



Discussion Guide on Relevant and Connected Learning
Prepared for the April 2004 National High School Alliance Partners Meeting
in Oakland, CA

Adapted from *Connected Learning Communities: A Toolkit for Reinventing High Schools*
by Cheryl Almeida and Sue Goldberger, Jobs for the Future (2001).

Overview of Focus on Relevant and Connected Learning

Research has shown that the organizational features of high schools have an impact upon the quality of teaching and learning and that high school-aged youth thrive in personalized school environments in which the adults in their schools know them. Additionally, schools can restructure to improve academic or social supports, or both, for students. The academic structure determines how knowledge is made available to students - what and how students learn (Lee, 1993; Lee, Smith, Croninger, 1997). Learning that makes connections to real life and students' real-world experiences is vital, particularly for high school-aged students who are most at risk for school failure (NASSP, 1996). The social structure of a school determines the relationships between the members of the school community—students to teachers; teacher to teacher; teacher to administrator; and student to student (Dornbusch, et al, 1996).

Adults in the school can play a supportive role by helping students to access resources, guidance and information about course options, higher education and career paths. In addition, many students need access to counseling and extra help to succeed in their classes and to build their capacity to handle academically rigorous coursework. Together the academic and social structures establish a school's priorities and the school's climate and culture. District-level restructuring is also crucial in supporting and sustaining the innovations of high schools, and for ensuring systemic equity so that all students have access to excellent schools.

Structure of the Discussion Guide

The discussion guide is designed to help collect and organize observations and reflections during the interactive sessions with local teachers and students. The guide is organized using the "Six A's" framework developed by Jobs for the Future:

- I. Academic Rigor
- II. Authenticity
- III. Active Exploration
- IV. Applied Learning
- V. Adult Connections
- VI. Assessment Practices

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Using the Guide for Interactive Session with Students and Teachers

The guide is designed to facilitate the discussions with student and teacher presenters. The criteria are described in each section, followed by indicators phrased as questions, both to prompt critical observations and to facilitate conversations. Use the space provided to note observations and evidence of relevant and connected learning.

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The “Six A’s” Discussion Guide on Relevant and Connected Learning

I. Academic Rigor: Projects address key learning standards identified by the school or district and help students develop habits of mind and work associated with academic and professional disciplines.

What is the central problem or question addressed by the project?

What knowledge area and central concepts will the project address?

What habits of mind will students develop?

What learning standards are addressed by the project?

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II. Authenticity: Projects use a real-world context (e.g., community and workplace problems) and address issues that matter to the students.

Where in the 'real world' might one see the problem or question addressed at work or in the community?

How do we know the problem or question is one the students see as meaningful?

Who might be appropriate audiences for student work?

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III. Active Exploration: Projects extend beyond the classroom and connect to work internships, field-based investigations, and community explorations.

What field-based activities does the project require students to conduct?

What methods and sources of information are students expected to use?

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IV. Applied Learning: Projects engage students in solving semi-structured problems calling for competencies expected in high-performance work organizations (e.g., teamwork, problem-solving, communication, etc.)

What are students actually going to do to apply the knowledge they are learning to complex or semi-structured problems?

Which competencies expected in a high performance work will be developed?

What self-management skills does the project require students to use?

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V. Adult Connections: Projects connect students with adult mentors and coaches from the wider community.

Do students have access to at least one other adult with expertise relevant to the project?

Does the project offer students the opportunity to develop a broader understanding of the relevant field of work through observing adults?

Does at least one adult from outside the classroom help students develop a sense of the real world standards for the type of work in the project?

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VI. Assessment Practices: Projects involve students in regular exhibitions and assessments of their work in light of personal, school and real-world standards of performance.

What are the criteria for measuring student achievement of the disciplinary knowledge, habits of mind, and applied learning goals of the project?

Are students asked to review or help establish project criteria?

Do students receive ongoing feedback on their work-in-progress from teachers, mentors, and peers?

What deliverables are students expected to complete prior to the final product or outcome for the project?

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