

# Keeping pace with our kids

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Over and over, parents complain that our schools are not doing an adequate job preparing students. Generations of students learned by sitting in rows at desks, memorizing multiplication tables, and listening intently to a teacher. Why can't students today learn the same way?

As Bob Dylan said, "The times, they are a-changing." And we have done a very poor job keeping up with these changing times.

For a good majority of today's youths, hours are spent at the computer, sending text messages or talking on cellphones, playing video games or listening to an iPod. Everything is electronic, fast, instantly gratifying, and independently controlled. These activities are in sharp contrast to the way most schools approach education.

Our system requires all students to take the same courses, and take the same tests at the same time, regardless of the differing abilities of the students. Wouldn't it make a lot more sense if each student could progress according to his or her individual ability and then be tested accordingly?

What would such an education system look like? For starters, the system would be flipped upside down. Today's system assumes all students have achieved proficiency because they have put in the time. Yet, a third or more of high school graduates aren't adequately prepared for college, the workforce, or for taking their place in the community. Instead, this flipped system would require no fixed number of days and hours of instruction. The demonstration of proficiency would be the requirement and time would be the variable. Funding would be based on demonstrating proficiency, not occupying a classroom for 180 days. This approach would judge success by the factor that matters most: the desired outcome.

Gov. Bill Ritter, the Colorado State Board of Education, and Education Commissioner Dwight Jones all agree that tinkering around the edges to change public education isn't going to produce the results we all desire and that public education's customers — parents, students, employers, taxpayers, and college professors — want and deserve. Tinkering doesn't

cut it.

Bold proposals are under consideration that would:

Shift from a system based on seat time to one based on demonstrated competency;

Raise high school graduation standards to ensure all students are prepared to enter college, a professional trade, or the work force.

Utilize exams to demonstrate competency. Colorado could potentially save money by working with neighboring states to develop common end-of-course exams.

Pieces of this agenda have been proposed in various bills by legislators of both parties in the last few years. In most cases, good ideas have fallen victim to partisan politics. We have an opportunity now to take the best of those ideas and develop a bipartisan proposal that will begin to move us toward a system of public education adequate to meet the challenges of engaging today's youth and their brisk, technology-based learning styles.

The job is immense: We must figure out how to juggle schedules, whether students will move from grade to grade, number of students per teacher, child care issues for working parents in light of a more flexible school day and, of course, how to find the money to pay for implementation.

The times continue to change, but most schools have not. Now is the time for an approach to learning that jolts students out of the seat-time rut and gives them the best opportunity to thrive.

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