

# JANUARY 14 SPEAKER SERIES

## PRESENTATION: REBECCA E. WOLFE

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### STUDENT VOICE AND CHOICE NECESSARY FOR DEEPER LEARNING

If students don't feel ownership of their learning, what little they do learn is superficially understood and easily forgotten.

That's what brain researchers are finding and what's driving new interest in "student-centered learning," across the country, according to Rebecca E. Wolfe of Jobs for the Future, a national nonprofit based in Boston.

The research is unequivocal, Wolfe told an audience of mainly educators at Generation All's second community forum on January 15 in downtown Chicago. "If students don't have some kind of voice in how they learn, if they don't understand their own learning path and why they're on it, they're never going to [achieve what]they could, if they're learning at all."

Student engagement is especially important for achieving the "deeper learning" needed to meet the demands of the Common Core and the 21st century workplace, she said, such as mastering rigorous content, thinking critically, and working collaboratively.

The idea that learning should be "student-centered" that is, tailored to the needs and interests of students, has been around since the 1930s, she observed. What's new is the political will to make it happen, even in low-income districts, thanks to improved research on learning and motivation, advances in technology, and the necessity of a high school degree and post-secondary training to earn a living wage.

Technology is making it possible to personalize learning on a scale never seen before, Wolfe noted.

Teachers can create individual lesson plans or track student's mastery of skills in minute detail. Students

in remote areas can take courses on-line. “We have a way to attach students in Chicago to the National Zoo in [Washington, D.C.] and have a rich learning experience.” However, she cautioned, technology is only a tool in service of student-centered learning, not a silver bullet. Student-centered learning also calls for structured interaction with peers and adults, as well, she explained.

Driven by the economic imperative to prepare more students for college, states and districts, especially in New England, are looking for ways to make learning student-centered such as by allowing kids to do more independent work, moving at their own pace through the curriculum, or to work in groups on scientific experiments they designed themselves.

Changing teaching isn’t easy, she said, but schools that persevere can see a payoff in more motivated students and teachers, lower faculty turnover and higher student achievement. Wolfe pointed to a recent American Institutes of Research finding that students perform better in math in classrooms that use student-centered strategies. (See [www.air.org/resource/close-look-student-centered-math-teaching](http://www.air.org/resource/close-look-student-centered-math-teaching))

“Motivation, engagement, and student voice have always been seen as nice things we do on the side,” she said. “It turns out that [they’re] actually integral to the learning process.”

Download the presentation **slides**.

To find out more about the research on student-centered learning, visit the Jobs for the Future [website](#).