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Kansans Can: Redesigning Schools

Brad Neuenschwander

Kansas, like many states that are coming off an era of accountability under the federal No Child Left Behind requirements, is looking at more meaningful ways to value and measure student success. We have asked ourselves questions: are we focusing on the right measures, is our accountability system aligned to our educational priorities and values, and is the educational system itself in need of change in order to produce a more meaningful set of outcomes? These are questions that need answers before any educational reform initiatives can be addressed.

Kansas has a 10-member state board of education that traditionally holds a strategic planning retreat every two years in February following the election of new members. With the hiring of a new Commissioner of Education, Dr. Randy Watson, in November 2014, the decision was made to postpone the February retreat so KSDE leadership, along with state board members, could conduct a tour of Kansas communities, seeking input regarding what Kansans want and value in their public education system. It was important to the new commissioner and the state board to base their long-term strategic plan and vision on input from Kansans. The spring of 2015 was the best opportunity to conduct tours across the state.

As Deputy Commissioner of Learning Services at the KSDE, I oversee teacher licensure, accreditation of schools, early childhood, special education, title programs, standards, assessments, and career and technical education. The KSDE team works on behalf of the state board of education to provide support, guidance and technical assistance to schools in order to achieve the vision set by the state board. The results of this state-wide tour will play a significant role in guiding the work of the Learning Services team at KSDE as the state board crafts a new vision for the state of Kansas.

In order to encourage attendance and participation from a larger population than just the school employees, Randy and I decided to call these events *Kansas Children, Kansas' Future: Community Conversations*. It was important for us to hear the voice of all stakeholders who wanted to be engaged in conversation about redefining success for students in education; we wanted to focus on the ideas of community and conversation. *Community* referred to parents, business leaders, students, and the general public, while *conversation* signified dialogue between us, as presenters, and the participants, as audience. We wanted them to know they would be involved in a discussion, rather than merely hearing a presentation where communication is a one-way process.

The tour consisted of 20 locations across the state and included approximately 1,700 attendees broken into 287 focus groups, representing educators, parents, students, higher education officials, business leaders, community members, and public officials, including legislators. Some of these events were held during the day, while others took place in the evenings.

During the events, attendees learned about the current condition of education across the country, and in Kansas. We shared information and data about the changing economy, the rapid change in business and industry, including how innovation and automation has changed our life styles and behaviors. We also discussed that while the world is changing in our communities, states and

nation, little has changed within the walls of public education. From the structure of the day, to student and adult expectations for achievement, the educational community appears slower to change than the community in which we live.

It was at the mid-point of the event that Randy and I began asking the attendees, organized in focus groups, three specific questions in hopes to receive their input. Those three questions were:

- What are the skills, attributes, and abilities of a successful 24-year-old Kansan?
- What is K-12's role in developing this successful Kansan, and how would we measure success?
- What is higher education's role in developing this successful Kansan, and how would we measure success?

Each focus group was able to report their responses to the audience while Randy and I later collected their group responses on a card in order to aggregate a state-wide collective voice from Kansans. At the end of each meeting, we assured participants that we appreciated their participation and willingness to be open and share their thoughts. We also explained our commitment to the process of analyzing their input and reporting the data collected to Kansans for verification. In fact, we announced a follow-up tour to be held a few months later to report data and ensure our accuracy in capturing their voices.

In addition to the 20 locations where we hosted the community conversation events, it was decided to add seven additional listening events across Kansas that specifically targeted the voice and input from the business community. We felt it important to engage all voices in Kansas, including those of employers that hire our young Kansans once they leave the educational system. In using the same questions as on our previous journeys throughout the state, we learned that representatives from business and industry varied in size, as measured by the number of employees in the organization. There were two businesses that were self-employed, having no employees working for them, and 19 business participants who staffed more than 500 employees. Out of all attendees, 50.4% were representatives from firms that ranged in size from 1-50 employees, which would be described as the typical small business in Kansas. A major policy goal for Kansas, as with other states, involves the creating of new businesses for economic development.

As Randy and I continued our travels across Kansas, we heard loud and clear that the state accountability system used for accrediting schools was out-of-balance with our priorities. Kansans can say they value all of the things that help a young individual become successful later in life, but if we only measure the success of a child or institution based on a standardized test score, then we will most likely ignore examining the rest of the important components of a successful educational system. Not only was the system's main focus on NCLB test scores, but it was also the driving factor behind Quality Performance Accreditation (QPA). These were features that met with disapproval from many Kansans. We needed a more balanced approach to accountability – one that places value on other measures of success.

Of the responses from the first 20 community conversations, Kansans stated that the skills and abilities of a successful young adult should fall into five major categories. Figure 1, which is a

visual aggregation of the community responses, reveals that non-academic skills carry considerable value in what Kansans want for our youth. Valuing only academic skills in an accountability system does not match our desires.

• GENERAL COMMUNITY

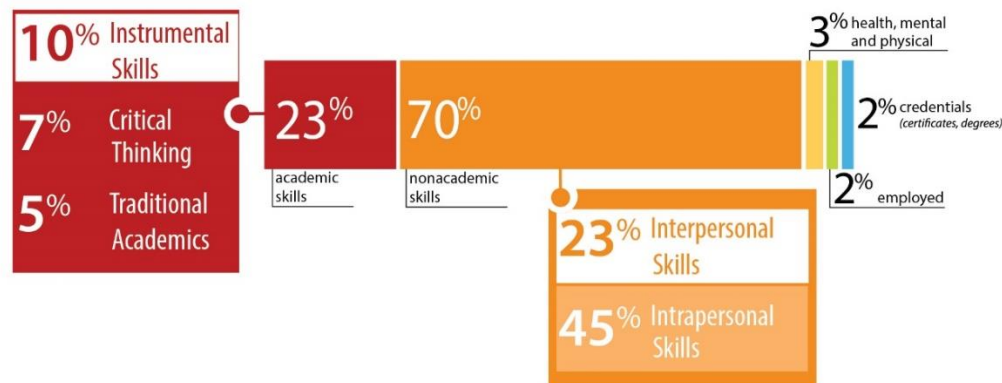


Figure 1: Summary of the General Community Conversation tour on the skills necessary for a successful 24-year-old Kansan.

Of the skills mentioned by participants, 23% were in the category of academic skills, with the majority of those being instrumental skills that can be used in real-world, on-the-job situations. People felt we put too much emphasis on many traditional academic skills where students memorize information in order to pass a test, but they cannot transfer that knowledge to an actual job performance task.

We anticipated hearing the types of skills labeled as non-academic, but we were somewhat surprised it would make up 70% of responses. We categorized the non-academic skills into two categories of interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. Interpersonal skills include areas like communication, citizenship, social tolerance, as well as cultural and group skills. Items that were placed under intrapersonal skills included agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, emotional stability, and openness.

Of responses from the seven business/industry tours, where 110 businesses across the state of Kansas were represented, the skills and abilities they desired were similar to those suggested by the community groups, in Figure 2 below. We assigned the same categories as we used with the set of community conversation responses, and we found it interesting that the business group listed academic skills to a smaller degree than the community group. Business participants spoke more often about the importance of non-academic skills for gaining and securing employment. In other words, many of their employee-candidates are academically prepared for the positions for which they apply, but they lack the types of non-academic skills that make them an effective employee.

• BUSINESS COMMUNITY

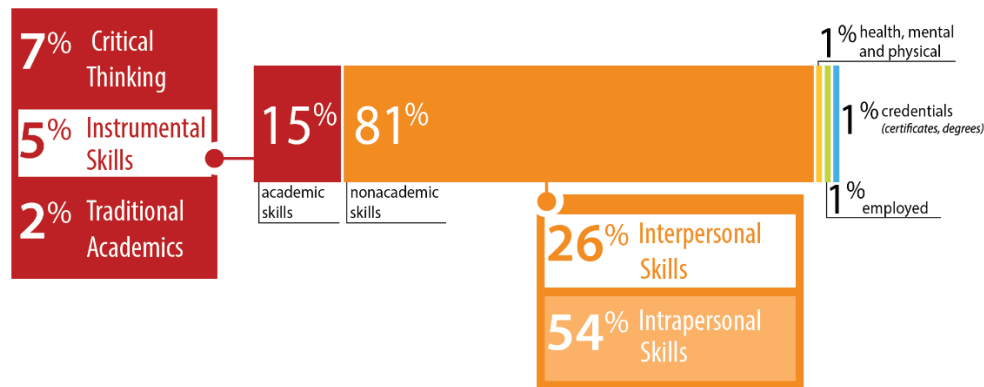


Figure 2: Summary of the Business Community Conversation tour on the skill necessary for a successful 24-year-old Kansan.

One of the most surprising and interesting findings from both the community and business tours was the need for our young adults to become civically engaged. It was not surprising that community groups would mention this, but we did not expect it to be mentioned to this large a degree. The magnitude of their responses was almost identical to those of the business and industry leaders. Businesses spoke clearly of their desire for employees who engaged with their communities.

When examining the results from both the community and the business/industry tours, we found that by a ratio of 2:1, *non-academic skills* were listed at a greater frequency than *academic skills*, with *conscientiousness* accounting for 22% of all items as the largest set of skills, followed by *openness*, *citizenship*, *communication*, *agreeableness*, and *extraversion* (See Figure 3). In a study that compared international research on college and career readiness, the authors found that there was a correlation across five categories: *openness to experience*, *conscientiousness*, *extraversion*, *agreeableness*, and *emotional stability* (Lipnevich & Roberts, 2012). In the area of academics, two-thirds of the skills fell into the category of critical thinking and applied academic skills, with the latter set gaining the most commonly cited set of academic skill importance.

I also believe that Kansans align themselves with respondents in other studies, such as when the Hart Research Association (2010) interviewed employers to find out the most important skills and abilities necessary for employee success. The highest responses included both academic and non-academic skills like communicating effectively, orally and in writing, using critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills, applying knowledge and skills to real-world settings, connecting choices and actions to ethical decisions, and analyzing and solving complex problems. Further support comes from a report (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006) suggesting that despite their foundational importance, skills like reading and mathematics are not of primary concern to today's employers.

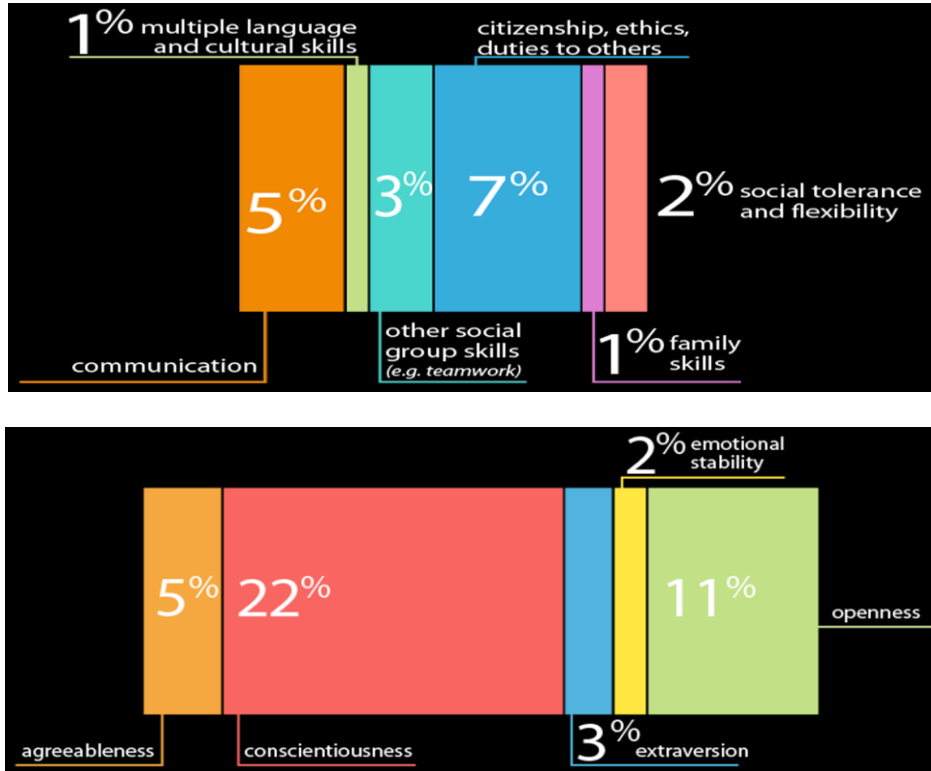


Figure 3: Percent of responses relative to Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Skills.

Additionally, the requirement of these non-academic skills are supported by a study from Harvard University, the Carnegie Foundation, and the Stanford Research Center (Crosbie, 2005) where it was found that 85% of job success was dependent on the employee having well-developed soft skills and people skills (see Figure 4). Of interesting note, this study referred to subject-matter knowledge as “hard skills,” as opposed to “soft skills.”

Research conducted by Harvard University, the Carnegie Foundation and Stanford Research Center, has all concluded that **85% of job success comes from having well-developed soft skills and people skills,** and only 15% of job success comes from technical skills and knowledge (hard skills).

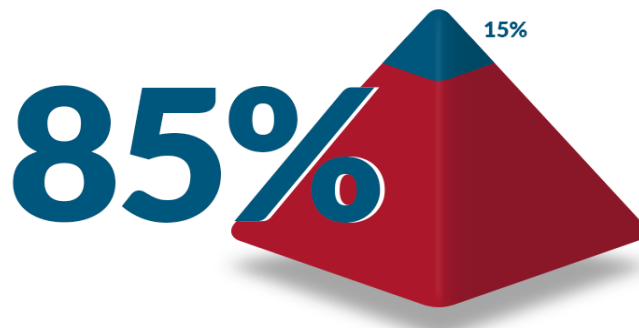


Figure 4: Research on job success as related to the need for soft skills and people skills.

While academic skills were cited as important for a successful young Kansan, it was clear from both groups that the current Kansas accountability system, QPA, has become outmoded in the way it measures success. Predominantly this was caused by a response to NCLB and proficiency targets included on state exams. Placing too much focus on a standardized test is not gaining us the desired outcomes we want as a state. Four participants advocated a more balanced focus to include other, non-academic skills on an accountability model to deliver the success that Kansans desire.

This was also a time of personal anxiety as I have never led this type of initiative. Although I believe that the field was confident in my abilities as Deputy Commissioner of Education, I felt responsible in delivering on the wishes of over 2,000 Kansans who provided their time and thoughts during the process. Kansas State University agreed to look over my shoulder throughout the analysis phase of the data to ensure a high level of reliability and validity to the tour data. Those at the university also assisted in instilling the study's rigor in analyzing the development of Kansas's new accreditation model.

While completing the analysis of the Community Conversation Tour data and the Business Community Tour data, we compared the commonalities and differences in how two different groups responded to the tour questions. This was accomplished by examining national studies that either did or did not support what Kansans wanted. To our delight, we discovered that what Kansans say they wanted actually *aligned* with several national studies around community and business desires on educational outcomes.

While visiting with Kansans on the tour, some of the more challenging questions and discussions centered on visualizing a new system that allowed for various types of programs, initiatives and outcomes that were desired as this required a new way of thinking about school design. As a beginning to the conversations, it was sometimes easier to describe what the new educational system will *not* look like than to describe what it *might* look like. What we do not want is the traditional system where students move through education based on age, time and, content; this would be akin to replicating an assembly line. There are many changes occurring in our schools, but Kansans are telling us that the *system* is getting in the way of true change. How do we create a system where every student is authentically engaged regardless of the classroom or teacher they are assigned?

A new system should address school culture, recognizing each student for her or his individual gifts and talents. This will require the reorganization of the school around the student, rather than attempting to fit the student into a system. This will also require a new role for school counselors and social workers to better identify the uniqueness of each child and tailor services individually instead of groups. Included in this model will be the need to have students more closely consider life and career exploration with connections to a broader community of experiences, including community service projects.

In addition, we envision a system where students spend more personalized time with a teacher, whether that means more time in school during the day or even spending more years with the same teacher. We also envision more project-based learning, specifically with those that occur over an extended time so that students can experience a deeper engagement in their learning. Just

as children involved in organizations like the Girl Scouts and the Boy Scouts engage in projects in order to receive recognition, or badges, students will have similar experiences in school. We may even consider innovative new partnerships with those two organizations, as well as 4-H Clubs, where their programs are introduced into our schools for all to experience.

Within the new system, schools will incorporate several main themes from the community conversation tour. How the schools incorporate these themes in the context of a new framework has yet to be seen, but I envision that they will have high quality preschool programs, including full-day kindergarten, that allow children to enter their educational journey on an equal playing field with one another. This will require new partnerships with the school and community to engage stakeholders in a coordinated effort that is unique to the needs of their families and students.

I am excited for the future of education in Kansas and honored to have been a part of this incredible journey. It is difficult to describe exactly what the future will look like for education, but I commit to ensuring we continue to push forward. The recommendations from the Committee of Ten were revolutionary more than a century ago, but they no longer align with the needs of our schools, our communities, and the life experiences of our students as they enter adulthood.

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