



# Developing College Readiness within and across School Districts: The Federal Role

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*The federal government can support college readiness by fostering organizational partnerships that coordinate services, share data, and smooth the transition from high school to college.*



In his first term, President Barack Obama regularly promoted college and career readiness as a national goal. In 2009, he challenged the country to regain its status as first in the world in college completion by 2020. He also asked every American to commit at least one year to postsecondary training. He regularly advocates the development and adoption of the Common Core State Standards and has made college affordability a platform issue for his party.

Education policy has generally followed suit. Despite some cuts to the nation's oldest Federal College Access Programs, known as the TRIO programs (e.g., Upward Bound), new education policies have emphasized college and career readiness. In 2010, Congress approved the College Access Challenge Grant Program, which aims to increase the number of low-income students who are ready for college. Waivers of No Child Left Behind Act requirements have been granted to thirty-four states and the District of Columbia in exchange for adopting College and Career Ready standards, among other policies. Race to the Top applicants, which included forty-six states and more than 1,000 local education agencies, were also required to show that they had adopted those standards, and two consortia won Race to the Top grants to develop assessments, scheduled to premiere across the nation in 2014-2015, based on the Common Core State Standards.

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These are important developments. But unfortunately, they are not enough to ensure that all students graduate high school ready for college. In this article, we make suggestions about how to reframe current federal policy to promote a community-wide college readiness agenda, using lessons from U.S. school districts and their local communities. Our recommendations focus on developing incentives and supports so that schools can learn

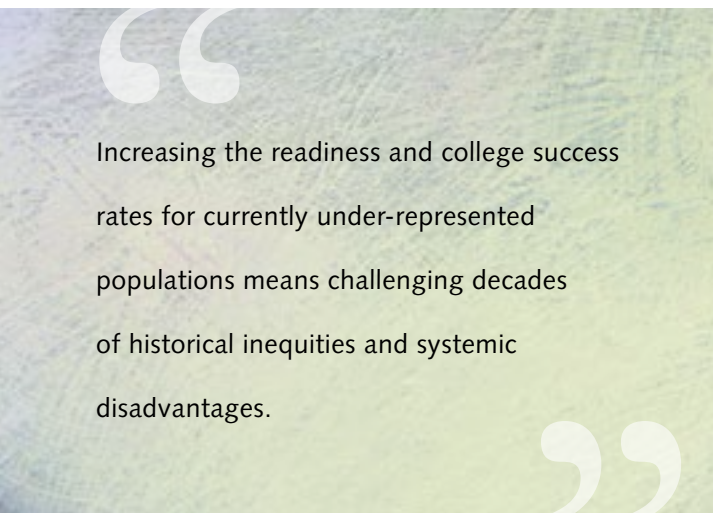
are unprepared for college-level coursework and require remediation; at each step on the pathway that starts with college aspiration and continues with graduation from high school, college enrollment, and college graduation, substantial gaps in readiness exist by race, income, and parents' education level (Aud et al. 2011).

College readiness has been the focus of a major strand of the current work of the Annenberg Institute for school reform (AISR). We have been working since 2010 on the College Readiness Indicator Systems (CRIS) project, supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, along with our partners – five large urban school systems that serve thousands of low-income students of color,<sup>1</sup> the Consortium on Chicago School Research, and the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University – to develop, test, and disseminate effective tools and resources that provide early diagnostic indications of what students need to become college ready. By our definition, students are “college ready” when they can successfully enroll in and complete credit-bearing (nonremedial) coursework in a post-secondary degree program.

Some of the challenges to college readiness took center stage at a December 2012 CRIS convening,<sup>2</sup> when two students from Lincoln High School in the San Jose (California) Unified School District described the barriers to college they faced. One student described her family's recent immigration from Ethiopia, her struggles learning English, and her lack of knowledge of course requirements and Advanced Placement

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- 1 The five CRIS sites are: Dallas Independent School District, New Visions for Public Schools (New York City), Pittsburgh Public Schools, the School District of Philadelphia, and San Jose (CA) Unified School District.
- 2 The CRIS work has included two convenings a year in which the sites and the partner organizations share knowledge.



from each other, build social ties across schools, and engage and sustain stakeholders in building a community-wide culture of college readiness.

## THE COLLEGE READINESS PROBLEM

Equitable access to and preparation for success in postsecondary education has become increasingly important in response to the new demands of the economy. More than 80 percent of high school seniors aspire to four-year degrees (Roderick, Nagaoka & Coca 2009). Yet only a fraction enroll in a degree-bearing program within a year of high school graduation, and among those who do enter degree-bearing programs, approximately 36 percent

opportunities. A Latino student cited the death of his mother and his abandonment by his father as challenges on his path to college.

In 2013, both these students will be the first in their families to attend college. But their outcomes are not typical. Nearly 39 percent of Black and 37 percent of Latino teenagers do not graduate from high school on time (Lee et al. 2011), and about 14 percent of Blacks and 12 percent of Latinos enroll in college (NCES 2011). Of those Black and Latino students who do enroll in a two- or four-year college, more than 45 percent must take at least one remedial (non-credit) course (Lee et al. 2011). In the CRIS work, we aim to identify how educators and other stakeholders can know whether all students – but especially those historically under-represented in college – are on track to be college ready and what opportunities schools, systems, and communities are providing so students will be college ready.

## **A TECHNICAL, SOCIAL, CULTURAL, AND POLITICAL CHALLENGE**

Developing the systems and strategies that enable all students to be college ready is an enormous challenge. It's a technical challenge that involves creating standards and assessments, developing indicators, collecting and analyzing data, and making valid inferences about their implications for policy and practice within and across school districts. But it's also a social, cultural, and political challenge. Increasing the readiness and college success rates for currently under-represented populations – low-income students, students of color, immigrants, and first-generation students, for example – means challenging decades of historical inequities and systemic disadvantages. Urban school districts came of age at a time when middle-

class comforts could be attained in jobs that did not require advanced skills or education. K–12 schools and school systems still contain structures, policies, and practices rooted in the belief that some are destined for college, while a larger majority of students are not. The structure of the old, large comprehensive high school with its curricular tracks and programs unfortunately pays homage to this outdated belief.

In addition to these antiquated notions of student potential, there are other barriers to achieving the goal of college readiness for all. While there is a vibrant community-based college readiness support sector in many communities, historically, the coordination of these activities with in-school supports has been limited and haphazard, at best. Few interventions have been evaluated effectively or even well documented. And there is a disconnect between K–12 and higher education systems in terms of both data systems and supports for college readiness.

## **SYSTEMIC APPROACHES TO COLLEGE READINESS**

To ensure that all students are college ready, communities and school districts need to foster cultures, attitudes, and beliefs that reinforce the need to provide for all what was once reserved for only some – and districts cannot do this work alone. As outlined in AISR's "smart district" concept, changing cultures and the policies and practices they reinforce requires building partnerships that engage stakeholders around the imperatives of setting new goals and using data aligned with the system's current needs rather than historical ones (Ucelli & Foley 2004). In an AISR study of thirteen New York City high schools that were "beating the odds" in preparing their students for college, the researchers discovered a pervasive 9–12 "college-going culture" in beat-the-odds schools, whose

graduates show a higher-than-expected rate of college enrollment (Ascher & Maguire 2007). School systems must have the willingness and resources to include students and families, educators, unions, the business community, reform support organizations, and higher education partners in developing a community vision for college readiness and a strategic plan that aligns infrastructure and incorporates college readiness policies and practices. These efforts must be coupled with initiatives to develop the capacity of teachers, counselors, instructional coaches, and building administrators and a shared accountability that involves multiple organizations and multiple outcomes.

Efforts like the Strive partnership, begun in Cincinnati and now a multi-city consortium; Say Yes to Education, founded in Syracuse and with its own multi-city network;<sup>3</sup> and the Providence Children and Youth Cabinet (see sidebar on pages 12–13), founded by former mayor David Cicilline and expanded by current mayor Angel Taveras to include more than sixty agencies and institutions, exemplify this systemic approach. The CRIS sites are adapting these principles; for example:

- With input from community and family partners, San Jose Unified School District has developed a strategic plan that identifies key performance metrics on the path to college readiness and has developed pilot college readiness programs at the elementary, middle, and high school levels that incorporate data

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 3 For information on Strive, see [www.strivetgether.org](http://www.strivetgether.org). For information on Say Yes to Education, see [www.sayyestoeducation.org](http://www.sayyestoeducation.org).

4 For more on the K–12 college readiness pipeline in San Jose, see Hewitson, Martinez, and McGinnis (2012).

5 For a national scan of college readiness models, see McAlister and Mevs (2012).

and aim to build a seamless K–12 college-going culture.<sup>4</sup>

- In Philadelphia, the school district, the local education fund, and the mayor’s office all play key roles in a citywide mayor’s committee on postsecondary readiness that has developed cross-sector collaboration around college readiness data, mission, and vision for the city.
- The Dallas Independent School District and Dallas County Community College District (where 60 percent of Dallas ISD graduates matriculate) have entered into a data-sharing agreement to monitor student outcomes longitudinally and inform the development of supports and interventions for students to be successful in college.
- New Visions for Public Schools in New York City has worked with teams of teachers to develop curriculum modules aligned to the Common Core and built in strategies to support students’ academic tenacity. They use teacher and student focus groups to understand the impact of this “Common Core for College and Career Readiness” initiative.

These college readiness efforts not only rely on the technical expertise of districts, but also include the knowledge that outside partners – higher education institutions, city governments, community-based organizations, and civic umbrella organizations – can provide about the students they serve outside of the K–12 system. These partnerships are critical to building support for college readiness beyond the public schools. School systems cannot and should not be approaching the goal of college readiness alone. Reform support organizations, colleges, businesses, families, city leadership, and agencies all play a role in supporting college readiness – and need to be involved through visioning, sharing data, and advocacy.<sup>5</sup>

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FEDERAL ROLE

The federal government is currently making key investments in college readiness through higher standards, better assessments that are aligned with the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in higher education, and support for states to develop data systems that can easily track students longitudinally through the P-16 system. These are necessary (and overdue) building blocks to developing greater numbers of college-ready young people. However, we believe these mostly technical approaches will not ultimately be sufficient to the task. Addressing the myriad political, social, and cultural barriers to “college readiness for all” in our communities, particularly our large urban communities, requires a broader set of federal policies and incentives. Below we outline several possible ways that the U.S. Department of Education can encourage a community-wide approach to college readiness.

### Develop incentives for creating and supporting umbrella organizations committed to college readiness.

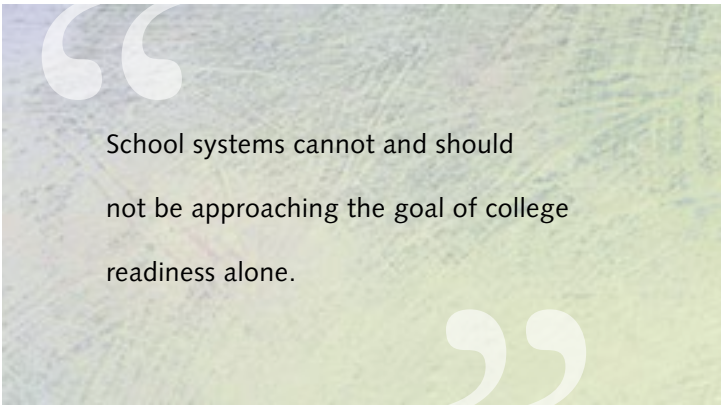
As described above, ensuring that all students are college ready is a massive undertaking that requires the buy-in and collaboration of K-12 districts and schools, early childhood education providers, higher education institutions, community-based organizations, business, and local political institutions. The large number of partners and lack of centralized hub for discussion and action around college readiness means that too often, responsibility for college readiness falls to already overburdened K-12 school districts.

However, an increasing number of grassroots and local umbrella organizations are providing the space and resources to discuss new governance structures, accountability mechanisms, and community-side demand around

college readiness. The Strive partnership and Say Yes to Education are models for bringing multiple community stakeholders to the table around college readiness. These models could provide a blueprint for a set of federal incentives to create and support these kinds of umbrella organizations, especially in cities and communities without a long history of multi-agency and multi-organization collaboration.

### Promote state data systems that not only connect K-12 student outcomes with enrollment, remediation, and graduation data in postsecondary education but also encourage collaborative action based on those data.

As noted earlier, states and the federal government are investing heavily in the development of educational data systems. The twelve state Race to the Top (RttT) winners all are working toward the goal of developing “early warning” indicators of high school dropout.



School systems cannot and should not be approaching the goal of college readiness alone.

Forty-one states have received State Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS) grants at some point since 2006, and some states received multiple grants. Both the SLDS and the RttT grants focus on developing the twelve elements outlined in the America Competes Act, such as developing a unique statewide

student identifier.<sup>6</sup> States have made considerable progress on developing these data elements, but there is very little among the elements that explicitly connects them to college readiness – with the exception of Data Element 7, student-level college readiness test scores (PSAT, Plan & Explore, etc.).

Yet, the CRIS sites have received limited support from their state departments and are working very hard at

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<sup>6</sup> For more detail, see [www.dataqualitycampaign.org/files/America\\_COMPETES\\_two-pager.pdf](http://www.dataqualitycampaign.org/files/America_COMPETES_two-pager.pdf).

## IN THE FIELD | THE PROVIDENCE CHILDREN AND YOUTH CABINET

The Providence [Rhode Island] Children and Youth Cabinet (CYC) was convened in 2010 by then-mayor David Cicilline and expanded by current mayor Angel Taveras. It aims to improve collaboration and coordination of services across a variety of education stakeholders and foster better educational, social, economic, physical, and behavioral health outcomes for Providence’s children and youth – in and out of school and from “cradle to career.” The CYC is led by co-chairs from three sectors: city government, the school district, and community-based organizations. Its members include more than 60 agencies and institutions, with more than 140 active participants.

The CYC has adopted a Social Ecology Model, which posits that there are many factors that contribute to the success of children and youth, including the school system, community conditions, family conditions, and larger economic and social forces. Its work is guided by a framework of *collective impact*, which is:

the commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem. Collaboration is nothing new. The social sector is filled with examples of partnerships, networks, and other types of joint efforts. But collective impact initiatives are distinctly different. Unlike most collaborations, collective impact initiatives involve a centralized infrastructure, a dedicated staff, and a structured process that leads to a common agenda, shared measurement, continuous communication, and mutually reinforcing activities among all participants. (*Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Winter 2011)

After significant quantitative and qualitative assessment of the state of education in Providence, the 2011 *Educate Providence* report was released, outlining five goals, along with eleven indicators to measure progress toward those goals. CYC Strategy Working Groups were formed in 2012 to translate the goals of *Educate Providence* into strategies that join the strengths of schools, higher education, community organizations, businesses, city and state agencies, and families to support children from cradle to career. One of the Working Groups, High School to College, focuses on high school graduation, transitions to college, and transitions to career.

The CYC is committed to using data to understand the programs and strategies that contribute to success for children and youth, as well as to evaluate program outcomes and re-engineer systems when necessary. The CYC seeks communication with and input from the community on its work through community forums, an annual report to update the community on progress toward the goals of *Educate Providence*, and a website for continuous communication and feedback.

The CYC is part of the Strive national network of organizations working in thirty-five states and four

developing their own data systems, making individual connections with higher education institutions to exchange information and generally acting independently of these state efforts. State department leaders who are developing these systems also tell us they have little to no interaction

with other states. They need a place to exchange information about what they are learning and more advocacy by local districts for more data about college readiness.

These disconnections may stem from the limited progress on developing

countries to create civic infrastructure in support of better student outcomes. Since October 2012, CYC and its director, Rebecca Boxx, have been affiliated with and housed at AISR, with support from several national foundations.

*CYC Goals and Indicators from the Educate Providence Report*

**Goal 1:** All children will enter kindergarten ready to learn and prepared for school.

- INDICATOR 1: Percentage of three- and four-year-olds enrolled in a high-quality preschool experience
- INDICATOR 2: DIBELS Next benchmark scores for incoming kindergarten students

**Goal 2:** All children will have access to a portfolio of high-quality schools, teachers, and district supports.

- INDICATOR 3: Number and percentage of district and charter schools serving Providence students that rank in the top three categories of Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

**Goal 3:** All children will be supported intellectually, socially, and emotionally in and out of school.

- INDICATOR 4: Percentage of students entering grades 1 through 3 participating in quality summer learning activities
- INDICATOR 5: Rate of chronic absence at each level of school

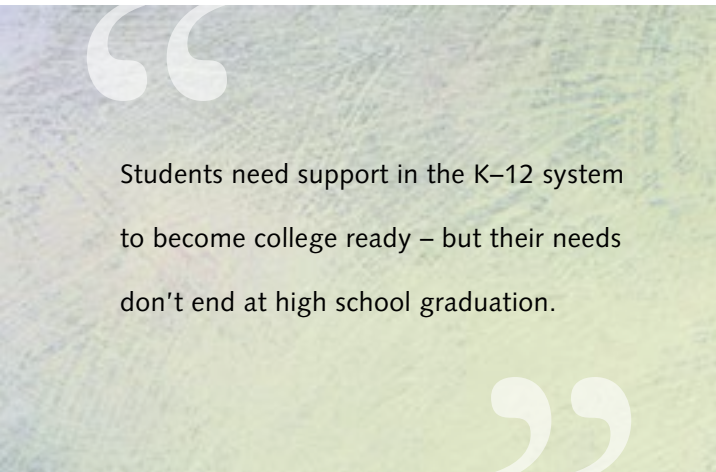
**Goal 4:** All children will succeed academically and graduate from high school ready for college, career and/or credential.

- INDICATOR 6: 4th-grade reading proficiency scores
- INDICATOR 7: 9th-grade promotion rate
- INDICATOR 8: 11th-grade reading and math proficiency scores
- INDICATOR 9: High school graduation rate

**Goal 5:** All youth will obtain a postsecondary degree or credential and enter a career.

- INDICATOR 10: FAFSA completion rate
- INDICATOR 11: Percentage of graduates who enroll in a higher education institution (within one and two years of graduation)

*For more information see [www.cycprovidence.org](http://www.cycprovidence.org).*



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actions that ensure effective data use (Data Quality Campaign 2011). Given their role in administering both K–12 and higher education, states could play a huge role in providing the data that link these two systems and fulfilling the shared need for understanding the outcomes for graduates from different high schools and in different higher education institutions.

The federal government should continue to provide incentives for states to link secondary and postsecondary data sets. But federal policy should also bolster these incentives with incentives to make the data accessible and useful to large urban districts, city agencies, and community-based organizations. Federal policy, through either the reauthorization of ESEA or continuation of the state longitudinal data system grants or other competitive grants, could favor states that demonstrate a close working relationship with their largest urban school districts and city/state college access programs and that have data showing that the information they are producing is useful in those partnerships.

### Encourage partnerships among local education agencies (LEAs) and higher education to smooth the transition from high school to college.

Students need support in the K–12 system to become college ready – but their needs don’t end at high school graduation. Smooth transitions from high school to the higher education system are critical, analogous to transitions from elementary to middle school and middle to high school. However, unlike those earlier transitions, the high school to college transition involves multiple, often-disconnected institutions and supports. Data-sharing agreements between LEAs and higher education institutions, which we have seen in several CRIS sites such as Dallas and New York City, are an important first step (for examples, see the sidebar on page 15 and Wilkes et al. 2012).

The federal government should continue to encourage these partnerships. It should also focus resources on helping higher education institutions use the data they have to connect incoming students to resources and supports – academic counseling, “college knowledge,” mentorships, etc. – to address “summer melt,”<sup>7</sup> smooth the transition to college, and increase the chances that students will have a successful college experience. Since most urban districts send the majority of their graduates to a small number of institutions (Nagaoaka, Roderick & Coca 2009), this would require a manageable number of partnerships in each district. Among the CRIS sites, the Pittsburgh Promise has hired two counselors and one facilitator to support Promise students’ transition to college at Community College of Allegheny County.

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<sup>7</sup> *Summer melt* refers to the tendency for some students to commit to a postsecondary institution in the spring, but then not enroll in the fall semester.



## SUPPORTING COMMUNITY-WIDE CULTURES OF COLLEGE READINESS AND ACCESS

Supporting college readiness is not just a technical endeavor. The Obama administration's emphasis on college readiness and college completion is admirable, but federal policy must go beyond standards, assessments, and data systems to develop community-wide sharing of cultures and practices that support young people inside and outside of school and help their transition from high school to college. Several communities, including sites

participating in the CRIS network, are building citywide alliances and partnerships among districts, higher education institutions, community-based organizations, businesses, and civic agencies centered on college readiness and success. The federal government has supported the important first steps in developing a college-going system, and it can build on that infrastructure by providing additional incentives for umbrella organizations, data sharing, support for high school to college transitions, and better alignment of existing federal programs with new standards and assessments.

## IN THE FIELD | STATE-SUPPORTED DATA SHARING BETWEEN K-12 AND POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS IN TEXAS

The college readiness data distributed by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), a state-level agency, has allowed Texas school districts to bridge the data gap between K-12 and post-secondary institutions. In collaboration with colleges and universities in Texas, THECB developed ApplyTexas, a centralized system that allows students to apply to Texas's post-secondary institutions using a common application. From this state-level data, THECB collects the number of applications completed by in-state students and shares this information with school districts in the state on a regular basis (usually monthly). These data have allowed some districts to develop college readiness measures by connecting with their high school data. While these data are currently distributed only through THECB's monthly reports, THECB is developing an online database from which Texas's school districts can access and run the data as needed.

Dallas Independent School District has developed a college readiness indicator on college knowledge by connecting the ApplyTexas completion rates and senior enrollment in its high schools. These data have allowed the district and its high schools to be better informed about the college application completion status of their students. This information is updated monthly by the district and is available on the district's online database, where counselors can access their students' application status and contact information from their respective campuses. The ApplyTexas data have become an important college readiness indicator for Dallas ISD's counselors to identify students who need help and provide timely support to them.

THECB also collects other statewide post-secondary data (e.g., college GPAs, remedial courses), but they are not as readily available to districts as the ApplyTexas completion rates. Interested school districts can obtain these college readiness data by submitting written requests or applications.

*For more information on THECB, see [www.thecb.state.tx.us](http://www.thecb.state.tx.us).*



## PREPARING STUDENTS FOR THE TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL TO THE WORLD IN SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

**Alethea Frazier Raynor**

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The Risers Academy for Young Men, located within Hubert Middle School on the east side of Savannah, Georgia, has a vision to address the needs of thousands and is poised to move its students successfully from school to the world. The Academy enrolls just under 100 young men, almost all of whom were born in Savannah and many of whom have never been more than one state away from home. But they are introduced to languages from countries around the world when they venture just a few miles from school to downtown River Street.

Savannah is dubbed “the Hostess City” – majestic, southern, and deeply steeped in American history. It regularly takes on that role with tourists – but also when huge container ships navigate the narrow waters along River Street to make their way to the Savannah Port Authority. The boys at the Risers Academy have all been to River Street and waved as the freightliners pass by with foreign crews. But what they do not know is that the colorful containers these ships carry are part of an enormous industry of international trade and that *their* city is a hub for this commerce – Savannah is the fourth-largest and fastest-growing port in the nation. And international trade can be the passport for these young men in their journey from school to the world.

At the Risers Academy, the principal and staff encourage strong community ties and participation, believing that young men, particularly in urban areas, need to know there are positive role models in their local community who will embrace them and help them to learn the life and career skills they need. They also believe it’s important to give back through the service projects that the students do in their communities. But to prepare them as productive global citizens, the staff has launched the development of a curriculum focused on international trade and entrepreneurship that will provide learning experiences both inside and outside the classroom. They will study international trade and understand that in the new millennium they must become what Yong Zhao (2012) calls “world class learners” who are able to create their own jobs.

They will visit the Port of Savannah, the airport, the Savannah Economic Development Authority, and the Target distribution center. They will begin to connect their classroom knowledge with their real-world experiences, so they understand that commerce is far bigger than Savannah and that there was a long journey, perhaps halfway around the world, for the cargo on those ships as it gets moved from producer to consumers beyond the city of Savannah. If we want education to become a tool that can transform the lives of young people, we must use what we have in the midst of our communities to develop our students with the twenty-first-century skills and competencies they need for the future. The Risers are only in grades six through eight, but their teachers want to be sure that when these young people leave the Academy they are ready and empowered to engage in the world beyond school.

*For more information on the Risers Academy, see <http://internet.savannah.chatham.k12.ga.us/schools/hms/risers/default.aspx>.*

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