

SMART Skills™: A Research-Informed Framework for Modern Cognition in District Leadership, Instruction, and Student Thinking

Dr. Dario Sforza, EdD
 Superintendent of Schools
 Carlstad-East Rutherford (Becton) Regional High School District
 East Rutherford, NJ

Abstract

For more than a century, educational leadership has relied on hierarchical cognitive frameworks such as Bloom's Taxonomy and Webb's Depth of Knowledge to shape instruction, assessment, and accountability. While foundational, these models were designed for a linear, industrial-era conception of learning that no longer reflects the cognitive, technological, and societal realities facing today's students. This article introduces SMART Skills™, a post-Artificial Intelligence, non-linear cognitive framework grounded in creativity, cognitive complexity, real-world transfer, and ethical reasoning. Built through long-term research and superintendent practice, SMART Skills™ reframes learning as an adaptive process aligned to a human–AI world.

This paper advances three core contributions to the field: (1) it identifies the structural limitations of legacy taxonomies in measuring modern cognition; (2) it presents SMART Skills™ as a next-generation cognitive architecture built for complexity, originality, and transfer; and (3) it translates this framework into actionable guidance for district-wide leadership, curriculum design, evaluation systems, and future-ready schooling. Positioned at the intersection of theory and practice, this work offers superintendents and educational leaders a research-grounded pathway for moving beyond compliance-driven instruction toward a model of learning that supports human flourishing in an era of profound change.

Key Words

SMART Skills™, cognitive complexity, educational leadership, curriculum and instruction, teacher evaluation, human–AI co-intelligence, school system design, future-ready learning,
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Introduction

Why Cognitive Frameworks Must Now Evolve

Educational leadership stands at a critical inflection point. While schools have long served as institutions for knowledge transmission, character formation, and civic preparation, the intellectual architecture guiding teaching and learning has remained largely unchanged for decades. Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) established a hierarchy of cognitive processes that brought order to instructional planning. Webb's Depth of Knowledge (1997) added rigor by emphasizing complexity of task and depth of reasoning. Together, these frameworks shaped generations of classrooms, assessments, and policies.

Yet the world these models were designed to serve no longer exists in its original form. Students now navigate environments defined by artificial intelligence, algorithmic systems, economic volatility, global interdependence, and accelerating ethical dilemmas. The demands placed upon learners extend far beyond recall, comprehension, or even procedural problem solving. Today's graduates must demonstrate originality, adaptability, strategic reasoning, collaborative intelligence, and the capacity to transfer knowledge across unpredictable contexts.

The challenge for superintendents and district leadership is no longer simply how to raise test scores within existing frameworks, but whether the frameworks themselves still match the nature of modern cognition. When educational systems rely on models that privilege linear progression, static hierarchies, and predetermined endpoints, they risk preparing students for stability in a world defined by volatility. This tension is no longer theoretical; it now plays out daily in classrooms attempting to reconcile legacy standards with emerging realities.

Within this context, SMART Skills™ framework emerges, not as a rejection of Bloom or Webb, but as an evolutionary advance built upon their intellectual foundations. Where earlier taxonomies provided order and rigor, SMART Skills™ introduces adaptability, non-linearity, and real-world cognition as central organizing principles. It reflects a shift from education as compliance toward education as cognitive empowerment.

For superintendents, this shift is not merely instructional, it is systemic. Cognitive frameworks shape how districts design curriculum, evaluate teaching, allocate resources, define readiness, and ultimately determine how students are prepared to participate in society. The question now confronting educational leaders is not whether change is coming, but whether existing models are sufficient to guide it.

The Structural Limits of Bloom and Webb in the AI & Complexity Era

For more than half a century, Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) and Webb's Depth of Knowledge (1997) have shaped how educators define rigor, sequence instruction, and evaluate student performance. These frameworks provided essential structure during eras when schooling was designed primarily for knowledge transmission, procedural mastery, and predictable workforce preparation (Sforza, 2014). Their contribution to curricular coherence and instructional clarity is undeniable. However, the persistent and often uncritical reliance on these models now presents a structural limitation in an era defined by cognitive complexity, artificial intelligence, and profound uncertainty.

Bloom's Taxonomy organizes thinking into a hierarchical progression, from recall to analysis to creation. While this hierarchy brought order to instructional planning, it

assumes that cognitive growth is linear, sequential, and universally paced. Modern learning, however, rarely follows such predictable pathways (Davis & Sumara, 2006). Students often move fluidly between synthesis, intuition, experimentation, and reflection, sometimes producing original insights before mastering every underlying procedural step. Innovative thinking frequently emerges not from structured ascent, but from lateral connections, intellectual risk-taking, and moments of productive failure. Bloom's hierarchy, by design, struggles to capture these non-linear realities.

Webb's Depth of Knowledge attempted to correct for oversimplification by emphasizing the cognitive demand of tasks rather than the verbs used to describe them. Although DOK strengthened discourse around rigor, it retained a task-centered orientation (Biggs & Collis, 1982). Educators still assess depth primarily through assignment complexity. In practice, this has often resulted in compliance-driven instructional design: educators align tasks to DOK levels, but the framework offers limited guidance on how students develop transferable reasoning, creative insight, and sustained cognitive complexity over time.

In both frameworks, knowledge remains the central currency. Even at the highest levels, cognition is defined primarily by what students can demonstrate within a contained academic task (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). What remains largely unmeasured is how learners intellectually navigate ambiguity, generate original problems, integrate multiple domains of knowledge, or apply ethical reasoning in complex, real-world contexts (Sforza, 2014). These intellectual capacities are no longer peripheral; they define success in modern civic, economic, and technological life.

The rapid emergence of artificial intelligence further exposes the limitations of legacy taxonomies. AI systems now replicate many functions once associated with lower- and mid-level cognitive tasks: retrieval, summarization, pattern recognition, and even procedural generation. When machines can perform much of what schools have historically prioritized, the central purpose of human learning must be re-examined. The question shifts from *what students know* to *how they think, how they adapt, and how they ethically apply intelligence in partnership with machines*. Bloom and Webb were never designed to operate within a human–AI cognitive ecosystem.

From a superintendent's perspective, these limitations are not abstract. They surface in strategic planning, evaluation systems, curriculum audits, and workforce alignment efforts. Districts are increasingly asked to demonstrate graduate readiness not only for college, but for careers that do not yet exist, for civic participation in polarized environments, and for ethical engagement with emerging technologies. Legacy frameworks offer insufficient precision for these demands. They help classify academic tasks, but they do not sufficiently illuminate modern cognitive readiness.

Moreover, both Bloom and Webb are structurally content-bound. They operate most effectively within traditional academic disciplines and standardized assessment systems. Yet learning now unfolds across interdisciplinary spaces, Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) integrated with ethics, humanities intertwined with data science, and civic reasoning embedded within global digital cultures. Cognitive development in integrated environments is recursive, contextual, and adaptive, not hierarchical and fixed.

The limitations of legacy models do not diminish the historical importance of Bloom's Taxonomy or Webb's Depth of Knowledge. Rather, they signal the natural boundary of any framework born in a different era.

Just as earlier industrial models of schooling gave way to more constructivist approaches, today's educational leaders must confront the limits of taxonomies that prioritize sequence over synthesis, compliance over creativity, and task alignment over human adaptability.

The challenge before district leaders, therefore, is not whether Bloom and Webb are "wrong," but whether they are sufficient to guide the next generation of learning. If the central aims of education now include originality, strategic reasoning, ethical discernment, and real-world transfer in an AI-saturated society, then a different cognitive architecture is required, one that treats complexity not as an endpoint, but as the starting condition of learning.

It is precisely within this widening gap between legacy cognitive taxonomies and modern educational demands that SMART Skills™ framework takes shape, not as a refinement of existing models, but as an adaptive reconfiguration of what cognition means in contemporary schooling.

The Theoretical Foundations of SMART Skills™

SMART Skills™ framework is not a departure from established learning science, but an evolution of it, one that integrates decades of scholarship in cognitive complexity, creativity research, constructivist learning theory, and real-world transfer into a unified, modern architecture of thinking.

At its core, SMART Skills™ reframes cognition as dynamic, contextual, and ethically grounded, rather than hierarchical and stage-bound. Table 1 presents a comparison of Bloom's Taxonomy, Webb's Depth of Knowledge, and SMART Skills™ across key structural and cognitive dimensions.

Table 1

Comparison of Bloom's Taxonomy, Webb's DOK, and SMART Skills™

Feature / Dimension	Bloom's Taxonomy (1956)	Webb's DOK (1997)	SMART Skills™ (2026)
Structure	Linear hierarchy (6 levels)	Hierarchical (4 levels)	Non-linear constellation of interconnected skills
Origin	Knowledge domains	Cognitive demand	Modern thinking dimensions & adaptability
Core Emphasis	Knowledge → Evaluation	Recall → Extended Thinking	Creativity, foresight, criticality, ethical reasoning
Flexibility	Rigid levels	Slightly flexible	Dynamic & fluid across tasks, contexts, and learners
Integration with AI/Tech	None	None	Designed for intelligent tool synergy
Relevance to Classrooms	Limited	Moderate	High — aligns with real-world & neurodiverse needs
Equity & Accessibility	Assumes uniform progression	More complex = better	All learners engage based on context & strength
Instructional Application	Lesson classification	Task design	Planning, coaching, & evaluation across systems
Impact on Student Identity	Passive recipients	Task-doers	Meaning-makers, collaborators, problem-finders
Future Alignment	Mid-20th century	Late 20th century	Future-driven — 21st century & beyond

Cognitive Complexity as a Foundational Construct

The intellectual roots of SMART Skills™ draw directly from research on cognitive rigor and complexity, including work that analyzed the comparative depth of state standards, national frameworks, and instructional expectations across disciplines.

This body of scholarship demonstrated a persistent misalignment between the stated goals of higher-order thinking and the operational demands placed on students in classrooms. Too often, systems claim to

prioritize complex reasoning while structurally rewarding procedural compliance and surface-level demonstration (Sforza et al., 2016; Sforza, 2014; Tienken, 2017).

SMART Skills™ addresses this gap by shifting the unit of analysis from *task difficulty* to *thinker behavior*, a shift grounded in prior analyses of cognitive complexity and instructional misalignment (Sforza et al., 2016; Sforza, 2014).

Rather than asking whether an assignment is “rigorous,” the framework asks whether the learner is engaging in behaviors

associated with complex cognition: synthesizing across domains, generating original problems, adapting strategies in real time, and exercising reflective judgment. In this sense, cognitive complexity becomes not an endpoint on a scale, but the living condition within which learning occurs (Sforza, 2014).

Non-Linear Learning and Constructivist Traditions

Where legacy taxonomies assume orderly progression, SMART Skills™ is grounded in the constructivist understanding that learning is inherently non-linear and emergent rather than sequential (Davis & Sumara, 2006; Bratianu & Vasilache, 2009; Chow et al., 2021). Learners construct meaning through iteration, error, experience, social negotiation, and contextual interaction (Dewey, 1938). Insight often precedes explanation. Creativity often precedes structure. Strategic thinking often emerges through uncertainty.

SMART Skills™ rejects the assumption that students must “climb” cognition in fixed steps. Instead, it recognizes that learners move fluidly among ideation, analysis, synthesis, communication, and reflection depending on task, context, and identity reflecting diverse cognitive pathways and forms of intelligence (Gardner, 1983; Davis & Sumara, 2006). This framing aligns with contemporary neuroscience and learning sciences, which emphasize plasticity, pattern recognition, and feedback-driven growth over rigid instructional sequencing.

Creativity, Originality, and Problem Finding

A defining theoretical pillar of SMART Skills™ is its elevation of creativity and problem finding as central, not peripheral, dimensions of intelligence. Traditional frameworks tend to locate creativity at the apex of cognition, implicitly treating it as rare, optional, or reserved for advanced learners.

SMART Skills™, by contrast, situates originality as a core operating condition of modern thinking (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

In complex systems, whether civic, economic, scientific, or technological, success, unlike in linear systems where it is defined by solving predefined problems, depends less on solving predefined problems and more on identifying *which problems matter*, framing them effectively, and iterating through imperfect solutions.

Problem finding, therefore, is not a soft skill; it is a strategic cognitive act. SMART Skills™ embeds this capacity directly into the architecture of learning (Sternberg, 1985; Torrance, 1974).

Real-World Transfer and Situated Cognition

SMART Skills™ is also grounded in theories of situated cognition and transfer, which hold that knowledge is inseparable from the contexts in which it is used. Too often, students demonstrate mastery in artificial academic settings but struggle to apply learning beyond the classroom. This transfer gap is one of the most enduring failures of traditional schooling (Dewey, 1938).

By positioning real-world application as a foundational rather than downstream expectation, SMART Skills™ reframes instruction around authenticity. Knowledge is not something students merely acquire, it is something they actively test, refine, challenge, and apply across evolving environments. This theoretical stance is essential in preparing learners for complexity beyond school walls.

Meta-Awareness, Self-Regulation, and Ethical Reasoning

Another distinctive feature of SMART Skills™ is its explicit inclusion of meta-awareness, or the ability to monitor and regulate one's own

thinking, and ethical reasoning as cognitive—not merely behavioral, dimensions of learning (Costa & Kallick, 2000).

Students must develop the capacity to think about their own thinking, regulate effort, evaluate bias, consider the human impact of their decisions and monitor their own thinking processes. In an era of AI-generated content, algorithmic influence, and accelerating social polarization, ethical discernment is no longer an add-on; it is a cognitive necessity.

SMART Skills™ treats self-regulation, reflection, and civic reasoning as intertwined with creativity, strategy, and communication. This integration reflects a modern understanding of intelligence as not only analytical, but moral, relational, and socially situated.

Equity, Access, and Cognitive Opportunity

Finally, the theoretical foundation of SMART Skills™ is inseparable from its equity implications. Historical cognitive taxonomies often functioned as sorting mechanisms, distinguishing who could access advanced thinking and who remained confined to procedural instruction.

SMART Skills™, by contrast, is grounded in the principle of universal cognitive potential. All learners, across ability levels, backgrounds, and identities, are capable of engaging in creativity, strategy, synthesis, and real-world reasoning when provided appropriate conditions.

This framing shifts the equity conversation from access to content toward access to complex thinking itself. It challenges systems that reserve higher-order cognition for select student populations and instead aligns with longstanding calls for more equitable and

democratic aims in public education (National Education Association, 1918).

From Theory to Framework

Taken together, these theoretical foundations, cognitive complexity, non-linear learning, creativity, situated cognition, meta-awareness, ethical reasoning, and equity, converge within the SMART Skills™ framework as an integrated model of modern intelligence.

Rather than fragmenting thinking into isolated domains, SMART Skills™ unifies them into a dynamic constellation that reflects how humans actually learn, adapt, and lead in the real world (Sforza, 2014).

It is this theoretical grounding that allows SMART Skills™ to function not merely as a descriptive taxonomy, but as a design framework for instruction, leadership, and systemic transformation, one capable of guiding the next era of public education.

The SMART Skills™ Framework—The Eleven Interwoven Dimensions of Modern Cognition

SMART Skills™ framework defines eleven interdependent dimensions of modern cognition that operate as a dynamic constellation rather than a hierarchy, extending prior critiques of standardized, linear curriculum models and advancing research on cognitive complexity and instructional design (Sforza et al., 2016; Sforza, 2014; Tienken, 2017; Tienken, 2021).

Unlike traditional taxonomies that sequence thinking in fixed stages, SMART Skills™ reflects how cognition actually functions in complex, real-world environments, fluid, recursive, contextual, and adaptive.

These skills do not replace academic content; they govern how content is engaged, applied, challenged, and transformed.

1. Creative Thinking

The capacity to generate original ideas, take intellectual risks, and explore novel possibilities. Creativity is treated not as an elite endpoint but as a core condition of learning in uncertain environments.

2. Critical Thinking

The disciplined evaluation of claims, evidence, logic, and assumptions across domains. This dimension supports analytical judgment while remaining integrated with creativity and ethics.

3. Strategic Thinking

The ability to plan purposefully, anticipate consequences, and adjust actions in complex systems. Strategic cognition governs decision-making under ambiguity.

4. Communication

Precision in expression across written, oral, visual, and digital modes. Communication is treated as a cognitive act, not merely a presentation skill.

5. Collaboration

Interdependence, perspective-taking, and shared problem-solving. SMART Skills™ positions collaboration as distributed intelligence, not a soft skill.

6. Problem Finding & Solving

The capacity to identify meaningful

problems, frame them effectively, and iterate through imperfect solutions. This skill reflects the realities of innovation and leadership.

7. Real-World Application

Transfer of knowledge across unpredictable, non-academic contexts. Authenticity is foundational, not supplemental.

8. Meta-Awareness

Self-regulation, reflection, and monitoring of one's own thinking. This dimension governs learner agency and cognitive independence.

9. Civic & Ethical Reasoning

Judgment rooted in fairness, responsibility, and awareness of social impact. Ethical reasoning is embedded within cognition itself.

10. Synthesis

Integration of multiple disciplines, viewpoints, and data sources into coherent understanding. Synthesis governs systems thinking.

11. Resilience & Adaptability

The ability to persist, recover, and evolve through challenge, feedback, and uncertainty. Adaptability defines readiness in volatile systems.

A Non-Hierarchical Cognitive Architecture

What distinguishes SMART Skills™ is not simply the inclusion of these dimensions, but their non-hierarchical structure. Learners do

not “progress” through SMART Skills™ in linear fashion, a departure from traditional hierarchical models of cognition (Bloom, 1956; Webb, 1997).

Instead, they activate multiple dimensions simultaneously depending on context, identity, task design, and social environment. A student may demonstrate advanced synthesis before procedural fluency, or strategic insight before formal analysis. This reflects the reality of authentic cognition, where thinking is situational rather than staged.

Why SMART Skills™ Outperform Legacy Frameworks

Unlike Bloom's and Webb's models, which primarily classify academic tasks, SMART Skills™ is behavior-centered and grounded in observed cognitive complexity (Bloom, 1956; Webb, 1997; Sforza et al., 2016). It describes what modern thinkers *do*, not just what assignments demand. It captures:

- Creativity and problem finding as foundational, not optional
- Real-world transfer as central, not downstream
- Ethical reasoning as cognitive, not behavioral
- Adaptability as a core readiness indicator, not a personality trait

In this way, SMART Skills™ shifts educational systems from measuring academic compliance to developing human capability.

From Classroom to District Systems

Because SMART Skills™ functions as a cognitive architecture rather than a content framework, it can be embedded across:

- Curriculum design
- Performance-based assessment
- Teacher coaching
- Leadership evaluation
- Graduate readiness profiles
- AI-governed instructional ecosystems

For superintendents, this means SMART Skills™ is not an instructional add-on—it is a system-level organizing framework for how thinking is developed, observed, and scaled across schools.

District-Wide Implications: Curriculum, Instruction, Evaluation, and Leadership

The true power of a cognitive framework is not measured by its elegance on paper, but by its capacity to reshape systems in practice.

For superintendents, SMART Skills™ function not as an instructional add-on, but as a district-level design architecture—one that realigns curriculum, professional learning, evaluation, and long-range strategic planning around modern cognition rather than legacy compliance.

Reframing curriculum: from coverage to cognitive design

Traditional curriculum models prioritize content pacing, scope, and sequence. SMART Skills™ reframes curriculum as cognitive experience design (Marzano, 2007; Tienken, 2017).

Instead of asking what content must be “covered,” district leaders ask what kinds of thinking behaviors students must repeatedly practice across grade levels and disciplines. This shift moves curriculum from a checklist of standards to a coordinated system for cultivating creativity, synthesis, ethical reasoning, and real-world transfer.

In practice, this translates into interdisciplinary performance tasks, real-world problem framing, and iterative design challenges embedded within traditional coursework. Academic rigor is preserved, but it is expressed through thinking complexity rather than volume of content.

Instructional Practice: Teachers as Designers of Thinking

SMART Skills™ reposition teachers as cognitive designers of learning experiences, not simply deliverers of curriculum (Danielson, 2007; Costa & Kallick, 2000). Instruction is intentionally constructed to activate multiple SMART dimensions at once, creative ideation alongside critical analysis, collaboration alongside strategic planning, meta-awareness alongside real-world application. Classroom practice shifts from linear lesson execution to dynamic learning orchestration.

For district leaders, this alters the nature of instructional leadership itself. Walkthroughs, observations, and coaching conversations move beyond compliance indicators toward deeper questions:

- *Where is originality present?*
- *How are students transferring learning?*
- *What cognitive risks are being encouraged?*
- *How are students reflecting on their own thinking?*

Evaluation systems: From procedural fidelity to cognitive evidence

Perhaps the most disruptive implication of SMART Skills™ lies in evaluation. Traditional observation systems focus heavily on instructional moves, pacing, and task alignment. While these remain important, they often fail to capture whether complex thinking is actually occurring. SMART Skills™ introduces a cognition-first lens for observation and feedback, centering what students are thinking, producing, transferring, and regulating.

For superintendents, this enables a shift from evaluating instructional compliance to evaluating cognitive opportunity and impact. Teachers are coached not merely on strategies, but on how effectively their classrooms

cultivate adaptive intelligence. Leadership evaluation similarly evolves from operational management toward system-level cognitive design.

Graduate readiness and equity of cognitive access

At the district level, SMART Skills™ redefines graduate profiles. Readiness is no longer framed exclusively through credit accumulation, test scores, or procedural mastery. Instead, graduates are defined by their demonstrated capacity for creativity, strategic reasoning, collaboration, resilience, ethical judgment, and transfer.

This reframing has profound equity implications. Historically, advanced cognition has often been reserved, explicitly or implicitly, for select student populations. SMART Skills™ establishes complex thinking as a universal expectation, not a selective privilege.

Districts using this framework shift the equity conversation from access to courses toward access to cognitive complexity itself.

Strategic Planning and the Future of Public Education

At the superintendent level, SMART Skills™ offers a strategic throughline that aligns board goals, instructional vision, workforce readiness, and AI governance under a single cognitive philosophy. Rather than reacting piecemeal to technology, labor market shifts, or accountability mandates, districts operate from a coherent definition of what modern intelligence requires.

In this sense, SMART Skills™ functions as a future-facing governance framework as much as an instructional one. It allows districts to move beyond incremental reform and instead undertake intentional cognitive transformation, anchored in human capacity rather than technological acceleration alone.

Human–AI Co-Intelligence, Educational Governance, and the Future of Schooling

The emergence of artificial intelligence marks not simply a technological shift, but a civilizational transition in how intelligence itself is defined.

For the first time, machines can perform many of the procedural, analytical, and generative tasks that schools once treated as the upper bounds of cognition (Holmes et al., 2019). This reality forces educational leaders to confront a fundamental question: *if machines can now execute much of what education traditionally rewards, what is the irreducible role of human thinking?*

SMART Skills™ provides an answer rooted in human–AI co-intelligence rather than technological substitution. In this framing, AI becomes a cognitive amplifier, accelerating pattern recognition, access to information, and simulation, while human intelligence is defined by the capabilities machines cannot ethically or meaningfully replace: originality, ethical judgment, contextual understanding, strategic foresight, reflective awareness, and civic responsibility (Shneiderman, 2020).

The purpose of schooling shifts from producing task executors to cultivating adaptive decision-makers in complex systems. This shift carries profound implications for educational governance. Districts can no longer afford to treat AI as a peripheral instructional tool or a compliance concern.

It must be governed through a coherent cognitive philosophy that protects human agency while leveraging technological capacity.

SMART Skills™ offers such a governance anchor by explicitly centering ethical reasoning, meta-awareness, real-world transfer, and adaptability as non-negotiable human outcomes.

The future of schooling will not be determined by how quickly districts adopt new technologies, but by how intentionally they redefine human capability in a machine-rich world. When districts frame cognition as dynamic, creative, ethical, and transferable, education reclaims its moral and civic purpose. Schools prepare students not just for jobs, but to steward an uncertain world.

SMART Skills™ thus positions public education at the frontier of what may be the most important leadership challenge of this century: ensuring that as artificial intelligence accelerates, human intelligence deepens.

Conclusion

Public education stands at a defining crossroads. The question is no longer whether schools must change, but whether they will evolve their deepest cognitive assumptions to meet a world shaped by complexity, artificial intelligence, and accelerating uncertainty. SMART Skills™ offer a future-facing framework that preserves the rigor of legacy taxonomies while transcending their limitations through creativity, adaptability, ethical reasoning, and real-world transfer.

For superintendents and educational leaders, this is not a matter of innovation for its own sake, it is a matter of stewardship. The future of schooling will belong to systems that design for human thinking, not merely academic performance.

Author Biography

Dario Sforza is a New Jersey superintendent and educational researcher specializing in cognitive complexity, instructional design, and systems leadership. He is the creator of Sforza's SMART Skills™ framework and leads district-level innovation focused on future-ready public education. E-mail: dsforza@bectonhs.org

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