

# Chapter 1

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## Transforming the Graduate

I get it. This is about learning.

— Carlos Ramos, Envision student, reflecting on a realization that came to him halfway through a portfolio defense

It's twenty-seven days until Kaleb Lawson's graduation ceremony, and he has just been told that he is not ready to graduate.

Standing alone at the head of the room, Kaleb can't believe what he has just heard. His face is losing color, and he is struggling to maintain composure. The lights are too bright. The fan of the digital projector whirs too loudly.

The audience, loosely packed in rows of chairs that face Kaleb and the screen behind him, numbers around twenty, an assortment of fellow students, interested parents, and supportive teachers. Fronting the audience is a long table, behind which sit four adults who have been asking questions and taking notes. Obvious to anyone who has ever seen an episode of *American Idol*, this is a panel of judges.

One of the panelists, a digital media teacher named Mr. Harris, breaks an uncomfortable pause: "Your reflections on your leadership skills don't show the depth that we

are looking for. Plus, we don't see evidence that you have practiced this presentation enough. You relied way too heavily on your notes. You didn't make enough eye contact with your audience."

Staring at the floor, Kaleb nods slowly to acknowledge what he has heard. He is taking this hard. Preparation for this presentation was not a matter of days, weeks, or even months. This was years in the making. For the last forty-five minutes, he gave a presentation that told his entire high school story. He showed examples of his best academic work, reflected on his successes and failures, tried to make a case that he was ready to graduate.

"You're not ready, Kaleb," Mr. Harris continues. "You can do better than this. Work with your advisor to revise your reflections. Polish your delivery. In ten days, you need to make a second attempt."

## WHY SCHOOLS NEED TO REDEFINE GRADUATION

We'll follow up on Kaleb's story later in the chapter. (Unsurprising spoiler alert: he passes on his second attempt.) But first, let us explain what we just witnessed.

In order to graduate, every Envision Schools student must go through what Kaleb did. We are not referring to the failing part, but the standing before a panel and making a sustained, evidence-based claim that one is ready to move on from high school. It is the culminating moment of what we call a Deeper Learning Student Assessment System, and it is what defines an Envision Schools education.

The concept is nothing revolutionary, an idea as old as the trial of the hero's journey and as traditional to education as the relationship between apprentice and master. It is the PhD defense, the bar exam, the IPO presentation, and the playoff game. Many learning journeys culminate with a challenge that draws on everything that you have learned to meet it, proving to all that you are ready to move on.

But how do we know when a high school student is ready to move on?

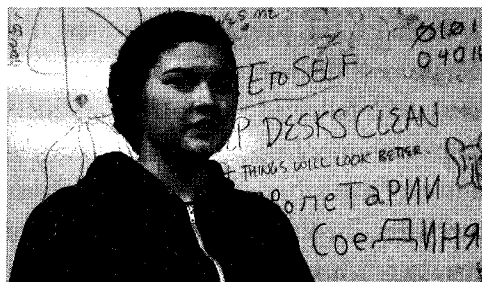
In most high schools in America, the de facto answer to that question seems both arbitrary and abstract. Four years of seat time, 120-something "credits." Perhaps a certain number on a standardized test. We count the inputs with one abstraction (course credits) and diffusely assess them with another abstraction (letter grades). After decades of this approach, our high schools have lost touch with any concrete sense of what their students know and are able to do at the end of four years. And with vague purpose have come uninspiring outcomes.

All of these changes are good ideas in their own right. But for us, they became necessary changes when we committed to our Deeper Learning Student Assessment System. That system became the focal point of our schools' design, from which everything else maps backwards.



#### Video 4. Tiana: Profile of a Deeper Learning Student

Deeper learning makes a real difference: for Tiana, her deeper learning education at City Arts and Tech High School meant becoming the first person in her family to go not only to college but also beyond tenth grade. Within a few months at CAT, she realized she had what it took to imagine that future for herself. She and other students reflect on the opportunities and the mentors that got them where they are today.



#### THE REST OF KALEB'S STORY

Years later, when we interviewed Kaleb and asked him to recollect that day when he did not pass his first defense attempt, he admits that he cried when he got outside the building. In addition to being disappointed in himself, he felt embarrassment for failing in front of a crowd, and, perhaps most stinging, shame over letting down people who believed in him. At the top of that list was Tony Harris; the panelist who delivered the bad news was also his advisor and one of his most trusted mentors.

Justin was also on the panel and remembers that Kaleb's failed first attempt had been a surprise. By senior year, Kaleb had emerged as one of the sharpest minds and most thoughtful communicators in the class, and as his English teacher for the past two years, Justin knew Kaleb's work firsthand. In American Literature, Kaleb wrote an essay on the author James Baldwin that would prove to be a seminal moment in Kaleb's intellectual awakening and a linchpin artifact of his graduation portfolio.

But on reflection, we had to admit that our surprise was also testament to how far Kaleb had come in the three years he had attended our school. Neglected by an absentee father and raised by a working-class mother, Kaleb came from the toughest neighborhood we served. His biracial background — half black, half white — made him question his identity. He had spent years bouncing around dysfunctional schools. When he came to us as a sophomore, Kaleb was angry and academically ill-prepared. His sophomore year was punctuated by academic setbacks, outbursts of rage, even the occasional fight; Tony Harris had to coach Kaleb through every one of these episodes.

In short, this was a kid who was no stranger to inconsistency and setback, nor to the process of overcoming it. After the tears dried, he went back to work. Over the week that followed, Kaleb rewrote his reflections on his “four C” skills, grounding them with more evidence of his growth over time. He developed an overarching and unifying metaphor, polished his delivery, reorganized his speaking notes to be more user-friendly, and tidied up his PowerPoint slides. He rehearsed in front of the mirror, start to finish, multiple times. These were all things Kaleb knew how to do and admitted he should have done the first time.

Keep in mind that Kaleb already had a college acceptance letter in his back pocket. So during a time when most college-bound seniors have long since succumbed to the lethargy of senioritis, Kaleb, faced with the threat that a diploma would not be handed to him on graduation day, was wrestling his way through a transformational learning experience.

The oral defense often feels higher stakes to the students than it really is. For Kaleb, the heavy lifting had already been done. He had already written the papers and performed the experiments and created the art that needed to fill the portfolio. His teachers had already guided him through the revisions that lifted his work to standard and had, as content specialists, signed off on that work as college ready. By most measures, Kaleb had already proven he was ready for college.

So why did he have to go through all this? Was this unnecessary abuse, a trial that amounted to little more than theater?

No. The oral defense is essential to the overall assessment. It must be passed, and the students who have had to show up in the summer for a third or fourth attempt, delivering their defenses to empty classrooms, can attest that it is not theater.

But Kaleb and his peers do overestimate the relative weight of the oral defense, for two good reasons: first, public speaking is inherently nerve wracking, and second, it is natural to invest symbolic significance in the final step of any journey, even though every step was vital to reaching the destination.

This is by design. We *want* students to attach major significance to this culminating experience. It is designed to give their graduation meaning and depth, to give them something concrete to point to, celebrate, and be proud of. In fact, we see the defense as the achievement of the pedagogical sweet spot, a created space that requires and inspires the learner's best effort while still cushioning failure's fall with second (and third and fourth) chances. In other words, although Kaleb was sweating it now, his teachers knew he was going to do fine in the end and that they would be there to support him along the way.

And he did do fine. Ten days later, Justin sat on the panel for Kaleb's second attempt at his oral defense and remembers how much more smoothly and persuasively Kaleb made his case. "Unlike the first time, I felt well prepared," Kaleb recalls, "and because I could feel that it was going well, I got increasingly confident. I started strong and got better from there. Before it was even over, I knew I had passed. It felt so good!"

After he passed, Kaleb went on to be the first in his family to attend a four-year university (Bob's alma mater, St. Mary's College) and, more crucially, would graduate from that university with a degree in sociology. He now works as a compliance officer to prevent discrimination and abusiveness in the banking industry.

"The grad portfolio taught me lessons that I have carried into the work world," Kaleb told us when we recently asked him about it.

For example, the job I have right now came out of a temp position. It wasn't handed to me, and I could tell that it wasn't going to be. First, I had to figure out what I wanted. Then I had to size up the situation, document my work, prove my diligence. In the end, I had to *make a case* [emphasis Kaleb's] that I was someone this firm should bring on full time. And I had a sense of how to go out about it because I had *practiced this before* [emphasis ours].

As I continue to work in a large organization, I am realizing this is true about everything. If you want something—change a policy or get a promotion or whatever—you have to make the case. And it's not just doing the work; you have to show the work. . . .

I remember that all of us seniors were frustrated by the grad portfolio requirements at the time. I mean, we had already done all these big assignments, and we didn't understand why we had to go through this extra step of reflecting on them.

Kaleb was part of the first Envision class ever to put together a graduation portfolio and defense; as pioneers, they were particularly resistant to the process because it was easy to imagine school without it. (Over the years, as younger students have watched

seniors prepare for and deliver their defenses, the process has become embedded in our school culture and is no longer resisted as it was during that pioneer year.)

We were used to the normal way of doing school. You churn out an assignment or take a test, usually after cramming for it, you hope you get an A on it, and you move on.

But the graduation portfolio forced us to go beyond just doing the work. We had to learn how to be confident about our own work. If you can do that in a safe high school environment, that's the place to start. It was so positive . . . so smart what you guys made us go through back then.

Even the trauma of failing that first attempt?

Kaleb recalls,

I was crushed. I went outside, and I was crying. But it wasn't long before I could appreciate why Mr. Harris failed me the first time. I felt that he respected me, rather than letting me sell myself short. What I realized, even then, was that Mr. Harris believed in me more than I did. And in order to pass the defense, that needed to change.

No, this is not theater; it is backwards design. This is what we must do if we are to send students off into the world and expect them to succeed. Because what we see up there during an oral defense, the culminating moment of a four-year project, is not Kaleb convincing his teachers that he is ready to graduate; it is Kaleb making—and winning—the case to himself.



## Video 5. Student Profile, Portfolio Defense

An Envision student and teacher talk about preparing for the “final moment” of the portfolio defense; Yvonne reflects on her growth as a student and a learner.

