Let's begin by acknowledging an uncomfortable reality: The conventional approach to schooling is not working. Even at well-run and highly rated schools, students tend to be disengaged[1] and do not consistently develop the knowledge and skills they need to be ready for college, career, and civic life.[2] Even students who get good grades often do not develop deep content knowledge or transferable skills; instead, they learn to "do school"--to take tests, comply with expectations, avoid risks, and get the grades they want.[3]

Why is this? The underlying problem is that schools are designed, like assembly lines, to maximize efficiency by pushing large batches of students through a standardized and compartmentalized curriculum at the same rate, regardless of their readiness or interest.

If this industrial age model ever worked, it has become increasingly out of synch with the information age world.

Many schools people consider as alternatives to their zoned public school do not offer anything fundamentally different. Perhaps they help students "do school" better than other schools. Perhaps they have a theme that makes school more interesting. Perhaps they have nicer facilities. But so often, these differences amount to little more than lipstick on a pig; the underlying logic and processes of factory-model schooling remain unchanged.

Nexus Charter School is a real alternative. We offer a secondary school experience (grades 6-12) that is not designed like a factory. We do not operate in strict age-based cohorts, grades are not determined on a fixed timeline, classes are not siloed, and students are not treated as interchangeable parts. Instead, all students develop meaningful skills with flexible pacing and significant agency through an integrated project-based curriculum. Not only is this more enjoyable for students, but it leads to more meaningful and lasting learning, and empowers students to thrive in a rapidly changing future that will require of them much more than the ability to "do school" well.

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[1] A national Yale study found that the overwhelming majority of high school students had negative emotions associated with their time in school. The most commonly reported emotions were tired, bored, and stressed.

[2] The recent NAEP results confirm that proficiency levels in high school Math and ELA are declining nationwide, and we see this reflected in Henderson-specific results as well: 3/4 of Juniors are below proficient in the Math, 1/2 are below proficient in ELA, and 1/3 are required to take remedial classes in college.

[3] Grade inflation and the disparity between grades and standardized test scores are clear signs of a disconnect between grades and proficiency, but there can also be disconnects between scholastic success and real-world skills. What secondary schools and standardized tests value does not always match what colleges, employers, and fellow citizens value.
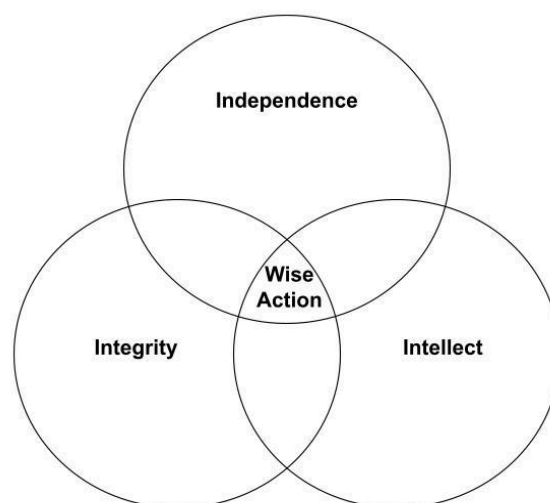
Portrait of a Graduate

Social and technological changes are reshaping the world our students are entering, not always for the best. In this uncertain future, adaptability, initiative, and deep thinking are more essential than ever. Traditional educational pathways no longer guarantee purpose or prosperity. In the wake of the COVID pandemic, the rapid changes brought on by AI, and lingering questions about the effect of ubiquitous digital connectivity and social media, families are seeking schools that prepare young people to thrive in a dynamic future—and to shape that future for the better.

Nexus graduates are empowered to thrive in any future and become a force for good in the world because they have developed:

- **Intellect**: They do not merely know how to take tests and get good grades; instead, they wield knowledge to solve problems, make sense of data, and seek truth. They apply their academic competencies across contexts—with versatility, rigor, and creativity—even when confronted with unfamiliar or complex challenges.
- **Independence**: They do not need to wait for someone to tell them what to do; instead, they proactively learn, advocate for themselves, and connect with others. They have cultivated genuine interests, questions, and projects. Although they have developed autonomy, they do not work in isolation. They seek out input from others, revise their work in response to feedback, and draw on a network of peers and mentors who support their growth.
- **Integrity**: They do not live fragmented lives; instead, they live wholeheartedly, standing for what they believe to be true and following the path they have determined to be best. They have internalized an ethic of excellence. Although they have deep convictions, they are attentive and responsive to others, work to repair harm when it occurs, and reconsider their views when warranted.

The nexus of these three characteristics is **wise action**.

Classes at Nexus

Nexus offers two primary types of courses: personalized Literacy and Numeracy **Labs** and interdisciplinary, project-based **Explorations**. (See an example daily schedule below.)

Labs are organized linearly and hierarchically—imagine them as ladders students climb rung by rung. Each rung corresponds to a clearly defined objective and demonstration of mastery, ensuring students and families always know where they stand and what comes next. Numeracy Labs combine adaptive digital tools like Khan Academy with teacher-facilitated discussions, guided practice, and in-person assessments to confirm conceptual understanding. Literacy Labs, structured around cumulative knowledge-building and increasing levels of text complexity, ensure every student builds powerful background knowledge and engages daily with appropriately challenging texts.

Literacy and numeracy are the building blocks of the academic competencies we cultivate, so every student gets personalized training in these domains every day. We empower students to advance through the Labs at various paces, progressing when they are ready and getting additional support as needed. They are given credit for a particular level of Literacy or Numeracy whenever they demonstrate that they have mastered the requisite skills—not when the term ends. This means that they can get credit before the end of the semester, or take longer than a semester if necessary.

Explorations are designed not like ladders but as spirals: students engage repeatedly in the same core academic practices articulated in our competency framework (see below) but at increasing levels of sophistication. Each Exploration is co-taught by two teachers and integrates their content areas[4]. In general, these courses are categorized as either Humanities (e.g., ELA + Social Studies) or STEM (e.g., Physics + Engineering). All Explorations are structured around a meaningful project that simultaneously meets Nevada Academic Content Standards and provides an opportunity to develop and demonstrate the Nexus Competencies. At the end of each unit, students present their work to the school and broader community.

Throughout the unit, students are given formative feedback and parents are made aware of their progress, though this is separate from students' summative grades, which are related exclusively to the competencies they demonstrate on the projects. For example, if students were working on a project that asked them to create a podcast, their grades would be determined by the quality of the podcast and the knowledge and skills they demonstrated in creating it, but parents would be given information and updates on the development of the project. If the podcast had something to do with the "checks and balances" in the federal government, for instance, students might be expected to complete certain readings and demonstrate their understanding of certain prerequisite information before they could advance

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[4]The two teachers are each assigned a group of 25 or so students. They are assigned adjacent rooms separated by a removable partition and decide together how to schedule two back-to-back periods. They can operate in parallel, teaching only their content area to one of the groups and then switching, or they can open the partition and co-teach all 50 students.

to the next stage of the project. Parents would be able to check on their children's performance on a checkpoint like this, though it would not become a part of the students' grades.

Nexus' Approach to Grading

We recognize that our approach to grading differs significantly from that of industrial-age schools. This is deliberate. We believe that it is nearly impossible to change students' experience of school without changing grading; in industrial-age schools especially, grades are the root of all incentives.

Fundamentally, there are three interrelated problems with the normal approach to grading: 1) It often advances students who have not developed a meaningful mastery of the material to work they are not prepared for. 2) It incentivizes "doing school" rather than meaningful learning. 3) It encourages learning dependence.

In the prevailing system, grades have become detached from real learning. Students can earn high marks without genuine understanding, and they can fall short even after real development. This disconnect allows them to move forward without mastery, leaving gaps that compound over time—or to coast through school without ever engaging deeply. Students sense this disconnect. They see that grades depend as much on compliance and teacher preferences as on real mastery, innovation, or growth. They learn to play the game: sit through the classes, complete the assignments, do what each teacher wants. When grades slip, there's always extra credit; when college isn't the goal, a diploma only requires a D. The result is a culture where passing classes replaces learning, getting grades replaces inquiry, and external direction and approval replaces judgment, curiosity, and growth. Even successful students come to see school as a sequence of hoops to jump through rather than a meaningful journey toward understanding and skill. School should be a coherent training program that develops real intellectual fitness; instead, it ends up only really developing dependence, compliance, and grade grubbing.

At Nexus, we 1) decouple grading from a fixed timeline and give credit when students develop real mastery, regardless of how long it takes; 2) operationalize "mastery" so that it reflects meaningful skills[5]; and 3) help students take ownership of their own learning.

These three shifts allow us to systematically cultivate more meaningful learning.

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[5] Unlike some, I do not believe there is an inherent disconnect between academics and the real world. The problem is not in academics per se, but how academics have been misunderstood and poorly operationalized in schools. The academic disciplines have developed over time to seek truth; to make, defend, and dispute claims; to propose solutions to problems; etc. The practices related to these efforts are meaningful, relevant, and valuable in the contemporary world. Unfortunately, schools tend to focus on *covering content* related to disciplines rather than *doing the work* of the disciplines. That focus is the problem, not academics.

What this looks like:

We use a system of "competency-based grading." This means that students' grades are based on their demonstration of meaningful competencies, not the amount of time they spend in class. Nexus' competency framework (see below) articulates the academic skills we help students develop. As students complete their projects, they are given evaluative feedback about the level at which they demonstrated these competencies. This summative evaluation is reflected in their dashboards (see below). Notice, however, that a low score in one competency does not become a permanent blot on their record. In subsequent projects, as students demonstrate higher levels of a given competency, their dashboards are updated accordingly.

Throughout the year, students curate a portfolio of their strongest work (which can include work from outside the core curriculum and from outside of school) which they present at the end of the year in a portfolio defense before a panel of teachers and community members. In these defenses, students explain what they have learned, how their work shows growth in each competency, and how they plan to continue developing. Both students and panelists refer to a shared rubric (see example below) that defines levels of mastery for each competency. When students demonstrate readiness, they are approved to move on to higher levels of study.

As much as possible, we try to avoid a letter-grade paradigm. It is much healthier and conducive to learning to see feedback as an opportunity to improve one's work and deepen one's understanding than as a somewhat permanent fixture in one's transcript. We believe our competency-based system encourages this learning mindset. However, we recognize that it may be necessary to convert our competency-based records into traditional GPAs for transcripts or external reporting. Although we prefer to use a gradeless mastery transcript, if this is not workable for some reason, we can retrofit a more conventional transcript. (Notice how L4 on the rubric below would correspond with an A for middle school, a B for underclassmen, and a C for upperclassmen.)

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Example schedule

8:00	Advisory	The focus of advisory is on SEL, especially belonging and non-academic competencies (e.g., self-awareness, goal-setting, etc.).
8:30 9:00	Numeracy Lab	Digital tools like Khan Academy give us the backbone of the Numeracy Lab, but we do not rely on them exclusively. We incorporate group work, in-class instruction, hands-on activities, etc. to build deep conceptual understanding. We also corroborate digital evaluations with in-person assessments to ensure students advance with complete understanding.
9:30 10:00 10:30	Humanities Exploration	Humanities Explorations are co-taught by two teachers and combine ELA and Social Studies classes. This increases the coherence of our curriculum and helps students integrate their learning. It also increases flexibility of how teachers use this time to meet students' needs. Each Exploration is built around meaningful projects that help students develop our core academic competencies. At the end of each year, students present a portfolio of their work and reflect on their learning and growth.
11:00	Lunch	
11:30 12:00 12:30	STEM Exploration	STEM Explorations are co-taught by two teachers and combine Science courses with other content areas. Like the Humanities Explorations, they are centered on meaningful projects that require students to practice the core academic competencies, and can be included in students' end-of-term portfolio defenses.
1:00 1:30	Literacy Lab	Literacy Lab provides time and space for every student to read and get support in this fundamental academic skill. We provide intensive interventions for struggling readers and ensure that every student reads appropriately complex literature for an extended period of time every day.
2:00 2:30	Electives	Intramural sports, student clubs, certain required classes, etc. Students have a lot of agency during this time, and can draw on their elective work for their portfolio defenses.

*We are considering having students work off-campus in work study or internship placements one day a week. During this time, teachers would have structured time for collaborative planning, data analysis, professional development, community engagement, and visiting students at their off-campus sites.

Core Academic Competencies

	Humanities Examples	STEM Examples
Analysis (the practice of breaking something down into component parts in order to explain what it is and how it works)	*Rhetorical analysis:* Identify rhetorical devices in a persuasive text and explain how they function to persuade a particular audience. *Historical analysis:* Identify various contributing factors to the Civil War and explain which are primarily responsible for the war and why they were irresolvable otherwise. *Visual analysis*: Identify features of visual art and explain their effect on the viewer.	*Chemical analysis:* Determine the nature of an unknown substance by breaking down its characteristics and reactions to other substances. *Engineering analysis:* Assess which of two bridges is most likely to hold the most weight by breaking down its structural components and explaining how they distribute forces across the structure.
Argumentation (the practice of making and defending claims with appropriate evidence and reasoning)	*Political debate*: Argue whether a minimum wage increase helps or harms low-income workers, using economic data. *Character interpretation*: Make an argument about why we should (not) consider George to be a good friend to Lennie in *Of Mice and Men*.	*Mathematical proof*: Defend a geometric proof with reference to certain axioms. *Ecosystems:* Argue whether a species should be reintroduced into a particular ecosystem based on ecological data.
Research/Inquiry (the practice of posing a question and methodically collecting data to propose an answer)	*Local historiography:* Interview community members to learn about their experiences with the police. *Toxic masculinity?* Interview a sample of the student body to determine why males underachieve relative to females.	*Screens and sleep study*: Survey classmates about screen time/usage and sleep habits, then analyze correlations between the two. *5 second rule:* Using petri dish analysis, determine the validity of the 5 second rule by comparing the spread of potentially harmful bacteria in food that has been left on the floor for more/less than 5 seconds.
Communication/ Representation (the practice of sharing your ideas with diverse audiences)	*Poster presentation:* Present the findings and conclusions of one's research. *Whiteboard animation:* Create a YouTube whiteboard animation video that summarizes the content and message of a play.	*Data visualization*: Create compelling visualizations of collected data. *Infographic:* Create an infographic to explain certain laws of physics.
Modeling (the practice of deriving abstractions from data, applying the abstraction to subsequent data, revising the abstraction in response to that data, etc.)	*Hero's journey*: Apply the framework to a series of stories of people/characters you consider heroic and discuss its adequacy. *Fall of Empire*: Develop a model of how empires fall and apply it to various other examples.	*Population growth:* Develop a mathematical model of population growth using historical data and using it to predict the future population of the USA. *Wet tennis ball*: Collect data and develop a model of the relationship between the size of a splash of a wet tennis ball and the height from which it was dropped in order to predict the size of a splash from any given height.
Critical Evaluation (the practice of assessing the context, source, credibility, bias, and relevance of data/texts)	*Contextualizing literature:* Explore how literature was historically situated and responsive to its contemporary concerns *Media literacy*: Analyze a news article or social media post for bias, agenda, or selective framing of facts.	*Scientific critique:* Dispute the validity of certain claims based on the methods of collecting and analyzing data *Statistical skepticism*: Evaluate whether a graph/data presentation is misleading (e.g., truncated y-axis, cherry-picked data points).
Design/Creation (the practice of developing novel ideas, texts, interpretations, products, and solutions to problems)	*Museum curation*: Design a museum exhibit that tells a particular story using selected artifacts and commentary. *Public awareness campaign*: Design a social media campaign to increase public awareness of something significant *Theater*: Write and/or direct a play.	*Prototype*: Design a water filtration system using available resources *Coding*: Write a program that sorts a list of names or numbers more efficiently than a naïve approach.

Prototype Student Dashboards

Prototype of 8th Grade Dashboard (with "links" to student work)

	Analysis		Argument-ation		Research/Inquiry		Modeling		Design/Creation	
L6										
L5										
L4							STEM			
L3			STEM					HUM		
L2	STEM	HUM			STEM	HUM				
L1				HUM					STEM	HUM

Prototype of Sophomore Dashboard (with "links" to student work)
- Notice how the darker colors represent repeated demonstrations of a given level of performance. The darker the color, the more times that level has been met or exceeded.

	Analysis		Argument-ation		Research/Inquiry		Modeling		Design/Creation	
L6										
L5				HUM	STEM				STEM	
L4	STEM	HUM	STEM		STEM	HUM	STEM			HUM
L3		HUM	STEM	HUM		HUM	STEM	HUM	STEM	
L2	STEM		STEM		STEM			HUM		HUM
L1									STEM	

Prototype 1 Multi-tiered Rubric (Textual Analysis)

11th-12th			D	C	B	A
9th-10th		D	C	B	A	
6th-8th	D	C	B	A		
Dimension	**Level 1** **Retelling / Recall**	**Level 2** **Noticing Surface Features**	**Level 3** **Identifying Features w/ Emerging Insight**	**Level 4** **Connecting Features to Meaning**	**Level 5** **Integrating Multiple Features / Deeper Significance**	**Level 6** **Sophisticated Relational, Contextual Analysis**
Distance (Ability to hold text at arm's length)	Stuck in summary or personal reaction; cannot step outside the text.	Beginning to step back; occasionally notices "what the author did," but lapses into recounting.	Consistently distinguishes analysis from summary; recognizes choices as purposeful.	Moves fluidly between text and analytic stance; sees text as constructed.	Recognizes ambiguity, tension, complexity; identifies gaps or contradictions.	Moves among close, interpretive, and contextual distances; situates the text in larger conversations or traditions.
Conceptual Repertoire (Tools for noticing/ naming features)	Little/no vocabulary for features; recognizes only characters/ events.	Recognizes some basic features (imagery, repeated words, simple plot structures); limited vocabulary.	Growing vocabulary: devices, structural elements, tone, theme, claims; can identify features reliably.	Solid working knowledge of devices, structures, genre patterns; notices interactions among features.	Broad, flexible toolbox across genres and modalities; recognizes patterns, conventions, deviations, and intertextual elements.	Mature, domain-flexible conceptual toolkit; understands high-level strategies (genre subversion, irony layers, rhetorical structure, intertextual transformation).

Explanatory Power (Ability to explain significance/ effect)	Cannot explain significance; restates obvious ideas ("It's important").	Attempts explanations, but vague ("It makes it better"); often intuitive not textual.	Gives basic cause–effect explanations tied to textual evidence; still simple.	Explains clearly how choices shape meaning, tone, theme, argument; traces development over time.	Connects multiple features to deeper significance; explains *why it matters* in interpretive or rhetorical context.	Produces layered, synthesis-level explanations; articulates multiple interpretive possibilities, cultural/ideological significance, and relationships across texts.

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