

February 9, 2012

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Will Measuring Creativity In Schools Help Youth Be Workforce Ready?

Posted: 02/ 9/2012 1:51 pm

Last month, the California State Senate approved a bill to develop a Creativity and Innovation Education Index, designed to measure how schools are fostering creativity among their students. California is just one of several states to implement a law like this, Massachusetts being the first, according to Education Week.

It might seem like a shock that California is concerned with measuring creativity opportunities when the budget for arts classes and music programs has been cut in school districts all over the state in recent years. However, employers and business owners are saying that new applicants to the workforce are not equipped with the creativity and critical-thinking skills required to get hired.

The California Alliance for Arts Education describes the index:

A creativity and innovation index would provide a way for schools to rate their progress in teaching, encouraging and fostering creativity in students. Index scores would be voluntarily compiled by school and district staff from a survey of curricula and teacher reports. It would quantify the opportunities in each school as measured by the availability of classes and before and after-school programs offered by and through school districts that nurture creativity and innovation in students.

Examples might include visual and performing arts education classes, debate clubs, science fairs, theatre and dance performances, music concerts, film-making, creative writing, and independent research.

Youth Radio spoke with Mary Wright, Associate Director for The Conference Board, a business membership and research association, who specializes in the intersection of business and education. She was a leader on a report called, "Are They Really Ready To Work?" in 2006, which identified key skill sets that employers thought were important for their employees to have, and creativity and innovation were among the top five.

We spoke with Wright about the concept of a Creativity Index and how she thinks it could affect the workforce readiness of young people today.

Youth Radio: Explain in a nutshell, the findings of your workforce readiness research with regards to the need for non-academic skills.

Wright: We wanted to understand what business really meant by--new entrants are not workforce ready. We looked at both basic skills, which we took from No Child Left Behind-- the reading, writing, and arithmetic skills, and also asked about the applied skills, like 21st century skills. The applied skills are things around critical thinking, information technology application, teamwork and collaboration, and creativity and innovation. There are about 13 or 14 skill sets we looked at.

It was clear to us that the applied skills were the ones that were considered most important. Certainly, people would argue that math and science develop significantly critical thinking skills. They give you tools to figure out problems. But if you can't communicate what you just learned or what you just did, you're not as valuable in the workplace.

It was interesting given the emphasis that people have on STEM [science, mathematics, technology and engineering] skills, and yet, what employers were saying, it wasn't the math skill that was important, it was the critical thinking skill. That would be true regardless of whether someone was in a STEM career or a retail career.

Youth Radio: How does this research reflect a changing trend in the workforce?

Wright: In my parent's generation, you started working at the bank, and you were at the bank for 50 years and you retired with your gold watch, and that's all you did. Today's generation, you're not only looking at six different jobs at the bank, but six different careers. You may start in a retail company, and take those skills and go to a manufacturing company, and take those skills and go to a bank, and take those skills and go somewhere else.

The ability to use your knowledge as a set of tools, to be able to analyze, regardless of the industry or the role you find yourself playing - that seems to be a far more valuable skill set than whether you have the technical skills. There's a stubbornly high unemployment rate, and people are saying that there's a huge mismatch between the skills of the people available and the skills of the jobs that are there. That, I think, people are attributing to the decline of technical education, or the fact that people are saying everyone needs a four year degree, I think the data shows that that's not necessarily true.

Youth Radio: Do businesses and schools deal with creativity in the same way?

Wright: We were curious to see, how is it that creativity is taught, and how is it enhanced. We asked both business executives and school administrators how they were thinking about creativity. Everybody said creativity was very important, but how it is defined was quite different. Businesses said that it was the ability to define the problem, whereas school administrators were saying it was the ability to find the answer.

A lot of businesses have gone out of business because they were solving the wrong problem. The auto industry has solved the wrong problem many times over - maybe they're building bigger cars but the problem was fuel... We also saw that when we asked schools -- what are the programs that help develop creativity? They said creative writing and arts classes. Yet the majority of those classes are not required, not part of the strict core curriculum, they were an elective.

Now business had a very similar result. We asked, once you have these employees, how do you help develop creativity? They said yes, it's important, but we don't require them to take advantage of these things, they're not required. Neither schools nor businesses are making creativity a requirement of either their employees or their students.

Youth Radio: Do you think creativity indices are a good way to increase the amount of creativity in schools?

Wright: What's important gets measured. I think that therefore developing some metric by which you can determine - are you making a difference? - is a critical one. Massachusetts and California are two states with big high-tech industries and very interested in making sure there's a creative nature. If we develop this measure and we think these schools are doing it really well - it allows for inter-state and inter-district sharing about what programs have really helped.

We're hoping to be able to ask, if these are the most creative people in the company, what is their training? What is similar in their background that would suggest that therefore if you did the following six things, you are going to be more

successful as a creative person? If schools had some measure that begins to say-- it's because they had a fabulous science teacher, or project-based learning, or a theater program -- because we don't have a sense of what is the most significant driver.

Youth Radio: Do you have any concerns about the index?

Wright: There's always an issue around equity -- if kids are coming from an upper-income area and parents can supplement what kids are exposed to, then you begin to worry about the bias. Is it just the school environment? Or what is happening before and after school that is going to make a difference? I haven't seen the indices so I don't know how they're going to factor in that kind of thing.

There's always the concern about how inclusive is the data and how are they used -- are they used to really benefit all the kids in the system?

Then there's the issue of preference... If a kid chooses not to be involved in activities like theater, are they missing out on the opportunities?... If that project-based learning is not used in the traditional classroom, then that child will not be exposed. Then there's the reverse - just because a kid was in a classroom with project-based learning, does that mean they're inherently more creative? No.

Youth Radio: Do you see a common goal for businesses and education in terms of workforce readiness?

Wright: We continue to look at the issue around how businesses and schools talk to each other. Schools have always felt that their role is to make that person ready to be an important contributor to society, someone you want to have as a neighbor. We certainly feel that the skill sets involved in being workforce-ready are exactly the same as those of being a good citizen -- you can read, you can write, you can express yourself, you can understand, you can take knowledge from a variety of areas and turn it into something useful. We feel that the bridge between the business world and the education world is there - and it's something we need to work on strengthening.