

CASE STUDY

Wren High School



Closing the Graduation and Readiness Gap

SREB

High Schools
That Work



Closing the Graduation and Readiness Gap

Case studies highlight best practices High Schools That Work (HSTW) network schools and districts are implementing to better prepare students for further studies and careers.

Wren High School near Greenville, South Carolina, exemplifies what schools can achieve when they adopt the HSTW design for continuous school improvement and implement it with fidelity. This report highlights how Wren is using the HSTW Key Practices to better prepare students for further studies and careers.

- Wren exposes all students to a rigorous curriculum, including those formerly relegated to less rigorous instruction due to poor academic performance or discipline issues.
- The school has consequently eliminated all low-level courses, and all students now perform at higher levels than students at most other schools in the state.
- The school is adding Advanced Placement (AP) classes, and the percentage of students passing AP exams is increasing.
- The school has expanded and strengthened its advisory and guidance programs to ensure all students take the right courses guiding them to future success.
- The school is implementing new, rigorous state standards through development of benchmark assessments, rigorous assignments and rubrics.

All HSTW network schools can benefit by sharing the Wren High School case study with staff. In so doing, your school improvement team may gain insights in raising graduation rates and increasing the percentage of students ready for postsecondary studies and a career.

Gene Bottoms

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Gene Bottoms". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

SREB, Senior Vice President

Setting and Background

Wren High School (WHS) is a comprehensive public high school in rural northwest South Carolina that opened in 1957. The community, once agrarian, does not have a significant number of business or industry. However, due to its close proximity to Greenville and the I-85 corridor, Wren has experienced an increase in student population resulting from residential growth in recent years. Many families who move to the area cite the school's reputation of academic excellence as the reason for their relocation. The overall success of the school is attributed to a rigorous academic curriculum, a reputable freshman academy, and access to the Anderson 1 and 2 Career and Technology Center (CTC), which provides supplemental courses to advance students' pathway programs of study leading to employment and further study.

Under the leadership of former principal G. Robert Binnicker and first-year principal Nichole Boseman, Wren has developed an atmosphere in which all students are academically and technically challenged to be both college- and career-ready. "Wren not only stresses knowledge and academics, but the faculty, administrators and staff also recognize that students must be prepared for success in and out of the school building," said Boseman.

In the 2012-2013 school year, Wren High School had 1,465 students. Eighty-seven percent identified themselves as white, 7 percent as black, and 6 percent as other ethnicities. Twenty-five percent received free or reduced-price lunches.

Becoming a High Schools That Work Site

For years WHS did not have a comprehensive reform plan. In 1998 it chose the Southern Regional Education Board's High Schools That Work (HSTW) reform model because of the 10 Key Practices that closely aligned with Wren's vision for change and its efforts to improve student achievement. (See Appendix A.) The data-driven practices provide a framework for communicating to teachers, parents and students the importance of evaluating, analyzing and collaborating to prepare students for the next step.

Challenges

Closing the Achievement Gap

Wren High School's overriding challenge was to close the learning and opportunity gap so that all students perform at least at the Proficient level on standardized testing, while increasing the percentages performing at the mastery and Advanced levels. For this goal to be attainable, all students

needed a rigorous and relevant curriculum. However, Wren had many general courses that were not rigorous and geared toward lower-achieving students who had no expectation of continuing their education beyond high school. These courses proved to be a dumping ground for unmotivated students and those with discipline issues. Following adoption of the HSTW framework, these general courses in the four core academic areas were systematically eliminated. Today all students are now in college preparatory (CP) classes where students and teachers have a clear connection to college and career readiness — mastery of learning, application of knowledge and skills, and engagement in intellectually demanding assignments.

“Wren not only stresses knowledge and academics, but the faculty, administrators and staff also recognized that students must be prepared for success in and out of the school building.”

Restructuring the Guidance Department

With the changes in curriculum, Wren's guidance department also needed to restructure its advisement effort to incorporate a comprehensive adviser/advisee program that included not only course selection but also career counseling and information. Wren took a collaborative approach to guidance, getting all stakeholders involved. District and school-level administrators, guidance counselors, teachers, parents and community leaders worked together to devise the Career Action Planning for Students (CAPS) advisory program.

Wren High School identified closing the achievement gap and developing a comprehensive guidance program as the two primary benchmarks for improvement. It then examined the data and research to implement a focused plan of action to:

- design initiatives and programs of study that ensure all students have access to a rigorous and relevant curriculum that incorporates college- and career-readiness skills; and
- develop, for all stakeholders, a system to support every student academically and socially.

Steps to Close the Achievement Gap and Increase Rigor

Adopting the HSTW Recommended Curriculum

To design a rigorous program of study, WHS aligned its focus with the HSTW recommendations for students to complete four credits in CP English courses; four credits in CP mathematics including Algebra I, geometry, Algebra II, and a higher level mathematics course such as trigonometry, statistics, pre-calculus or calculus; three CP science courses such as biology, chemistry, anatomy and physiology or physics; and three CP credits in social studies.

The WHS program of study now meets the HSTW recommendations for curriculum offerings. (See Table 1.) In addition, all students are required to take an English, math, science and social studies class for four years at Wren High School; therefore, emphasizing the importance of making the senior year count.

General courses in the four core academic areas have been systematically eliminated.

Launching the Freshman Academy

In 2002, more than 14 percent, or 62 ninth-graders at Wren, failed their freshman year of high school. Research shows students who fail the ninth grade are far less likely to complete high school compared to their classmates. Quick action was needed to turn this trend around. Wren High School created a freshman academy to help ease the transition from the middle grades to high school.

Table 1: Comparison of HSTW-Recommended Program of Study and WHS Requirements

	WHS STANDARD DIPLOMA	COLLEGE ENTRANCE REQUIREMENTS CREDITS	HSTW/RECOMMENDED CURRICULUM CREDITS
ENGLISH	4	4	4 college-preparatory (CP) credits
MATHEMATICS	4	4	4 credits (Algebra I, geometry, Algebra II and a higher-level course)
SCIENCE	3 (2 must be lab-based)	3	3 lab-based courses
SOCIAL SCIENCE	3 (1 U.S. history, 0.5 gov., 0.5 economics)	3	3 CP credits
ADDITIONAL CREDITS	1 PE/JROTC, 1 computer science, 1 foreign language or CT, 7 electives	2 foreign language	4 credits in an academic or CT concentration

This well-defined small learning community ignites students with a sense of ownership by establishing stronger study skills and a commitment to excel. A team of teachers, counselors, and administrators identified students at risk of failing the South Carolina High School Assessment Program (HSAP) exit exam. Identifying these students in the ninth grade facilitates placement in supplemental classes such as a language lab and or math lab in the upper grades in order to receive additional instruction in reading, writing and

math skills needed not only to pass the HSAP exam, but also required to be successful in academic and elective classes. The data validate the full impact the freshman academy setting has on the academic climate. In 2012 only 4 percent (10 students) failed the ninth grade.

Since the implementation of the freshman academy, students at Wren have experienced tremendous success with passing the HSAP exit exam. (See Table 2.) The goal is to have 100 percent pass the exit exam.

WHS implemented an after-school tutoring program that supports the concept of the Power of I (incomplete) program. Teachers in all college-prep subject areas require students to complete major summative assignments with a passing grade of at least 70. Students must complete a tutorial session before retaking a mastery assessment. To complement the Power of I process, WHS offers after-school tutoring three days a week with bus transportation available. These supports have been crucial in increasing the level of achievement on standardized exams such as the

South Carolina End-of-Course (EOC) exams in Algebra I, English I, biology and U.S. history. Wren High School's EOC passage rate in 2011 was comparable to high schools with like students on all exams except U.S. history. (See Table 3 and 4.)

Table 2: Percentage of 10th-Grade Students Passing HSAP

HSAP	2007–2008	2008–2009	2009–2010	2010–2011	2011–2012
ELA	95%	93%	96%	95%	97%
MATH	94	94	96	96	96
BOTH	92	91	95	94	95

Source: South Carolina Department of Education

Table 3: 2011 EOC Passage Rates

TEST	Grade Level	PASSAGE RATE AT WHS	High Schools with Like Students
ALGEBRA I	9/10	95	84
ENGLISH I	9	80	79
BIOLOGY I	10	83	82
PHYSICAL SCIENCE	9	77	70
U.S. HISTORY	11	55	65

Source: South Carolina Department of Education

Table 4: 2012 EOC Passage Rates

TEST	Grade Level	PASSAGE RATE AT WHS	High Schools with Like Students
ALGEBRA I	9/10	96	86
ENGLISH I	9	81	79
BIOLOGY I	10	86	86
U.S. HISTORY	9	59	67

Source: South Carolina Department of Education

To improve U.S. history EOC scores, teachers formed collaborative teams on the district and school level to discuss and observe best practices. These teams also visited schools with higher history scores. Teachers used computer-based learning and developed support documents, common lessons and assessments to ensure all students receive the same rigorous level of instruction. Teachers also provided extra support through individual and group tutorial sessions to guarantee mastery learning for all students.

Adding More Advancement Placement Courses: Pathway to Postsecondary Study

Understanding that the achievement gap cannot be closed by simply implementing a Freshman Academy, WHS has aggressively implemented a rigorous and relevant pathway aligned with postsecondary expectations. WHS established a goal that all students would graduate from high school having passed at least one Advanced Placement (AP) course.

The school increased the number of AP courses offered in grades 10 through 12. In the 2011-2012 school year, AP English literature and AP English language were added to the curriculum, and during the 2012-2013 school year, AP human geography was added to the ninth-grade curriculum for any student taking English II college prep or English II honors.

WHS also initiated a push to increase the number of students taking AP courses. Teachers realized college preparatory classes were now prerequisites to AP classes. As a result, teachers also recognized the importance of becoming AP certified. Even though many of these teachers were not going to teach an AP course, they attended the AP summer institutes to learn the strategies, pacing and rigor required in taking an AP course. This eagerness to strengthen the AP initiative ultimately enhanced introductory level courses, giving students the skills, confidence and motivation to succeed in rigorous classes.

WHS established a goal that all students would graduate from high school having passed at least one AP course.

In addition to teachers' enthusiasm, counselors held AP evening meetings with parents to discuss the benefits of taking these classes and the role parents played in the process. Parents, who normally would not have encouraged students to enroll in AP classes, were now encouraging their students to prepare for and enroll in at least one AP class. In the 2012-2013 school year, 325 students enrolled in AP courses. Table 5 shows the students' passing rate on the AP exams.

Table 5: List of AP Courses and Percentages of Students Passing AP Exams in Grades 10 – 12

AP COURSE	2007–2008	2008–2009	2009–2010	2010–2011	2011–2012
ART	67%	100%	100%	100%	100%
BIOLOGY	15	25	33	N/A	20
CALCULUS	86	82	49	54	84
CHEMISTRY	91	92	80	64	92
ENGLISH LANG.	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	72
ENGLISH LIT.	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	83
U.S. HISTORY	45	33	51	24	76
WORLD HISTORY	31	56	36	29	53

Source: College Board

Dual Credit: Pathway to Postsecondary Study

Knowing some students are hesitant to take AP courses, WHS offers students a secondary path to engage in the postsecondary experience. Through a collaborative effort with Tri-County Technical College (TCTC), juniors and seniors can also enroll in a variety of dual credit classes that are taught on campus by Tri-County professors, or they can opt to complete work through online courses. Dual credit classes offered are English 101 and 102, Economics 210, Psychology 201, Mathematics 120, Sociology 101, Microcomputer Applications 170 and 270. In the 2011-2012 school year, 175 WHS students were enrolled in dual credit classes.

SAT Pathway Initiative to Postsecondary Study

To complement the AP and dual credit enrollment, Wren High School established an SAT pathway initiative, a collaborative effort by core academic and elective teachers to increase SAT scores. This initiative consists of two parts.

First, all students must read two non-fiction works each semester in their elective classes. Teachers discuss critical reading strategies such as marking the text, summarizing, and identifying claims and evidence. Having the elective teachers discuss the reading emphasizes the importance reading across the curriculum plays in raising expectations and closing the achievement gap.

Secondly, 10th-grade students who do not score a combined 110 on the math and critical reading portion on the PSAT are enrolled in a semester SAT preparation class in their junior year. The purpose is to give students test-taking strategies and to familiarize them with the format of the test.

Prior to the implementation of a schoolwide SAT initiative, the school's average composite score was 993. Since inception, the school's scores have increased 10 percent, and the school has maintained an average composite score of 1042 (math and critical reading) over the last three years, which is above the state and national averages. (See Table 6.)

Table 6: SAT Composite Scores for Math and Critical Reading 2008 – 2012

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
WHS	1042	1038	1048	1030	1048
SOUTH CAROLINA	982	982	979	972	969
NATIONAL	1017	1016	1017	1011	1010

Source: College Board

Complementing this initiative is the number of students receiving South Carolina lottery scholarships. One hundred sixty-two graduating seniors qualified for the LIFE scholarship in 2010 by scoring a minimum of 1100 on the SAT (24 on the ACT), and 24 additional students received the Palmetto Fellows Scholarship by scoring a minimum of 1200 on the SAT (27 on the ACT).

WHS made a commitment to increase graduation rates for all students in every subgroup.

Commitment to Increasing the Graduation Rate

With a well-defined pathway to increase rigor, WHS also made a commitment to increase graduation rates for all students in every subgroup. This was essential to closing

the achievement gap for all students. **A graduation coach certified in guidance and counseling was hired to ensure students at risk of not graduating had a graduation action plan or an intervention plan that met each individual student's specific needs.**

The mission of the graduation coach is to increase the yearly percentage of high school graduates by developing a trusting relationship to modify at-risk behaviors, thus enhancing students' abilities to meet the objectives of the individualized graduation action plans. The graduation coach recognizes the importance of not only academic skills but also effective self-management and social skills to compete in the 21st-century job market and therefore stresses the following supportive strategies for students.

- Employ online classes to assist with credit recovery and accrual of Carnegie units, and rearrange class schedules to meet the specific need(s) of students.
- Assign credit recovery classes during school, after school, or on Saturdays.

- Provide mentors and service learning activities.
- Provide before- and after-school tutoring sessions.
- Assign Saturday school make-up sessions for students with attendance issues.
- Provide frequent interaction and encouragement, not only to students, but to their parents or guardians, teachers, counselors and administrators.

- Provide postsecondary information: career, military, school to work and college information.
- Work with middle grades schools to provide a transition and/or bridge program for incoming ninth-graders.

As a result, the data indicate the graduation rate is significantly above that of South Carolina schools with like students. (See Table 7.)

Table 7: Four-Year Graduation Data

	2009	2010	2011	2012
WHS GRADUATION RATE	80%	88%	87%	88%
GRADUATION RATE FOR SCHOOLS WITH LIKE STUDENTS	77	80	81	85

Source: South Carolina State School Report Card

Guidance Program: Advising Students for College and Careers

Wren High School's second benchmark was to develop a comprehensive guidance program for all stakeholders to support every student in academics, career-technical studies and socially. **One HSTW Key Practice stipulates that students and their parents are involved in a guidance and advisement system that develops positive relationships and ensures completion of an accelerated program of study with an academic and career-technical concentration.**

Wren High School provides Career Action Planning for Students (CAPS). It includes a rigorous curriculum design and a requirement that each student develops a challenging individual graduation plan (IGP).

During the CAPS process, students work with their parents, counselors, teachers, and advisers to develop plans that include academic as well as career-related courses. The students' plans also identify extended learning opportunities designed to prepare students for transition to postsecondary education and the workplace.

Framework for Curriculum Planning

A comprehensive curriculum framework includes the following elements:

- Career clusters of study
- Majors for each career cluster of study
- Individual graduation plans (IGPs)



- Recommend curricula for IGPs
- Template for the IGP for each major

A career cluster of study is a means of organizing instruction and student experiences around broad categories that encompass virtually all occupations from entry level through professional levels. Choosing a cluster of study and a major requires students to assess interests and skills, and then select course work to achieve his or her academic goals while exploring professional and career goals. There are 13 clusters of study:

- Agriculture, food and natural resources
- Architecture and construction
- Arts, audio/visual technology and communications
- Business management, finance and administration
- Education and training

- Government and public administration
- Health science
- Hospitality and tourism
- Human services
- Information technology
- Law, public safety, corrections and security
- Science, technology, engineering and mathematics
- Transportation, distribution and logistics

A cluster of study has several majors which require students to complete at least four units of study in their chosen areas. The curriculum currently comprises majors in 27 career areas. Students are never locked into a specific cluster or major, and they can change majors if their professional interests change.

One of the essential elements in CAPS is that the process begins in the middle grades and transitions to high school. In the spring of eighth grade, students choose one of the 13 clusters during an individual planning conference with an adviser and his or her parent(s).

In ninth grade, students select at least one of the 27 majors to explore. A major enables students to focus on an area of interest that motivates them to stay in school and to make a smooth transition to postsecondary education and/or the workplace. Each student who completes the requirements for a major receives special recognition at graduation.

Individual Graduation Plan

The purpose of the IGP is to assist students and their parents in exploring educational and career possibilities and making appropriate secondary and postsecondary decisions. The IGP is part of the career folder. It builds on the course work, assessments and counseling in middle grades and high school.

In the sixth grade, career specialists, school counselors, and advisers in group and individual counseling settings begin to develop IGPs by working with students regarding their career and college interests, clusters of study, majors, postsecondary choices and high school options. This includes information on academic and professional goals, career activities and access to career resources. Teacher and parental involvement throughout this process are vital.

CAPS is a continuous process with grade-level tasks.

Ninth Grade

- Students choose a cluster of study and majors to explore.
- Students declare a major, focusing their elective choices in a particular area.
- Students have the opportunity to participate in career shadowing.
- Students review and update their IGPs developed in the eighth grade.
- Students begin to explore postsecondary opportunities.

10th Grade

- Students review and update their major.
- Students review and update their IGPs.
- Students begin to develop postsecondary goals.
- Students have the opportunity to participate in extended learning opportunities.

What Parents Saying About the Guidance Process

- *“Keep it up. It’s important to have parental involvement in the child’s education.”*
- *“Very informative and productive.”*
- *“Thanks for the chance to discuss my child’s IGP and to plan for his future.”*

11th Grade

- Students review and update their IGPs with particular attention given to postsecondary goals including school to work, military, and educational opportunities.
- Students have the opportunity to participate in extended learning opportunities.

12th Grade

- Students complete requirements for a major.
- Students receive recognition for completion of a major at graduation.
- Students have the opportunity to participate in extended learning opportunities.

In grades nine, 10 and 11, IGP extended learning opportunities identify learning experiences outside the classroom designed to make student learning relevant and give students an awareness of work associated with the major. These opportunities include shadowing, career mentoring, service learning, internships, cooperative education, apprenticeships, senior projects, career information delivery system exposure and career-related student organizations.

The CAPS advisory process has been successful. Seventy-three percent of all 12th-graders completed a major, 20 percent completed two majors and 8 percent completed three majors. These completers are recognized at senior awards night and identified at graduation.

WHS considers feedback from parents essential in defining and refining the program. In 2012, 98 percent of the parents or guardians with students in grades nine to 12 participated in the CAPS process. A parent evaluation survey indicated 97 percent of the parents thought the CAPS advisory was beneficial or very beneficial.

Lessons Learned

Using the HSTW Key Practices and recommendations as a catalyst for change, WHS teachers welcomed the challenge of designing strategies to improve the curriculum by implementing rigorous content. Teachers readily accepted that lecturing and relying on textbooks or worksheets does not and will not increase rigor and relevance or student motivation in the classroom. Once this concept was embraced, teachers recognized the importance of asking higher-level questions, using authentic assessments coupled with collaboration, developing common assessments and integrating technology.

Lecturing and relying on textbooks or worksheets does not and will not increase rigor and relevance or student motivation in the classroom.

A common goal — to challenge students to transcend typical expectations and discover their intrinsic motivations — ignited teachers to implement change focused on new ways of teaching and learning.

A Look to the Future: Remaining Challenges

Implementing the Common Core State Standards

As a result of common planning and constantly striving to ensure there are no gaps in student achievement, teachers continue to work together to implement the new Common Core State Standards by developing benchmark assessments, rigorous assignments and rubrics. Therefore, teachers' methodologies now include Socratic seminars, Cornell note process, self-reflection writing and higher-level questioning to encourage critical thinking.

Increase Rigor

Some challenges remain to increase the rigor in the classroom and to improve the success rate of all students in meeting and exceeding state and high school readiness standards. To address these challenges, **WHS has developed the following actions to ensure all students not only meet but exceed the college- and career-readiness expectations:**

- Establish guidelines for completing work that meet the mastery of standards across the curriculum.
- Require students whose grades drop to a C to attend tutoring sessions.
- Reteach information using a variety of approaches or strategies.
- Follow assessments with corrective instruction, and give students a second chance to demonstrate success using alternative assessments.
- Conference with students, and require students to answer correctly all missed items on major exams.
- Require each teacher to assign challenging homework several times a week. (Assignments should be clearly tied to independent practice, and students should receive feedback on the quality of their work.)
- Implement a random system of questioning to make sure all students stay alert and involved.

At the request of Gene Bottoms, senior vice president of SREB, WHS has agreed to consider four additional actions. The first is to consider having a team of at least two math teachers — algebra and geometry — and maybe even encourage a feeder middle grades school to have two teachers participate in a special SREB workshop that focuses on using formative assessment lessons. This is designed to advance students' abilities to reason, understand and apply math concepts in upper middle grades math classes and in grades nine and 10.

Second, WHS will continue to support teachers who attended SREB literacy training last school year, and encourage them to use the literacy instructional framework.

This training includes new strategies and tools for effectively embedding new literacy standards into core academic subjects to advance students' abilities to read a range of texts — including technical and scientific documents. This will advance their reading achievement and their abilities to express their understandings in writing. It will also advance their achievement in English, social studies and science.

Third, WHS will study the potential of adopting one of SREB's Advanced Career¹ curricula either in partnership with a technical center or at WHS school next year.

Finally, the school will consider implementing a senior transition literacy class or senior transition math class during the 2013-2014 school year or the 2014-2015 school year for students who need special instruction to be ready for further study without remedial courses.

Leadership Observation and Feedback

WHS administrators are striving to monitor classroom instruction to ensure students are working at the Proficient and Advanced levels and to ensure a schedule exists that allows time to conduct walkthroughs in all classes and provide effective and timely feedback to teachers on improving their level of instruction. Teachers continually reflect upon and incorporate the feedback in order to enhance their individual performance and to make constructive changes.

Policies and Support for School Improvement

Anderson District One believes in giving teachers a voice in developing curriculum objectives and strategies. The HSTW policies of eliminating general classes, collaboration between academic and technical teachers, increasing literacy, developing an adviser/advisee system, and requiring students to take four core academic classes each year have led the district to form district leadership teams comprised of lead teachers from all schools. The teams meet to discuss, assess and plan district and school initiatives to improve curriculum and classroom instruction.

By providing financial support, relevant staff development, and encouraging teachers to try innovative strategies, the district's support has been and continues to be instrumental in implementing instructional and organizational changes that foster student achievement and improve the school climate.



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¹ SREB's Advanced Career is a new approach to career and technical education. It is a series of intensely challenging and highly relevant courses. Seven AC pathways and curricula will be ready for adoption in fall 2014: Aerospace Engineering, Clean Energy Technology, Energy and Power, Health Informatics, Innovations in Science and Technology, Advance Manufacturing and Informatics.

HSTW Key Practices

High expectations: Motivate more students to meet higher standards by integrating high expectations into classroom practices and providing frequent feedback.

Program of study: Require each student to complete an upgraded academic core and a concentration.

Academic studies: Teach more students the essential concepts of the college-preparatory curriculum by encouraging them to apply academic content and skills to real-world problems and projects.

Career-technical studies: Provide more students access to intellectually challenging career-technical studies in high-demand fields that emphasize the higher-level academic and problem-solving skills needed in the workplace and in further education.

Work-based learning: Enable students and their parents to choose from programs that integrate challenging high school studies and work-based learning and that are planned by educators, employers and students.

Teachers working together: Provide cross-disciplinary teams of teachers time and support to work together to help students succeed in challenging academic and career-technical studies.

Students actively engaged: Engage students in academic and career-technical classrooms in rigorous and challenging proficient-level assignments using research-based instructional strategies and technology.

Guidance: Involve students and their parents in a guidance and advisement system that develops positive relationships and ensures completion of an accelerated program of study with an academic or career-technical concentration.

Extra help: Provide a structured system of extra help to assist students in completing accelerated programs of study with high-level academic and technical content.

Culture of continuous improvement: Use data continually to improve school culture, organization, management, curriculum and instruction to advance student learning.