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## Teaching students 21st-century skills

By Scot Lehigh, Globe Columnist | November 19, 2008

IF STUDENTS are to succeed in today's complex economy, they need to know more than just English, math, science, and history. They also need a range of analytic and workplace skills. So says an important new report on 21st-century skills, which concludes that though Massachusetts schools have made impressive progress in the last 15 years, many students still don't graduate with the abilities today's jobs require.

"In our high schools, we need to prepare our young adults to be college and career ready," says Gerald Chertavian, chairman of the state board of education task force that prepared the report. "Unfortunately we are not in that position today."

Indeed, a depressing new study that headlined Monday's Globe found that though Boston sent some 64 percent of the class of 2000 to college, seven years later only about 35 percent had actually graduated. Further, according to a recent study by the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education, state employers say high school graduates lack essential job skills.

Mastering those skills means learning how to think critically and creatively, work collaboratively, use the Internet to do research, and communicate clearly and effectively. Students also need to be responsible and accountable, to be up on the news, and to have a workable knowledge of economics and business.

To promote that, the task force recommends revising teacher training and recruitment, weaving those skills into curricula and assessments, and holding schools accountable for delivering that kind of education.

Now, this is a report some skeptics might well dismiss as another attempt to reinvent the educational wheel.

Except for one thing: Chertavian, a wealthy former businessman, practices what he preaches. He's the founder of Year Up, a nonprofit that imparts some of those very skills to urban young adults in Boston, Providence, Washington, New York City, and San Francisco.

Free for students, the Year Up program starts with six months of IT, business, and communications coursework, followed by a six-month corporate apprenticeship. Widely praised for its results, Year Up is funded in part by businesses looking for skilled employees; the students themselves earn a weekly stipend of \$150 to \$225, as well as college credit, for participating. Expectations are high, to mirror those of a professional workplace. Infractions such as arriving late, neglecting homework, or violating the business casual dress code are punished by a loss of points - and a reduction of one's stipend. Lose too many points, and you're dismissed from the program.

On a recent day, students in one classroom were taking apart desktop computers and learning the various components. In an upcoming competition, student teams will be presented with disassembled computers and race to get them back together and working.

"Eight weeks ago it would have looked like Chinese words to me," says Tykara Oliver, 24, of Roxbury, as she peers at the desktop's complicated innards. Now, she's repairing her own computer at home.

From IT to business etiquette to networking to preparing a resume to little things like having a proper handshake and making appropriate small talk, Oliver says she's learning how to conduct herself in the business world.

Chertavian says many of the task force's recommendations, which were presented to the full board yesterday, could be done at little extra cost.

Perhaps, but one recommendation is to increase, from 26 to 100, the number of extended learning time

schools over the next five years. That's a worthy goal, but one with a price tag of an additional \$50 million or so; in that light, it bears repeating that charter schools, whose numbers have now reached the cap in several cities, often feature longer days or years than traditional schools.

Some worry the report is a veiled effort to water down the MCAS.

"Categorically no," insists Chertavian, whose experience at Year Up has convinced him that with the proper support young people can meet high standards.

In a week of discouraging news, that's an encouraging conclusion from an educational entrepreneur who has already shown that he knows how to deliver 21st-century results.

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