> "You can talk about health. You can talk about economics. You can talk about jobs. For me, I place my bets on education…I really don't see any large-scale social change in poor communities, for poor people, without literacy and numeracy." – *Journalist/social justice activist*

Most people, however, did not bring up how providing education to all children connects to broader benefits for communities and society. Those who articulated these benefits mostly focused on the economic impact.

> "[Education creates] more revenue from higher paying jobs, more people lifted out of poverty. All of the implications that has for a nation when their citizens are well-educated versus who can't really go to college because they're not ready for any type of post-secondary education."
> – *Civil rights leader*
>
> "You're trying to keep homegrown talent. You're trying to keep those kids in the area so that they can go on and have jobs there and can be a part of the renewal of economic circumstances for those areas. And these schools do that." – *Journalist*

Audiences agree that education is outdated.

Parents especially acknowledge that the prevailing educational structure wasn't designed to teach students the skills they need in the modern world—and that opportunities to develop these skills in and out of the classroom aren't accessible for certain students.

> "If you look at how life has changed…even the jobs that our kids are going to have probably haven't even been invented yet. But schools run the same as when they first invented it for farmers. Everything down to the times, the months they go [to school], the subjects they're learning— it's all totally outdated." – *Parent, New Hampshire*

While most audiences agree that not all students have the educational opportunities they need to be successful, they disagree about the cause of this gap.

Most people agree that inequalities in the current educational system limit some students' access to crucial educational opportunities. However, audiences have different opinions on the causes of this inequality, and whether those causes are systemic, specific to particular districts, or personal failings on behalf of teachers or students themselves.

> "I feel like I can empower my kids. I can give them all these tools. I can encourage them to take these steps. I can encourage them to go to college, but there are these systems that are put in place by our schooling systems and by our country that are going to continue to put up roadblocks for our kids, at least for the kids that I serve, continuously. It's hard for me to really stand there and feel like I can really make a difference in their life when everything's truly standing against them."
> – *Teacher, Denver, Colorado*
>
> "Housing [and where you live] deeply affects health outcomes and education outcomes and ability to get to jobs." – *Civil rights leader*
>
> "A lot of our children of color are not getting the education that they need… It's so frustrating for me to walk the hallway and see so many of our children of color in the hallway because teachers don't want them in their classroom." – *Teacher, Denver, Colorado*
>
> "The kind of teachers you see in a lot of low-income schools, high poverty schools, are teachers who aren't really prepared, who are really struggling, and the conditions aren't there for deeper learning to occur." – *Civil rights leader*

Parents and teachers agree that a lack of support for teachers often inhibits students' ability to learn, including insufficient time for professional development, insufficient resources and large class sizes..

> "The educators nowadays are very quick to get through school, that they're not really obtaining the necessary requirements to really teach a class." – *Parent, Denver, Colorado*
>
> "What's hard for me is if a new thing comes along, the next big idea…if you want people to buy into it, you need to dedicate a lot of time to train [teachers] and see what it looks like and practice it. Our school does a poor job." – *Teacher, Denver, Colorado*
>
> "Just general class size. I've had years with 30 students. Right now, I have 25. I'm at capacity for my grade level. I have students performing beyond grade level. I'm struggling to meet their reading group right now because I need to give my students who are struggling to be at a kindergarten level in second grade daily reading instruction." – *Teacher, Manchester, New Hampshire*

Teachers also say that while they remain passionate about finding new ways to help each of their students achieve their full potential, they are bombarded every year with information on new initiatives that simply repackage old ideas. They also have limited time to explore new approaches and must use classroom time to focus on mandated curricula and test preparation.

> "Manchester, New Hampshire is not very good at sticking to a program, or anything, for longer than a year or two. Then, they just throw something new at us." – *Teacher, Manchester, New Hampshire*
>
> "Everything is from the top, and there's no input from us. I should say little input, but that makes me frustrated." – *Teacher, Manchester, New Hampshire*

IDEAS

When discussing deeper learning, start with an aspirational message about the vision of education as a gateway to equal opportunity. This establishes common ground with audiences, clearing the way to discuss the causes of inequity and how deeper learning practices and outcomes can help alleviate them.

In particular, show how deeper learning practices help schools update their approaches and provide students with the skills they need to prepare for the jobs of the 21st century, even the jobs that don't exist yet.

Advocates should articulate the broader benefits of deeper learning for students, economies and our democracy. Showing how supporting deeper learning can have a tangible effect on local communities, economies and even our democracy can motivate more audiences to care about deeper learning. This may be most effectively done through student or school success stories.

Advocates should also think about the best messengers to articulate these benefits. Local community leaders, business leaders and state and local politicians can serve as effective champions among their peers.

Show how deeper learning practices help teachers and schools do more with the resources they have. When talking about changes to classroom practices, advocates should share tools and resources that would help teachers implement them, and show how even small changes to existing curricula can make an impact.

In addition, starting by introducing the six competencies and explaining how deeper learning practices build on what works, rather than getting bogged down trying to define deeper learning as a term, may help to offset resistance to ideas teachers see as just another fad in educational approaches.

Motivating Audiences to Take Action

Parents, teachers and students don't necessarily seek out education information. The best way to reach them is through messengers who are part of their existing networks.

Parents and teachers tend to trust their peers or school networks to inform them about education. Parents also rely on the school to send home information, including through social media groups organized by their children's schools.

> "Any little blurb that comes through, you get it through other teachers. You get it through immediate colleagues." – *Teacher, Manchester, New Hampshire*
>
> "Having colleagues who were doing it really helped [teachers] out. I think that helped them with their fear because they had somebody that they could go see right around the corner." – *Superintendent*
>
> "With the schools for our kids, we have the private pages for like Facebook or whatever. I find out a lot through that." – *Parent, Denver, Colorado*

Students, on the other hand, may look to their peers for opinions or to learn from their experiences but don't see them as trusted sources of information. Instead, they tend to rely on their teachers.

> "You can talk to a lot of people on social media and say, they have a good college where they live. They can live on the other side of America, and say, it's one of your interests, and you never knew about that college before. Talking to them could help you know about that college."– *Student, Manchester, New Hampshire*
>
> "[I'd go to] counselors or a teacher that I have a more personal connection with or my mom." – *Student, Manchester, New Hampshire*

Civil rights and advocacy leaders have extensive experience reaching and mobilizing the communities they serve. They have specific knowledge about parents in these communities and understand the things they value and how to motivate them to take action, as well as what tools and resources they need to champion causes such as deeper learning.

> "[We help] parents learn how to navigate the school system…what's the chain of command, where do you go when you need this, how do you talk to your teacher, how do you talk to principal. One of the culminating activities of the training is the conversation with the principal of the school, where parents go in with prepared questions." – *Civil rights leader*
>
> "If I was really trying to find Mom and provide her with information about her kids, I would provide it in the same place where she's getting information about a lot of her other life needs, too." – *Civil rights advocate/journalist*

Policymakers and advocates identified the implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act as the biggest opportunity to advance deeper learning goals, suggesting a focus on state and local policymakers.

When asked what opportunities they see to advance deeper learning in the next few years, most advocates mentioned ESSA. As state and local governments work to develop plans for their schools and implement the law, advocates have an opportunity to integrate deeper learning practices and outcomes into curricula, goals and assessments.

> "I think a lot of the advocacy and efforts are going to have to shift to the state and local level because that's where all the decisionmaking and action is going to happen. People who have typically focused at the federal level can help states understand the law." – *Policymaker*
>
> "The biggest opportunity you have right now is states being given more control over their State of Accountability Plans with ESSA. So, it's almost like innovation is being placed on the state level. I think our advocacy now is supporting states to make sure they understand what this definition and common terminology looks like, and what does it look like in practice across the entire state." – *Administrator*

Administrators also note implementing deeper learning practices can be a slow and challenging process, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach.

Administrators and teachers familiar with deeper learning emphasize the challenge of scaling the approach: Deeper learning looks different depending on the school or classroom. What works for one community may not work in another, and figuring out solutions is an iterative process.

> "Deeper learning looks different based on your class or your subject or your content, but mostly based on the individual kid that you might be teaching at that moment." – *Superintendent*
>
> "I will give them our plans all day long. We just post them on our website, but what I tell them is that this is [our] county's plan. You have to then be able to localize options for you." – *Administrator*

In addition, administrators note that adopting deeper learning practices requires changing the overall culture of a school. Principals and superintendents need to believe in deeper learning and support teachers with the necessary tools, resources and flexibility to learn about deeper learning practices and adapt them to their classrooms. Often, this culture shift requires teachers and administrators in a school system to work on developing deeper learning competencies themselves in order to have the right mindsets and skills to implement deeper learning practices in their classrooms.

> "It has to be a culture that is tied to innovation and to risk taking, and a culture that's really built around teamwork where everyone understands what we're looking to do is give our kids access to the world." – *Administrator*
>
> "[It's really a] change of mindset that comes from a dynamic curricula and an instructional approach that's quite different from what our teachers were trained in."
> – *Administrator*

Finally, administrators said that because truly implementing deeper learning requires changes in budget, infrastructure, organizational structure, curriculum and assessment, change can sometimes be slow. The most important thing is for school and district leaders to establish a plan and then keep evaluating and improving.

> "When I address [administrators visiting our schools], I talk to them mostly around the planning and making sure they understand that it doesn't look like this overnight. There's a lot of planning that goes into it, especially if you want it to be successful, but for the most part if you want it to be sustained." – *Administrator*
>
> "Even when you're making small, messy baby steps, some sort of implementation plan or...collecting a variety of sources of data about how things are going, is really important."
> – *Superintendent*

IDEAS

Meet audiences where they are: Identify trusted messengers among your target audiences or their influencers and empower them to champion deeper learning by sharing information and resources with their networks. In particular, bringing new partners to the table early and often can help the movement authentically engage diverse audiences and advance deeper learning goals in different communities.

Focus communications and outreach on grassroots leaders at the state and local level, including community leaders, youth leaders and local business leaders. Engage partners, including community leaders, youth leaders and local business leaders with experience working at local levels, by clearly communicating how implementing deeper learning practices in schools in their community can help them achieve their larger goals.

Share success stories while also being transparent about integrating deeper learning as a process that is different for every school. Provide resources for administrators and policymakers at the state and local level that help them understand why deeper learning practices might look different for different schools and explain how they can measure and evaluate their progress over time.