

Navigator Conference — 21<sup>st</sup> Century Transformation — Op-Ed Submission

July 23, 2007

Word Count: 573

Suggested Title: *Public Schools: Think Transformation, Not Tinkering*

In a world that's changing rapidly, education isn't.

Colorado's education system is rooted in industrial era principles, when routine work was the norm, conformity was valued, and mastery of reading, writing and math could take us pretty far.

Like Henry Ford's Model T car, that system was quite an achievement 100 years ago, but it isn't what we need today. Model T education will not carry our children and their children down the digital highway.

Our increasingly accelerated economy and society demand that we can analyze and evaluate vast quantities of information, solve complex problems, communicate effectively using a variety of media, work in teams, create, and innovate.

Yet we are asking students to learn such 21st century skills in an education system rooted in industrial times.

We need a new definition for what it means to be well-educated. We need a cohesive, comprehensive vision for education in Colorado that is aligned with the realities of life and work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In June, more than 200 Colorado educators and education stakeholders met during the 21st Century Learning Navigator Conference to craft a vision for transforming our K-12 education system to meet tomorrow's demands and shape the state's future.

It was an important step taken by an exceptional group of people, including the state's new commissioner of education, fifteen students, four members of the state board of education, eleven state legislators, three of the Governor's appointees to the P-20 education council, twenty-five school district superintendents, delegates from Colorado's K-12 and postsecondary education groups, parents, and classroom teachers.

The conference participants established the foundation for a statewide vision of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning that will enable our students to work and think across cultural and national boundaries, develop into self-propelled learners, contribute productively to their communities, make ethically sound decisions, adeptly manage and use information, and support the learning of others.

The conferees also posed important questions that address significant tensions involved in developing new understandings about the role of public education.

How should core subjects be redefined for the 21st century learner? For example, Colorado Model Content Standards don't necessarily require that we teach students how

to adapt in a rapidly changing global society or how to use information creatively. How do we assess 21st century skills? Conventional assessments don't measure up to that standard.

Further, does 21st century learning mean that everyone goes from K-12 into postsecondary education? What are the other options, and how do we ensure that each student has the opportunity to select the best path?

Exactly what needs to change... Classroom teaching? Our entire educational system?

Participants agreed that support for transformative change is necessary. Educators need leadership, guidance, technical assistance, and resources that support new modes of curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Education is the best investment we can make. Research ties the quality of education to a community's quality of life. It leads to higher wages and increased employment stability for individuals, higher property values, and communities that are attractive to both residents and employers.

That's true for big cities and rural towns alike.

If Colorado wants to be competitive, we must do the very thing we hope our future graduates will do – think creatively, solve complex problems, and communicate clearly in making changes that help us address the challenges and opportunities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The real world and schools are out of synch. It's time to think transformation, not tinkering.

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