

Secondary School Change

Contributed by Tony Wagner

Meeting challenge with the three R's of reinvention.

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Districts are making progress with elementary school reforms around the country. Fourth grade reading and math scores are up in many states. In elementary schools where recently I've spent time, there's a sense of emergent pride and hope.

Not so in secondary schools. Districts that have seen test scores increase for elementary-age children see those same kids' scores fall in 8th grade. The slump is often even worse by the time the students get to 10th grade. Secondary school reformers are profoundly demoralized. They have no sense of what's going wrong, or what new strategies they might try.

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What is little understood is that the change challenge is profoundly different in elementary vs. secondary education. To understand the differences, I'd like to suggest a three-part lens for analyzing successful improvements in teaching, curriculum, and school structure. They are the interdependent principles of Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships.

Profound changes in our society over the last quarter-century and the rapid shift from a blue-collar, industrial economy to a knowledge economy mean that all students now need new skills for work, citizenship, and college-readiness. All students now need a rigorous curriculum. But rigor is often interpreted to mean simply covering more of the same old tired, traditional academic content. The problem with "more of the same" rigor is that the content is often irrelevant to many of today's students. The traditional college-prep, lecture-style curriculum is not connected to the world from which many students come; nor does it align with the worlds for which students must be prepared.

Increasingly, all students must learn to reason, communicate, problem-solve, and work collaboratively. The skills now needed for work, college, and active, informed citizenship are essentially the same, but they are often not the skills being taught in many so-called college-preparatory curricula. Employers and professors agree that communication and study skills, good work habits, curiosity, and respect are what's most lacking among the nation's high school graduates, according to Public Agenda studies (see, for example, Reality Check, 2002 at www.publicagenda.org). Except for "basic math skills," neither group is concerned about lack of proficiency in traditional academic disciplines.

Rigor as a curriculum concept must be connected to relevance. Early in the 20th century, we gave up teaching Greek and Latin as required courses in high school for a reason: Mastery of those languages was no longer considered essential. Yet, we have not really reconsidered the "Carnegie unit" as a framework for thinking about what students need to know in high school since the inception of that measurement of high school coursework in 1906. We need to better connect today's secondary school curriculum to the interests and needs of the students we teach, as well as to the skills they'll need as adults.

The traditional college-prep, lecture-style curriculum is not connected to the world from which many students come; nor does it align with the worlds for which students must be prepared. Such curricula exist in many highly successful secondary schools that use what I call a "merit badge" approach as a way for students to rigorously demonstrate mastery of core competencies. Even inner-city "merit badge-based" schools find that more than 90 percent of their students graduate, and, of those, more than 90 percent go on to two- and four-year colleges. This is in contrast to traditional high schools serving the same populations, where fewer than 50 percent of the students graduate. (I include a description of the merit-badge approach to curriculum in *Making the Grade: Reinventing America's Schools*.)

But rigor and relevance aren't the only explanations for the successes of these "reinvented" high schools in New York and elsewhere. They are also built on the principle of establishing and maintaining strong relationships between students and adults who care and are knowledgeable about what students are learning. When one conducts focus groups with today's adolescents, as I have, their persistent complaint about school is that "no one cares." Even students in Advanced Placement courses tell me that adults seem too busy to listen to them. Growing up in single-parent or dual-career families, today's students have much less of an adult presence in their lives. They need connections to caring adults in order to be motivated to master an academically rigorous, relevant curriculum.

Good elementary schools, where students spend most of their day with the same teacher, have always been built around caring relationships. Introducing rigor and relevance at that level has involved curriculum and professional-development challenges, but the nature of the changes is comparatively modest. Reading had to be more focused around material that students wanted to read, and teachers have had to learn how to raise expectations for all students. The elementary "scope of work" was and is reform, not "reinvention." The changes required do not challenge teachers' and parents' conceptions of school. We have known what good elementary school classrooms look like for some time. The challenge is replicating at scale, and few have to be convinced of the need. Most people understand the importance of ensuring that all children learn to read and to do math.

To succeed with all students in middle and high school, though, we have to go back to the drawing board to "reinvent" secondary education. We must challenge many academics' notions of what constitutes a "rigorous" curriculum, and create a course of study that is as relevant as it is rigorous. We need to bring the kinds of skills mentioned in the U.S. Department of Labor's SCANS report of the 1990s into the core content of our academic courses. We may even want to consider teaching courses around "modes of problem-solving," rather than by the traditional academic Carnegie-unit compartmentalization.

And above all, we must create small school communities, or what I call New Village Schools, where caring adults are much more knowledgeable about and involved with all students' learning.

Too many educators and parents remain cautious or skeptical about 'reinvention'—preferring simpler but ineffectual fixes. A growing number of educators, as well as local and national philanthropies like the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, are working hard to "reinvent" secondary education. But that effort is a race against both time and tradition. We are losing large numbers of kids, and too many educators and parents remain cautious or skeptical—preferring simpler but ineffectual fixes like professional development.

Perhaps if we could all agree on rigor, relevance, and relationships as three core principles of "redesign," the necessary conversations—the adult learning—and the important work of reinvention might move forward more quickly and with a sharper focus.