



Reason and Purpose

Learning by Doing

Quest to Learn is a school committed to graduating strong, engaged, literate citizens of a globally networked world. Through an innovative pedagogy that immerses students in challenge-based contexts, the school recognizes design, collaboration, and systems thinking as key literacies of the 21st century. Within an integrated, rigorous standards-based curriculum, students work with teachers to gain the skills necessary to meet these requirements, and even surpass them. Ongoing evaluation and feedback create opportunities for students to plan, revise, and reflect on their own learning. The overall curriculum is rooted in mathematical practices and the use of smart tools, assessing students in context. Most importantly, teachers work with students to build individual and academic competencies and enrich youth identity development in contexts that are relevant and personally meaningful.

The school has been designed to help students bridge old and new literacies through learning about the world as a set of interconnected systems. Design and complex problem solving are two big ideas of the school, as is a commitment to deep content learning with a strong focus on learning in rigorous, engaging, and relevant ways. It is a place where digital media meets books, and students learn to think like designers, inventors, mathematicians, writers, and more. Quest to Learn brings together teachers with a passion for content, a vision for helping kids learn, and a commitment to changing the way students engage in an increasingly networked world.

Quest to Learn is a response to the growing evidence that digital media and games offer powerful models for the changing ways young people learn, but also a response to the belief that access for all students to these new opportunities is essential. Quest to Learn is based on the belief that a true aim of education is supporting students, their parents, and their communities in a quest to become motivated, resourceful, lifelong learners.

Background

In 2006 the MacArthur Foundation turned its attention to the design of 21st century learning environments that would respond both to the needs of kids growing up in a digital, information-rich era as well as the need for creativity, innovation, and resourcefulness. As part of this work, New Visions for Public Schools joined forces in spring 2007 with the Institute of Play, a games and learning non-profit, with an idea for a school that would use game-like learning as a way to empower and engage today's students. Quest to Learn is the result of this collaboration. Specific in its focus on connecting rigorous student learning to the demands of the 21st century, Quest to Learn supports young people in their learning across digital networks, peer communities, content, careers, and media.

Support for the school's design and development was provided by a grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

Mission

Design and innovation are at the heart of Quest to Learn, a school committed to helping every student achieve excellence in the skills and literacies necessary for college and career readiness. Students today can and do learn in different ways, often through interaction with digital media and games. Quest to Learn builds on this belief to create a nurturing and vibrant sixth- to 12th-grade school environment that supports all students in the pursuit of academic excellence, social responsibility, respect for others, and a passion for lifelong learning. Quest to Learn opened with a sixth-grade class in fall 2009 and is adding a new grade each subsequent year.

Quest to Learn supports a dynamic curriculum that uses the underlying design principles of games to create academically challenging, immersive, game-like learning experiences for students. Games and other forms of digital media also model the complexity and promise of systems.

Understanding and accounting for this complexity is a fundamental literacy of the 21st century.

The school's learning model is carefully designed to enable students with a diverse range of learning styles to contribute to the design and innovation necessary to meet the needs and demands of a global society. At Quest to Learn, a curiosity for learning paired with a commitment to social responsibility and respect for others defines the school culture. "Learn how, learn now," is our motto.

Quest to Learn fosters the type of learning that is possible today—learning based on access to online resources and tools from around the globe, learning that supports customized content for every student, learning that is game-like in its ability to inspire and motivate.

Quest to Learn faculty and staff work closely with its founding partner, the Institute of Play.

Core Components

ORGANIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE

At the center of Quest to Learn is an innovative approach to pedagogy that connects design and systems thinking within a content rich curriculum aligned to state standards. This pedagogy includes a reworking of traditional disciplines to reflect on the organization of knowledge in the 21st century — integrated, networked, mathematically rich, and systems oriented. Quest to Learn supports students in developing a way of thinking about global dynamics: how world economic, political, technological, environmental, and social systems work and are inter-dependent across nations and regions. High levels of student engagement and ownership in the learning process are valued, as students participate in a rigorous process of research, theory building, hypothesis testing, evaluation, and critique, followed by a public defense of results.

DYNAMIC LEARNING

Quest to Learn students engage in "ways of knowing and doing," using models and simulations to study the science of weather, learning mathematical reasoning by designing codes using an Enigma machine, and creating a role-playing game about the American Revolution where players rewrite the Constitution to reflect an alternate set of values. This approach offers an engaging and motivating platform on which to build the technological, artistic, cognitive, social, and linguistic skills students need to graduate from high school prepared for college. Students not only develop these capacities within the curricular experiences of the school but also are equally supported through internships,

community service, service-learning opportunities, and capstone research projects.

ONE NODE WITHIN A LEARNING NETWORK

Quest to Learn takes into account the experiences, communities, and contexts in which students are engaged, both inside and outside of school. Rather than defining school as a separate place in time and space from the concerns and communities of children's lives, Quest to Learn reaches out into the home, into local and global communities to which students belong. This does not mean that students are expected to be at school 24/7; it does mean that all experiences are leveraged as potential contexts for learning, building on nascent interest-driven participation motivating student engagement.

STUDENT IDENTITY FORMATION

Quest to Learn pedagogy focuses on learning to "be" rather than learning "about." Students take on identities of mathematicians, scientists, writers, historians, and designers as they work through a 21st century curriculum that challenges them to demonstrably connect ideas, information, and experiences. Immersion within richly defined problem spaces requires students to gain the ability to find and use resources on demand, with intelligence, judgment, and sophistication. Peer education is an important part of the curriculum: students exchanging interests and expertise with one another.

EMBEDDED ASSESSMENT

Assessment at Quest to Learn is integrally connected to learning. This means understanding the needs of all students, defining explicit tools for assessment, creating opportunities for feedback and revision, and exposing students to data that can inform their own decision making. Students and teachers use data as powerful tools to support each student's ongoing potential for future learning. Longitudinal data on student development will be captured within multiple, overlapping systems, including an online social network space and annual portfolios.

In the News

Read national news stories about Quest to Learn, including coverage in *The New York Times Magazine* and *The Economist* and on National Public Radio at www.macfound.org/Q2L.