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Iowa Learning Council

IOWA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Iowa Learning Council

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Iowa Learning Council

Introduction

On the following pages, the reader will find a voice largely absent in Iowa's pursuit of improving learning across the state: current students. Nearly a year ago, 132 Iowa students in grades 8 through 12 applied to represent their peers with the advent of the Learning Council. Eighteen students were chosen and promised an avenue for voicing their thoughts on how to best serve educational needs across the state. The Learning Council represents a broad range of student perspectives from small, rural schools to large, urban schools, homogenous student bodies to diverse student bodies, alternative learning environments to traditional learning environments. A great degree of effort went into selecting students in order to create and sustain a conversation on improving education for each and every student in Iowa.

For too long now, decisions about education in Iowa and across the country have failed to incorporate the most important stakeholder – students affected by educational policy. The Learning Council sprang to life in an effort to provide students an avenue into education policy. Most importantly, the Council is solely a function of the students.

Since the group first convened in March 2012, four students graduated from Iowa high schools and recently completed a semester at various universities. Similarly, the remaining representatives are now one step further in their educational journey after beginning a new school year in August. Since students live in various parts of the state, meeting face-to-face has been limited to three dates. After establishing initial relationships in March, students returned for the second meeting in May and decided that writing a legislative brief for the 2013 legislative session would be the focus of the Council's efforts in 2012. Once the general direction emerged, the Learning Council utilized Edmodo in order to move the work of the brief forward during the summer and fall months.

On the pages that follow, the reader will find reflections and recommendations from the perspectives of the very students who represent a bright future for Iowa. It must be especially noted that little assistance came from the Iowa Department of Education, aside from involvement in convening the group, arranging meeting dates, setting up the Edmodo site, and serving as a general facilitator and advisor.

Bob Dylan once expressed, "Don't underestimate me and I won't underestimate you!" Please do not underestimate the students across the great state of Iowa and their desire to influence the world around them.

With great honor,

Byron Darnall, Iowa Department of Education

Iowa Learning Council

Executive Summary

A quality education is the key to success later in life. As students who have spent most of our lives in Iowa's school system, we believe that there is a growing disconnect between education and the world for which we're being prepared. We acknowledge that education in Iowa works. But simply working is no longer good enough. Over the past few decades, many other parts of the world have enacted sweeping changes that have launched them to the top. As a result, this state – once an educational leader – has settled to the middle of the pack in a country that continues to fall behind in international rankings. In order to maintain Iowa's global competitiveness and truly prepare students for success, we propose the following recommendations:

- Improving education starts with those who facilitate it. Iowa needs to effectively recruit and support great teachers and school leaders by offering competitive pay and career advancement opportunities, as well as giving teachers a meaningful chance to collaborate with one another.
- Iowa needs to start using a next generation assessment framework that will more holistically assess learning and render richer data. Iowa can achieve this by adopting the Smarter Balanced Assessments. Measuring student progress should also be driven by teachers, rather than developed by the state in end-of-course tests.
- Iowa's curriculum should reflect the complex demands of a dynamic world. A delicate balance between core subjects must be achieved. Our curriculum must also be relevant to, and actively connect with, the world in which students live through an emphasis on service learning, and it must be tailored to the needs of each individual student through competency-based education.
- Schools must empower and motivate students by fostering positive and unbiased interactions between students and teachers.
- Iowa should support STEM education programs, such as Project Lead the Way, and allocate resources to expand them to all of Iowa's schools. The state should also encourage schools to work with colleges and local businesses to enhance partnerships and increase opportunities for real-world career training and internships in high school.
- Iowa should expand online learning options so that all of Iowa's students have access to a variety of classes that fit their learning needs. In addition, students should have more opportunities to explore careers in high school.

Iowa needs to adopt bold, student-centered reform that will make education more engaging, relevant, and valuable.

Ultimately, we believe that Iowa needs to adopt bold, student-centered reform that will make education more engaging, relevant, and valuable. In doing so, we will secure our future and ensure Iowa's prosperity for years to come.

Our Recommendations

I. Enhance Teacher Quality

Education as a profession is not held in high regard in today's society. There are numerous reasons prospective students may avoid a position in this career field, such as low salary and disrespect from students. It seems obvious that adolescents and young adults graduating within the top 10 percent of their class should be the individuals pursuing a career in education; however, because of the factors mentioned above, along with many others, this is not the case.

Personally, as a senior in high school, I do aspire to become an English teacher; still, I am the exception, as I can confidently say that I am the only individual within the top 10 percent of my class with plans of becoming an educator. Certainly, if all teacher candidates were accomplished students in both high school and college, teaching quality across Iowa would skyrocket.

-- **McKenzie Baker**, 12th grade, Forest City High School in Forest City

We believe this is a realistic goal to begin working toward; meanwhile, collaboration among teachers, and even teachers with students, must increase greatly in order for teaching quality to improve dramatically. The following example shows one method used to execute this continuous process of collaboration:

> Several high schools in the Cedar Rapids Community School District require staff to participate in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) on Wednesdays after a shortened school schedule for students. This opportunity allows teachers from across the district to discuss which teaching procedures are producing success or failure. It also enables educators to refine the curriculum students are struggling with; they draw these conclusions from various assessments and overall student development.

This collaboration has also been implemented elsewhere on a different level. At Sparks Middle School in Nevada, teachers write tests together, compare results, demonstrate lessons, think up games to engage their students, and visit other classrooms for 15 minutes once a month to learn new strategies. Lastly, on Thursdays and Fridays, students start classes 75 minutes later, allowing time for the faculty to discuss their instruction. As one can see, Nevada has set the bar high, but we, as current students enrolled in Iowa's educational system, have confidence that our legislators will take the proper steps to implement an even greater level of educator collaboration, involving administrators, teachers, and students.

Recommendations:

- Iowa should look at the countries that are currently getting the best teachers and improve incentives to recruit and retain great teachers.
- Iowa should evaluate and improve the quality of its teachers by taking lessons from programs that produce the highest quality teachers.

II. Revolutionize Assessment

Assessment has always been an important issue in education. Indeed, standardized test performance plays a pivotal role in determining students' educational paths, and every major education decision is made based upon the data that assessments generate. Despite its importance, we believe that there are many problems with Iowa's testing framework. In order to understand these problems and consider the policy implications of improving Iowa's assessment systems, one must be aware of the reality of assessment in Iowa's schools.

Under federal and state statute, the scope and stakes of assessment have dramatically increased over the past decade. Current law stipulates that Iowa students be assessed through two accountability measures, including the Iowa Assessments (formerly known as ITBS/ITED) and a secondary assessment chosen by each district. Iowa's standardized tests are exclusively multiple-choice, which limits the standards that they can assess to a relatively small number of basic facts and concepts. The data generated by these tests are a suitable way to get a snapshot of student progress and are often used to inform decisions about placement in different levels of a course, but their utility is undermined by the amount of time it takes to get the results back.

Our assessment system coerces schools into teaching rote memorization of basic facts and concepts.

In addition, many students share scores and use them to judge themselves and their peers. Educators, parents, and students also feel mistrust of the required testing, fostering a culture of fear and hostility toward the state. Perhaps the greatest problem with our testing framework is its continuity. Over the past 100 years, the world has undergone profound changes; yet education, and assessment in particular, has remained largely static. The global economy now depends on ever-changing technology and workers who can utilize these tools to creatively solve complex problems. However, our assessment system still treats students as though they can succeed by doing repetitive tasks and coerces schools into teaching rote memorization of basic facts and concepts. Even though adjustments have been made to the curriculum that reflect these changes in the wider world and test questions often incorporate present-day graphs and data, Iowa's assessment framework is still fundamentally the same.

We believe that assessment has the power and potential to dramatically enhance education, but this will not happen until we develop assessments that assess true learning, use their data to empower instead of punish, and fulfill the ultimate goal of, as Linda Darling-Hammond put it at the Iowa Education Summit in July 2011, "assessment of, as, and for learning."

Smarter Balanced Assessments

Develop assessments that assess true learning.

The Smarter Balanced Assessments (SBA) are standardized tests being prepared for the 2014-15 school year through a consortium of 25 states of which Iowa is part. These tests will be intricately linked to the Common Core State Standards, which will ensure uniformity across the nation. The SBA will have three major components: a summative assessment that is designed to serve the purpose of a primary state accountability measure (thus taking the place of the Iowa Assessments); optional interim assessments that will be administered throughout the course of the year at locally determined intervals; and a digital library of professional development resources related to the assessments and the Common Core State Standards. Each component will be administered exclusively through computers and will include both traditional multiple-choice questions and constructed-response problems that will challenge students to apply their knowledge to complex, real-life situations. The tests will also incorporate a performance task in which students will conduct research and complete a project or perhaps write an essay.

The digital delivery of the SBA presents a number of issues. Thirty-seven percent of districts already use the computer-based MAP tests as a secondary accountability measure. These tests, which are administered two to three times per year and take approximately one hour per student, result in the closure of all computer labs in the school for upwards of three weeks each round of testing. In contrast, the recommended SBA summative assessments alone will take an average of 11.25 hours per student to complete in accordance with the original design. It is hard to imagine how schools will accommodate this level of testing without severely disrupting instruction and the use of already scarce technology resources. However, it is clear that continuing to administer the paper-and-pencil Iowa Assessments is unsustainable, and digital tests offer compelling advantages.

For example, the tests will be more engaging and meaningful to students. In addition, richer and more valuable data will be available almost immediately after the tests are administered. This will enable teachers to use the tests to immediately make relevant adjustments to instruction. For this reason, we cautiously believe that Iowa should move forward with the adoption of the SBA summative assessment with adequate support and consideration of their limitations.

We believe that Iowa should not adopt SBA interim assessments. These tests will provide actionable data to students, teachers, and parents throughout the year; yet, teachers understand the standards that students need to meet and are already constantly assessing progress. These tests will require the use of computers that could be used for instructional purposes. Furthermore, the interim assessments will cost at least an additional $2.1 million per year.

The development of these tests is being funded through a $360 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education. Once the tests are ready for use in Iowa schools in the 2014-15 school year, the cost for administration will be the responsibility of the state. The summative assessments will cost approximately $5.6 million per year for all students tested in the state, a nearly six-fold increase in cost relative to the Iowa Assessments. In addition, the technology requirements of the SBA will put further stress on already strained digital resources, so some districts may need to update or expand their existing technology infrastructure. It may be necessary for the state to offer funds to districts on an as-needed basis for this purpose.

End-of-Course Assessments

End-of-course (EOC) assessments are statewide standardized tests that students take at the end of a high school course as a condition of graduation and/or for incorporation into their final class grade. Over the past decade, 28 states have, or are in the process of, implementing EOC tests, and last year the Iowa Legislature considered a proposal to adopt these assessments in Iowa. These tests do present some very advantageous qualities. EOC tests will be linked to the Iowa Core standards, so requiring every student to pass these tests as a condition for graduation will ensure that all students will graduate career and/or college-ready. Furthermore, EOC tests will promote consistency in what is taught across the state and allow educators to make direct comparisons among teachers, schools, and districts within the state. Sixteen states have also used EOC assessments as an accountability measure for the federal No Child Left Behind law, meaning that these tests could take the place of a current assessment. EOC tests may also simplify high-school credit transfers for students who move both within the state and perhaps among other states with EOC systems.

We acknowledge that these are compelling advantages, and some positive outcomes would result if policymakers decide to adopt an EOC assessment system. However, there are a multitude of technical and logistical issues associated with EOC tests. For instance, the results of EOC tests need to be available in a timely manner to facilitate the printing of report cards and graduation certificates. But EOC tests must assess higher-order thinking skills,

and scoring such tests is inevitably time-consuming and expensive. EOC tests also contradict many of the teacher quality reforms that Iowa is considering. We expect teachers to teach to a set of high standards with consistency across the state, but every educator delivers this curriculum in a slightly different manner, meaning that each student has a slightly different educational experience. We need to trust that our teachers will fulfill their responsibility to equip students with a common set of skills and knowledge by empowering them with the autonomy to experiment with innovative techniques and develop their own classroom assessments.

Indeed, Finland, a high-performing nation that Iowa has looked to as a model, emphasizes responsibility instead of accountability and uses no such EOC tests. Teachers know their students better than the state does; they are able to develop more subjective final exams that assess deeper understanding through extended response questions or projects, and they are able to score these in a timely fashion. In light of this, we believe that Iowa should not adopt EOC tests.

Iowa should not adopt state-administered end-of-course assessments.

Recommendations:

- Although the Iowa Assessments have served Iowa well for many years, it is time for them to be replaced with the more relevant and comprehensive Smarter Balanced Assessments by the 2014-15 school year.
- Iowa should allocate fiscal resources for additional technology resources; Iowa should not use the SBA interim assessments.
- Iowa should not adopt state-administered end-of-course (EOC) assessments.
- Policymakers need to be aware of the reality of testing in Iowa's schools and use this to consciously make policy decisions.

III. Individualize & Adapt Curriculum

Ever since kindergarten, English and social studies classes have been my favorite classes. I've prided myself on being able to write the best papers, comprehend the hardest books and ace every history test ever. So when it came time to assemble a junior year schedule that showed colleges I was the best, the brightest, the most passionate student out there, I knew what classes I wanted to take: AP European History and AP World History. To my dismay, I was encouraged to take another math or science class. I was disappointed that students like myself were being discouraged from taking history and social science classes.

In the end, I negotiated my way into AP European History and AP World History,

but I felt as if my learning interests weren't as important as the interests of other students. Every student in Iowa should have the opportunity to pursue learning that is interesting and appeals to their individual passions.

-- **Sophia Babcock**, 11th grade, PCM High School in Monroe

Curriculum Balance

There is no doubt that math and science classes are becoming more important. To compete globally, Iowa needs engineers, physicists, researchers, and doctors more than ever. But that doesn't mean Iowa needs its government workers, teachers, salesmen, and average citizens any less. Skills that develop the latter group of people still need to be taught in Iowa's schools. If Iowa's schools focus less on English and social science classes, the results could be disastrous. With only 77.3 percent of Iowa sixth graders meeting the reading Annual Measurable Objective (AMO), Iowa clearly still has work to do in reading and writing. Unfortunately, there is no way to measure how we are performing in social science classes because it isn't a tested area. Most schools require three or four years of math and science to graduate high school, but only a semester of government to do the same. The average student who graduates high school will not use algebra or chemistry in their everyday post-high school lives; however, all students will read and write as part of their daily lives, and every student will have the ability to vote. Iowa's schools should be preparing students to excel at both tasks. Moreover, we should encourage students who excel in English or social studies classes to develop their talents in the same way that math and science students are encouraged to develop their talents.

Iowa needs to nurture the talents of students who are not planning on going to college.

In addition, we need to prevent our schools from becoming too weighted in the college preparation direction. In an ideal world, all of Iowa's high school graduates would go on to complete college. That simply is not reality. Iowa needs to nurture the talents of students who are not planning on going to college so that they can be successful straight out of high school. Allowing students to take classes such as auto mechanics, culinary arts, and nursing – and receiving graduation credit for them – is something that needs to happen.

Service Learning & Educational Relevance

Educator Sir Ken Robinson once said, "The great bridge between the two worlds [that which we live in and the one which lives within us] is education." Service learning and educational relevance are the two cornerstones in the education bridge. These two factors make an immense difference between students' ability to permanently retain and usefully apply important information versus the ability to temporarily memorize and reiterate it. In Iowa's quest to rebuild the education bridge, increased focus on these two factors is imperative.

The term "service learning" is defined as a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities. A large issue today lies not in students' ability to study and recite information, but rather to retain and dynamically apply it. Service learning solves this problem through engaging students' knowledge of themselves and the world around them, causing students to apply their knowledge innovatively and authentically according to their learning styles. Service learning not only engages one's in-class knowledge and knowledge of the outside community, but also encourages a connection between the two, creating new wisdom on how to apply that knowledge and utilize one's education in the real world for the long term. This version of learning not only generates enduringly engaged students, but enduringly engaged citizens – a distinct goal of the American educational system. Another in-class tool necessary to achieve the inspiration of engaged students and citizens is educational relevance.

Service learning not only engages one's in-class knowledge and knowledge of the outside community, but also encourages a connection between the two.

The applicability of what is taught by schools to the needs and interests of students and society is known as educational relevance. This approach to curriculum involves real-world scenarios and current events to engage students not only in the classroom, but also in the world that lies outside of it. Much like service learning, educational relevance inspires the development of real-world skills and suffices as a personalized (not standardized) segue between knowledge and application.

As the cornerstones of the bridge of education, Iowa must increase the foundational curricular focus on both service learning and educational relevance. Not only will this initiative improve student information retention, in-class engagement, and the development of real-world skills, it also will benefit the outside community in creating civically involved citizens and inspiring meaningful community volunteerism. In order to build a secure bridge to the future, we must first rebuild our bridge of education – starting with the cornerstones.

Competency-Based Learning

In order to meet the needs of students best, the state should look to the structure of competency-based education. The structure involves creating an individualized curriculum for each student on a personal basis. By assessing each student separately, the structure ensures maximum learning because students have only themselves to compete against in terms of academic achievement. This method even employs methods of assessment, such as internships and hands-on tests. By measuring ability using specialized curriculum and testing, competency-based education creates a system with the correct structure to maximize acquisition of knowledge. Also, the structure revolves around the student, allowing

advancement upon sufficient demonstration of competencies; therefore, it gives students ownership of their learning and placement, increasing productivity. In conclusion, the structure of education should become reliant on student ability and allow for students to determine their own rates of advancement due to the obvious benefits in doing so.

Recommendations:

- Incorporate service-based learning into state-mandated curricula.
- Allow principals and teachers to design and administer their own alternative assessments as long as they meet state guidelines.
- Require students to take four years of math, science, social studies, and English to graduate high school.

IV. Foster Meaningful Teacher-Student Interactions

Competency-based education gives students ownership of their learning.

Matt is about halfway into his first semester of his sophomore year of high school, and already his grades have slipped, as well as his classroom participation and attendance. Many of Matt's teachers have told him that if he does not come to class, he will fail; that if he does not do his work, he will fail; that basically, if he continues down the path he is currently on, he will fail. This may be true; however, he has been told so often he will fail his classes that he not only begins to believe that he will fail, he starts to accept it. Matt's freshman year of high school went the same way, and when he walked into his current classes, he found out that a majority of his teachers had already written him off as a slacker. This has resulted in Matt not wanting to work hard and ultimately living up to his teachers' preconceptions.

Cole is a junior and, up to this point, has had decent grades – mostly B's with the occasional C or D. Although Cole's grades are good enough to graduate, he often wonders if he is really learning anything he can use in the real world. He remembers one math teacher from his freshman year who liked to use examples involving different careers and other daily life examples. Cole remembers this particular teacher even took the class on a few field trips around town to look at different ways to apply what they had learned. However, when Cole asks his other teachers how the subjects he is learning will affect him in daily life, he is often waved off by his teachers and told to get back to work.

Amanda is a senior with a 4.0 GPA who plans on going to college next fall. Amanda learns very quickly, and as a result, she often helps other students learn. She and the students often discuss different ways their teachers could improve their teaching methods. Unfortunately, all too often when Amanda and her fellow students make suggestions to their teachers, they are not taken seriously.

These three examples highlight a few of the vital issues in teacher-student interactions. These issues are very real to many students in Iowa's education system. Every day, students encounter disappointing teaching, a lack of real-world relevance, and indifference to student input.

Matt's issues with biased and negative teaching depict the circle of failure between teacher-student communications that is very real to many students in the education system. To disrupt the pattern of low expectations, we must work with teachers to put forth an unbiased, positive way of teaching. There should be more focus on how the student will benefit from the work they do rather than how they will fail if they don't.

Cole's trouble with relating subject matter to real-world careers and experiences is often echoed in schools all over the nation by the classic question, "How am I ever going to use this?" To answer this question, there must be a curriculum put forth that involves more than just word problems and hypothetical situations, but one with connections between careers/daily life and subject matter. The curriculum should include activities such as field trips and job shadows that tie into the subject matter.

Amanda's frustration with student feedback is a common occurrence in many schools. Students feel they do not have a say in how or what they learn, causing them to feel as if they are not important to their teachers and the education system as a whole. In order to combat this issue, we must make sure all teachers have a comprehensive way for students to make suggestions, whether it be by email or a box students can drop ideas into. Additionally, we must devise a way to make sure teachers are taking suggestions seriously, perhaps by incorporating student surveys into teacher and administrator evaluations.

Matt, Cole, and Amanda's stories are real. They have brought to light some of the most prevalent issues between teacher-student interactions that the Learning Council has identified. By providing an unbiased, positive way of teaching, students like Matt can feel more confident and comfortable in the education system. By providing a realistic curriculum with real examples that tie into careers and daily life, students like Cole can place more importance in the things they learn. And by giving students a comprehensive way to give feedback to teachers, Amanda and other students can feel confident that what they have to say matters. Enacting a curriculum, and a way of teaching the curriculum that includes these solutions, can help empower students to feel confident in their education, making them more eager and ready to learn.

Recommendations:

- Teachers need to adjust their teaching styles based on district-obtained student feedback and the needs of their students.

- Teachers should teach in a way that applies and is relevant to the real world.
- Teachers need to teach in a positive manner. For example, students should be taught in an encouraging way, instead of saying such things as, "If you didn't study, you will fail" (whether it is true or not) to avoid leaving them with a reluctant attitude toward learning.
- Teachers should teach in an unbiased way and act professionally by not telling other teachers what to expect of students based on previous experiences.

V. Improve STEM For All

The United States lags behind the world in math and science, resulting in companies moving overseas to find more cost-efficient human capital. In addition, Baby Boomers, a generation excited about science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields after racing the USSR to the moon, are retiring. For our generation, the manned space program no longer exists in the United States. Our generation has not been attracted to STEM careers like generations past, a circumstance that has led to STEM career shortages. STEM careers are necessary.

I personally challenge you to find something right now that was not designed, built, innovated, or made better by a STEM field.

-- **Andrew Patience**, freshman, Iowa State University in Ames

Iowa needs students to pursue and graduate in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) careers.

In almost all human activities, STEM is involved. Throughout history, the nation with more advanced weapons created by STEM professionals won wars. In the past, that meant hand-to-hand combat weapons. It now means economic wars on the national and regional level as products and innovations created by STEM fields boost GDP and the quality of life in the region. Imagine pumping and heating water for a warm bath, washing clothes by hand or life without the computer (first invented at Iowa State University), among a multitude of other challenges overcome by STEM and largely overlooked by everyone who enjoys wonderful conveniences each and every day.

Iowa needs students to pursue and graduate in STEM careers to attract companies in a time when the rest of the world is increasing the number of engineering graduates. A program called Project Lead the Way (PLTW) has drastically increased the graduation rate among college engineers in the United States. PLTW starts in middle school and continues until the last day of a student's senior year. PLTW can increase the number of engineers who graduate college and join the Iowa workforce.

In addition to engineering, STEM needs to grow in other areas as well. For example, woodworking is being offered in some schools across Iowa, a great start to engaging students in a trade, but it can be so much more for many students. Medical partnerships with hospitals, auto tech training, expanded carpentry, plumbing classes, skyscraper construction training, and electrician training are just out of grasp of our current system. There is so much potential to change lives through STEM, lives that are slipping through the cracks of conventional schools because STEM reaches students who don't thrive in the traditional classroom but prefer the hands-on approach.

More opportunities to join STEM should be presented across the state of Iowa. As such, the Iowa education system should encourage and make it easier to form partnerships between local community colleges/companies and high schools, increase funding for STEM, publish results of the number of students enrolled and passing the final exam to encourage competition between schools, and form a council with companies, businessmen, public university professors, community college professors, and high school implementers to get their opinions on how STEM is progressing in Iowa.

In doing the above, Iowa will steer more students toward needed STEM careers and reach students who don't learn in traditional ways. With Iowa legislation supporting STEM fields, we will be on our way to a stronger economy, better quality of life, and students who graduate with rewarding careers that help us all.

Recommendations:

- Increase partnerships between high schools and colleges.
- Have one PLTW and one STEM technical field teacher in each school by 2020.
- Continue to support PLTW/STEM programs showing growth via financial resources.

VI. Expand Online Classes and Career Exploration in High School

Alternative classes are a must for Iowa students these days. A growing number of students are in need of classes that either challenge them academically or support their learning needs. Students are also finding that they need exposure to careers earlier in their education than is typically offered in high school curriculum. Offering alternative possibilities are just what students need to succeed in today's environment.

Alternative classes include online options for classes to which students often do not have access. Advanced Placement courses and foreign language are two

examples. Students in all settings, both rural and urban, can find their schools lacking in either a class that interests them, such as German, or a class that would provide college benefit, such as Advanced Placement.

I have had an enormous amount of experience with online classes. I am lucky enough to be able to mix traditional and online classes, which I feel gives me a well-rounded education. My eighth-grade year, I took a ninth-grade English class online and had a great time learning about how to use many computer programs and learning how to submit assignments online to my teacher. This school year, I am taking an anatomy and physiology class and an Advanced Placement class online because they are not offered at my school. I was very disappointed when I found out that these classes were not offered in my school, but I was optimistic again when I found out these classes could be taken online through the Iowa Learning Academy and Apex Learning Academy. I feel it is especially important for schools to offer AP classes as a choice. If these classes are not offered in the school, then they need to be offered online. There are only two AP classes offered at my school at the present time, which means that any other AP classes that a student has or wants to take must be taken online. This is my personal experience with alternative classes.

Other types of alternative scenarios are the classes for kids who need help and are struggling in the classroom. I have seen these classes implemented in my own school and have seen kids who have taken them blossom in their schoolwork and return to their original classes doing much better than before.

--Hannah Ritchey, 9th grade, Shenandoah Middle School in Shenandoah

Give students the option of taking online classes.

Many schools have already implemented these kinds of classes into their school systems, but there are many schools that do not give their students the choice of online classes or are unaware that they are even available. This needs to be corrected, and the choice of online classes and classes for those who are falling behind should be mandatory in all schools across Iowa.

In addition to online classes, schools are not doing enough to expose students to careers, and because of this, students do not have a path to follow through high school that will get them to a desired career. High schools need to offer a class based upon career exploration. Students should be able to take their skills and interests, and use them to find a career. If students knew what types of careers they wanted to pursue at the beginning of high school, they would be able to set a definite path for themselves. By self-selecting certain pathways, students will be involved in classes and other activities that will increase their competency in specific areas of study. This allows students to collaborate with other classmates who have similar paths and career expectations.

Also, because the careers fit not only the students' skills, but their interests as

well, it should compel them to improve work ethic and, in turn, lead to increased productivity in the classroom. There are many schools that have implemented co-op programs. These programs allow students to take a job during their senior year while completing the four required courses. We could also develop partnerships between organizations and schools to set up internships. Internships provide invaluable experience and can change students' lives. Internships increase students' maturity level and can improve their self-confidence and self-concept. They aid students in identifying, clarifying, and developing career goals, professional aspirations, and confirming career path options.

Recommendations:

- Iowa should expand opportunities for classes not available at schools through online learning options.
- Expand access to higher-level learning, such as Advanced Placement, honors courses, International Baccalaureate classes, and explore how to make these opportunities more readily available in school.
- Many students go through high school without considering a career pathway. Students in high school need a better means of exploring careers in order to best serve their future potential.
- Students should have more opportunities to explore their futures through job shadowing, interviews, resume-writing, and career exploration, including technical, vocational, and professional positions. This should be offered during high school for all interested students.

Conclusion

The Learning Council humbly presents the above recommendations as Iowa works to improve the educational environment. The 18 members of this council fully realize the need for change and improvement in how students learn, but more importantly, we are acutely aware of the world and how fast it is changing with each day. For too long, school systems across the country and Iowa have relied on the industrial model; it's time to consider better options. Do not mistake our voices as barking for change simply for the sake of change, but rather an acknowledgement that improvement comes only with a discerning heart and mind for discovering what students truly need to become happy, fulfilled human beings. As a collective representation of our peers, we simply ask: Help us find our passions, and equip schools with the most thoughtful, well-prepared educators possible.

References

Assessment

Domaleski, Christopher. "State End-of-Course Testing Programs: A Policy Brief." *Council of Chief State School Officers*. Feb. 2011. http://www.ccsso.org/Documents/2011/State_End-of-Course_Testing_Programs_2011.pdf