

Developing Certifications for Work Readiness

PROSPECTUS

Context

Many youth, even those at the top of the achievement scale, report that their schoolwork is boring and that they are disconnected from the curriculum. In many cities nearly 50% of students are evaluating the curriculum by leaving school. While alternative schools and programs attempt to serve many of these students, many more alternatives to the traditional high school and post-high school pathways are needed to address the needs of disconnected and out of school youth.

We need to expand the options that disconnected and out of school youth have for obtaining both a high school diploma and certificates that demonstrate their skills and understanding with respect to a set of essential competencies. We need to provide them with opportunities for obtaining high-paid work even as they continue with their learning. These new forms of certificates require new forms of authentic performance assessments that certify that learners are competent to do the work required and ready to continue learning to do new work requirements.

The current system of assessments shortchanges many young people who are not well served by the traditional school system. Traditional testing disadvantages many students who have talents and abilities that are not demonstrable through these tests, but who can show what and how they understand and apply their understanding. We need a definition of success that has breadth and depth and that looks longitudinally. And we need assessments that match that definition, assessments that measure know-how and know-why as well as know what. Therefore, we view these certificates and assessments as critical components of alternative learning systems. Alternative assessments will be rigorous, effortful, intense, and involve full concentration. The assessment must take into account the preexisting knowledge and abilities, and then offer an appropriate difficulty level for the student.

There is also a growing dissatisfaction with the Carnegie Unit as a primary determination of readiness to graduate and move on to postsecondary education. The Carnegie Unit is essentially a grade measure of specific time and specific text-based content spent rather than an assessment of proficiency on a pathway to the mastery of authentic work. Moreover, the Carnegie Unit disadvantages those students who need more than a year to demonstrate mastery but less than the two years that the traditional time-bound course structure requires. Also, it disadvantages students who already know the work or a high percentage of the work by making everyone adhere to the same standard time sequence from start to finish, thus wasting students' valuable time by having to sit, listen, and get tested on what they already know. Originally designed as a means to account for retirement credits for teachers, the Carnegie Unit was instituted as a quick means of assessing students mostly on a bell curve but not on performance.¹

¹ Harris, John (2002). *Brief History of American Academic Credit System: A Recipe for Incoherence in Student Learning*. Stamford University. Retrieved on June 20, 2006. Shedd, Jessica (2003). "The History of the Student Credit Hour". *New Directions for Higher Education*.

The Work We Propose to Do

We wish to develop innovative approaches to designing and using new forms of certificates beginning in high schools and continuing into postsecondary learning and work. At a time when we need much broader and insightful assessments of student competence, testing and assessment have dangerously narrowed the definition of success on at best a limited set of skills and at worst knowledge that is both narrow and at times false. Most traditional tests, for example, do not measure applied learning and 21st Century skills.² Moreover, it is not that the normative tests have a pristine pedigree. As Baker points out, the evidential disconnect between test design and learning research is *no small thing* and is manifested in the students who pass the test without having mastered the standards to which the test is addressed.³ We are particularly interested in credentialing and certifying learning in ways that supplement, and in some cases supplant, the traditional high school diploma and the Carnegie Unit system.

Our interest in certificates and authentic performance assessments grows out of our own 12-year struggle to create meaningful alternatives to the traditional high school experience and a 6-year initiative to form and strengthen a nationwide network of a dozen school developers specializing in serving disconnected and out of school youth. We believe that there is a substantial benefit to these youth and to society if we can create, scale, and sustain alternative secondary and postsecondary learning systems that are closely integrated with preparation for high-wage work. We wish to work with employers and industries to create authentic performance assessments that demonstrate understanding and serve as complements to, and sometimes replacements for, traditional paper and pencil assessments.

Our work on school design and implementation and performance assessments address these millions of students in urban, suburban, and rural districts who are entitled to show their know-how and know-what in ways that are contextualized to their own interests and work rather than to a set of disassociated tests that rarely bear any connection to how things are done in the world of work or academics.

Our field-based judgments are well supported by many members of the research community. For example, Eva Baker, a director of CRESST at UCLA, has stated: "Accountability tests have swung education strongly toward institutional goals and away from those of the individual."⁴ In calling for a redress to the imbalance, Baker cites the need to "encourage common and divergent performance simultaneously" and "consider encouraging the students to pursue their interests and talents at some depth."

Such systems of certificates based on authentic performance demonstrations can flourish within alternative schools as well as within alternatives to traditional schools and schooling. These certificates will enable students to pursue multiple career pathways and options within those pathways that lead to multiple career and life options. Moreover, such a credentialing system will

² See, for example, Levy, F., & Murnane, R. J. (2004). *The new division of labor: How computers are creating the next job market*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Partnership for 21st Century Skills. (2006, March). *Results that matter: 21st century skills and high school reform*. Tucson, AZ: Author.

³ Baker, E. (2007). The end(s) of testing. AERA Presidential address.

⁴ Baker, E. (2007). The end(s) of testing. AERA Presidential address. In press.

provide young people with lots of options and with the agility and nimbleness to learn new work as the economy changes.

Overview of Our Proposed Approach

We have already done a good deal of the conceptual work for framing this project. Ericsson postulates that individuals who start early and practice at higher levels will have a higher level of performance throughout development than those who practice equally hard but start later.⁵ Thus, our intention is to start this rigorous certificate work as early as the 10th and 11th grades in high school. Ericsson says expert performers are constantly attempting to improve their level of performance in relation to the best performance for their current level. As those on the road to expertise are also constantly striving to improve their performance.”⁶ The performance and feedback constitute our tests.

We have begun to work with selected companies in selected industries in order to identify potential areas for certificates. We have developed sample pathways in selected industries in which we intend to do this work. We are currently developing work agreements in the design, advertising, and aviation industries. We are also working with national programs such as Ford PAS and The Henry Ford Learning Institute and local programs such as the Steel Yard in Providence.

We have developed relationships with MetLife, Gilbane, Ecko Limited, J. Walter Thompson, Build-a-Plane, and other businesses. In these prototypes, we have developed comprehensive high school programs that are wrapped around the certificate work for each individual student. In doing this work, we have begun to engage businesses in new, more organic and sustaining relationships. We have created a process for constructing what we are calling within the Big Picture School design a Focused LTI (Learning Through Interests), which could be adapted for use in a variety of traditional school, alternative school, and non-school settings.

To address the technical challenges, we will build on the extant research and development in this area and employ appropriate technical expertise. We will establish a partnership with CRESST in order to ensure high quality prototype development. CRESST has done considerable work on performance assessments, and is eager to work with us in applying their technical skills and understandings to our practice-based contexts and settings.

Goals and Objectives

Big Picture Learning has three goals for this proposed work:

1. Develop and prototype an innovative approach to creating paid and unpaid internships and developing certifications that enhance student learning and lead to employment while

⁵ Ericsson, K.A., Krampe, R.T., & Tesch-Romer, C. (1993). The role of deliberate practice in the acquisition of expert performance. *American psychological association, 100, 363-406.*

⁶ Ericsson, K.A. (1996). *The road to excellence: The acquisition of expert performance in the arts and sciences, sports and games.* New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

students are in high school as well as after they graduate and pursue postsecondary education.

2. Create more diverse and robust pathways and options beginning in high school and continuing into postsecondary learning and work. These pathways must lead to a variety of learning, work, and career pathways.
3. Develop new mechanisms providing financial support to these youth as they pursue postsecondary learning pathways and options.

To achieve these goals, we will address these objectives:

1. Create a minimum of six new mini-certificates in four industries—design, advertising, aviation, and environmental services. Identify for each of these new certificates the specific skill sets to be mastered.
2. Prototype these certificates in selected Big Picture schools (N = 60) throughout the country.
3. Forge new systematic relationships with employers and with community colleges in order that students can pursue high-wage work and postsecondary learning simultaneously.
4. Provide the wrap-around support services (e.g., personalization, family, community) that help young people to find out who they are and develop themselves as people.
5. Evaluate and fine-tune the process and certificates in order to replicate the program in all Big Picture schools as well as in diverse alternative schools (N = 240) served by the Alternative High School Initiative (AHSI).

Major Tasks

We have conducted a preliminary review and analysis of extant certification programs employed in career and technical education programs in the secondary school system. We have also examined similar programs operating in postsecondary learning settings. We need to finalize this analysis and then identify sites for prototyping specific certificates in specific industries where we can work with specific businesses. We have done some preliminary work in this area, but have not yet done a thorough evaluation of that work in collaboration with our schools. We are just beginning that work now, but its full implementation has been delayed because of limited resources.

We have created several matrixes to begin tracking data. We are collecting information on our current students and where their internships have led them. We know that many students have summer jobs with the businesses they have interned with, many students have received mini-certificates, and a handful of students are working on industry certificates. With this information we can analyze what type of situation led to this organic process of students pursuing a particular career pathway and use the information as a guide for a more and systemic and system wide approach.

From our analysis of the data, we are developing a detailed typology of certificates. We learned from our earlier research that there are many certificates and each holds its own value within industry/ businesses both local and national.

We propose to work with a small number of major national corporations and local businesses, catalogue the scores of different paid internship possibilities that exist within those corporations, design a comprehensive internship system, and actually manage the system for the corporation with a turnkey option. We will also build in an evaluation of the system from both the school and business perspectives.

We will seed these ideas in companies such as MetLife, CVS, Gilbane Construction, J. Walter Thompson, and Ecco Limited and learn how to manage both the paid internship side and the school side of life for students and figure out how to get students into a wide array of jobs in these companies that fit their interests. We intend to disseminate information on the process for developing these internships and certifications to all of our Big Picture schools and to other schools that employ real-world learning experiences in their curriculum.

Resources Required

BPL has already committed its own resources to this work, but needs additional resources to support work with specific businesses in developing certifications and appropriate assessments and in prototyping these program components in selected Big Picture and other school environments. This work will require approximately \$.665 million over three years. A portion of the needed funding will be used to procure the technical assistance of Eva Baker at CRESST and William Sedlacek, retired University of Maryland professor.

Benefits

Certificates that certify readiness for doing specific work will serve as a valuable supplement to the traditional high school diploma as students prepare for postsecondary learning and work. These certificates will enable students to obtain high-paid work as they continue into postsecondary learning. Such work will not only allow the students to pursue a combined learning and work pathway, but also enhance their prospects for a successful graduation and transition into a successful career and life.