

A good read...
T. Price

DEEPER Learning

A Georgia school teaches skills that translate to the workplace

Thomas J. Gentzel and Richard Anderson

A decade in business gave Billy Heaton unexpected insights about educational priorities. During 10 years in the contracting industry, Heaton vividly recalls working with other professionals—from architects to subcontractors—who lacked some of the most fundamental, valuable abilities anyone can carry into the workplace.

“One of the biggest obstacles we faced was dealing with people who just didn’t know how to work well in a group, how to collaborate, how to listen, or how to communicate well,” he says.

Heaton traded in his business card for a career in school administration. He’s currently the principal at Clairemont Elementary School in Decatur, Georgia. Clairemont is a K-3 school that uses a learning model based on practical experiences and student projects called expeditionary learning.

Expeditionary learning seeks to cultivate the same skills that some of Heaton’s business associates failed to master. “The practices and principles of expeditionary learning teach skills that I saw as lacking in some of my colleagues in the business world. Those types of lifelong skills are important, and they’re learned by our students as they work with people out in the community who are in the business field.”

Lifelong skills are the bedrock of expeditionary learning. It involves hands-on lessons that impart critical thinking skills, problem solving, collaborative activities, and socialization. It emphasizes practical learning methods while incorporating a strong element of community involvement.

Heaton notes that students don’t do “field trips” at Clairemont. They do “field work.” Students collect data, conduct research, and interview experts and professionals over the course of an expedition in order to create a finished work product.

Heaton is thrilled with the results. “Our teachers regularly bring in experts and work with students on projects and the development of products,” he says. “All of the K-3 schools here in Decatur also use experts to provide students with feedback or to help critique students’ work. It’s a very collaborative effort in which students are exposed to professionals in a given field.”

TWO-WAY CONNECTIONS

That partnership is also a two-way street. Business people are able to see the challenges that educators and students face while gaining a greater understanding of those issues. At the same time, business leaders who are involved in expeditionary learning help foster a connection between the classroom and the community.

deeper learning

That connection is at the forefront of the work the students produce. For example, second-graders at Clairemont are creating an almanac. They're using local resources to research the information that will be composed for and included in the almanac, which will be donated to the City of Decatur's library upon completion.

"What I love about the expeditionary learning framework is that, even beginning in kindergarten, it's developing the skills that these kids will need when they go out into the real world," Heaton says. "We're trying to start instilling these skills as early as possible."

Those executive functioning skills are the ones employers value most: critical thinking, absorbing and incorporating feedback into one's work, communicating

effectively, knowing and mastering essential academic content, and creative problem solving.

Collectively, these competencies form the nucleus of an innovative, research-supported educational model called "deeper learning," of which expeditionary learning is one type.

Deeper learning emphasizes executive functioning skills that today's employers require. It helps children develop into well-rounded students who have the abilities that they'll need to thrive in the modern job market. Deeper learning helps students succeed in college, the workforce, and society in general.

Project-based learning, like the expeditionary model, is a centerpiece of deeper learning. It teaches kids real-world know-how in an environment that also stresses those crucial executive functioning skills.

SKILLS GAP

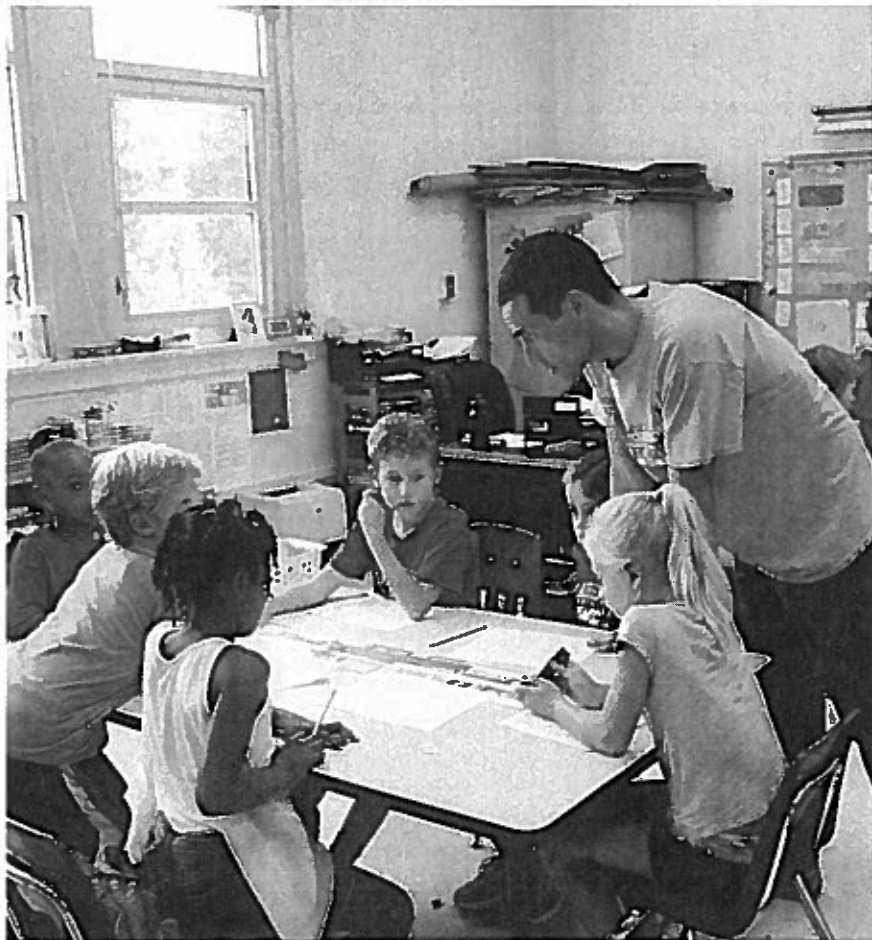
All of that is more important than ever for the next generation of American workers. Our country is in the midst of a potentially crippling "skills gap," meaning that there aren't enough qualified workers to fill available positions.

The business leader organization ReadyNation highlights startling research that shows just how severe this problem is: Nationwide, 65 percent of job openings by the end of the current decade will require some form of postsecondary education. However, only 60 percent of American workers possess that level of education.

That 5-percent gap means that, unless trends shift, there may be 2.75 million unfilled positions. In Clairemont's home state of Georgia alone, there will be nearly 85,000 jobs for which there won't be qualified applicants.

Even more alarming, the skills gap is especially significant in STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), which is a sector of industry that is growing rapidly.

The skills gap matters a great deal for Georgia companies like Delta Air Lines. Business leaders at major employers like Delta understand how vital it is to develop a workforce that has the deeper-learning skills necessary for success. And the business community wants to help grow and foster the next generation of good employees that will boost the state and local economies in Georgia and elsewhere.



Collaborative activities are a part of Clairemont's classwork.

Ensuring that all students graduate from high school well prepared for postsecondary education and a rapidly changing global workplace is a major priority of the National School Boards Association. Achieving that goal requires rigorous academic preparation as well as vital skills such as the ability to acquire needed information, to think critically and be creative in applying what has been learned, and to work effectively with others in developing and implementing solutions to challenging problems.

Valarie Wilson, the executive director of the Georgia School Boards Association, sees expeditionary learning as a success story.

"With expeditionary learning, teaching doesn't just involve students sitting in their chairs," Wilson says. "Children in the school do their projects, and then they have to present them and talk about what they're doing. They learn how to focus the presentation on key facts and how to figure out not only what to say, but how to say it to others."

Wilson also points out that parents support expeditionary learning and are able to see the positive difference it makes in their child's life.

ALIGNMENT AND COLLABORATION

Unsurprisingly, Clairemont has become an expeditionary learning "mentor school." It has also earned a National Blue Ribbon School award. It was the first elementary school in the district to use the expeditionary learning model.

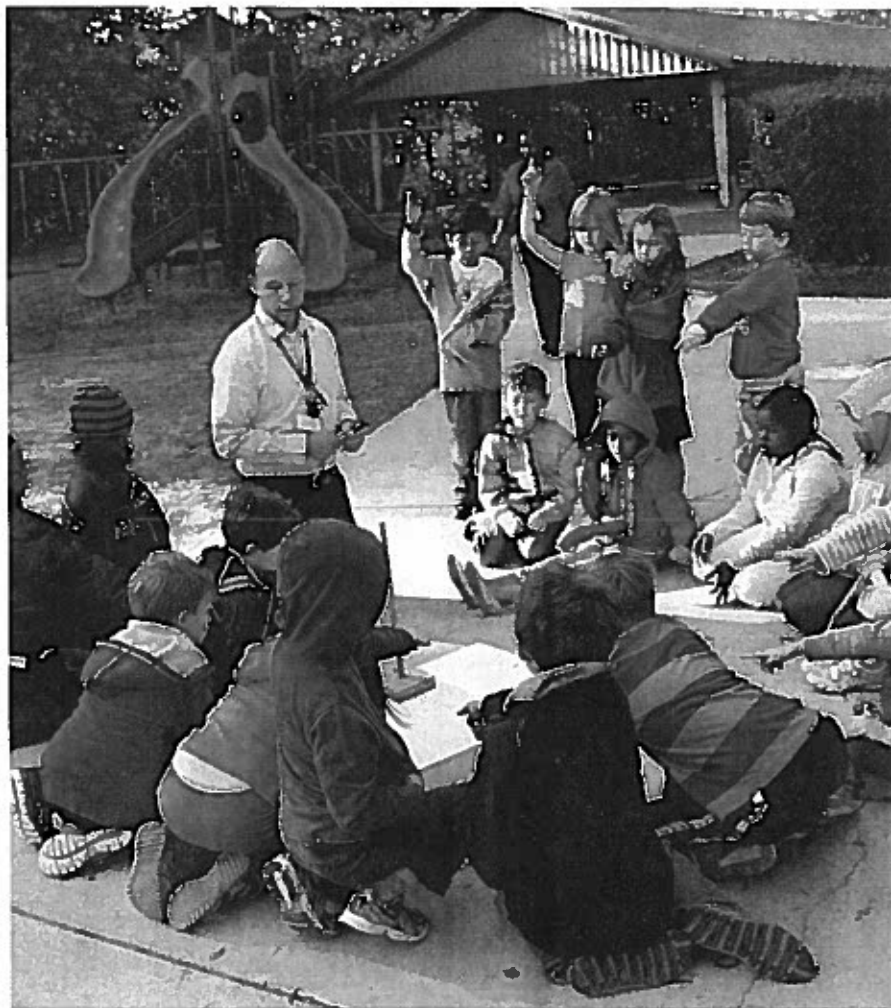
In fact, the students at Clairemont performed so well that the Decatur City Schools Board of Education decided to introduce the program into the other elementary schools in the district.

That piece of Clairemont's story underscores another reason for the success of the program: excellent alignment between school board and school district. When districts and boards work in concert to bolster effective learning models, everyone wins.

It seems appropriate that the success of the expeditionary learning program is based in part on a core deeper learning competency: collaboration.

Billy Heaton sees the difference that expeditionary learning already makes in the children's lives.

He speaks of the academic mindset expeditionary learning creates when he says, "We let kids know that



Clairemont students do field work, not field trips.

they aren't perfect. They are going to make mistakes. But they have to know that they can take those mistakes and use them as learning opportunities, which is a great lifelong skill." But the lessons extend far beyond the classroom.

Heaton says, "Overall, I've just been blown away by how kind kids here at Clairemont are to each other."

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