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HTH GSE: Leadership for School Change

Dream School: The Life of the Mind and Leading an Impactful Life

**The Dream:**

I dream of a school in which students both take pleasure in the pure “life of the mind” and commit themselves to building the skills that will allow them to have a powerful direct impact on their generation. Neither an ivory tower nor a vocational-technical school, this is a place in which ideas are celebrated for their own sake, but where skills are built for the future. Teachers are on a daily quest both to transform the way students see the world and to arm them with the skills they need to communicate and solve problems as influential professionals and adults.

**The Reality:**

“Why do we have to know this?” “Will this be on the test?” “When am I ever going to use this?” “How is this going to be graded?”

A combination of an excessive focus on grades and a lack of clear explication of the reasons for learning the material being presented creates a culture that is in some ways the exact reverse of the dream I outlined above. On the one hand, students are encouraged to think of the *content* they learn (mathematical formulas, historical facts, literary plots, etc.) as directly beneficial later in life. Teachers desperate to make their subject relevant promise that learning the material will help with everyday chores like balancing checkbooks and impressing dates. On the other hand, the *skills* students are in the process of acquiring (writing, speaking, reading, quantitative analysis, aesthetic awareness, etc.) become distanced from any real-world applications and are reduced to standardized formulas that are both boring to learn and useless when applied in their set format. The essay writing required for an AP or SAT, for example, is intentionally formulaic and dry as dust – something that would never pass muster in a widely-followed twitter account, much less a newspaper article, nonfiction book, political speech, or one of a hundred high-impact types of professional writing.

Sadly, the mindset that content should be “useful” and skills should be acquired in a formulaic vacuum is one that is hard to shake. Teachers hold onto it because it offers short-term solutions to the twin problems of capturing student attention (“pay attention – you’ll have to use this one day”) and assessing student work (“you’re getting a B because you missed three commas and misplaced your thesis statement”). Parents happily adopt it because it speaks directly to a major concern, answering the question, “will my child’s education help them be successful later in life?” with, “of course, because our content has direct applications to life experiences and our skills are standardized and guaranteed.” Finally, students themselves are easily sucked into this mindset, though they probably have the least to gain from it. In their perfectly natural search for a reason to pay attention and work hard, they fall easy prey to what Neil Postman calls “the god of Economic Utility”; and in their quest for a direct and simple route to success they are lured by the “transparency” of grading skills with a defined (if ghastly boring and simplistic) standard.

The surprisingly prevalence of this mindset among the students, parents, and even teachers at the Pacific Ridge school shows itself in a number of small ways. The most visible examples of the “content utility” mindset often come from the most abstract departments: it is not uncommon for students to complain about a math class with the refrain, “when am I ever going to use this?” Unfortunately, math teachers often attempt to respond with a concrete situation in which it might actually be applicable, thereby further fueling the mindset. As I discussed this project with colleagues, especially those who taught math, I found that they came out strongly on either one side or another. One particularly interesting conversation I had with a math teacher who has been experimenting with the Phillips-Exeter problem-based curriculum this year illuminated how much we both felt that this mindset was particularly insidious for his discipline because it caused students to lose sight of the importance of taking pleasure in the act of problem-solving, a skill he felt should be valued for its own sake.

More subtle, but perhaps even more common, are the attempts to simply standardize skills, turning them away from real-world applications and boiling them down to “teachable” exercises. When I initiated conversations among teachers about building writing skills, for example, most people tended to focus on creating shared rubrics and standards that prepared students for the kinds of assessments they will encounter in college. For example, students will have to write research papers in college, so the logic goes that we should therefore focus on teaching them to write mini research essays so that they can practice MLA format, finding sources in a library database, writing note cards, etc. Many teachers I spoke with said the solution to any reticence among students to learn these skills tends was to attach large grade penalties to any failure to complete an aspect of the assignment.

All this is not to say that there are not some “bright spots” within our curriculum, and I very much hope that they have the potential to shift the norm and reverse the current mindset. One notable bright spot that several teachers immediately thought of when the subject came up is a project that began in the very first year of the school (five years ago): all 9th graders write and perform an Oration – a public speech on a topic of their choosing that seeks to convince their audience to take action in some way. Over the past several years, this project has become more and more about pure skill development and a chance to get students voices heard. We have stripped away all content requirements (students may truly choose any subject to speak about), and we roll out the project with an emphasis on the idea that public speaking and learning to express opinions an influence an audience is an essential adult-world skill. Thus, when it comes to the final presentation, students are so keyed up, so excited to have an audience, and so invested in the process that no grade is needed at all: their final performance is ungraded, and yet each and every student does an exceptional job. This project would make an excellent model for future work, in that it focuses on *skills* as useful to develop in order to enter the adult world and puts the *content* in the hands of the students to explore and enjoy at their own leisure.

A bright spot that might work against the “content mindset” is harder to put a finger on: it would of course be a rejection of the idea that we learn content for its utility, but what would it be on the positive side? When I think about a “bright spot” in my own education, I remember walking home from school one day after a biology class and stopping to watch a man quietly playing catch with his young daughter. Suddenly, the scene in front of me transformed as I saw it through the lens of the neuroscience discussion I had just come from: they were not just throwing a ball back and forth, they were reinforcing a neuronal pathway by repeated use! I remember feeling as though the earth had shifted underneath me: I realized that even the simplest learning moments were ultimately about wiring in the brain, and ever after that I could never look at repeated behavior of any kind in the same way again. Those moments do happen in small ways every day for students and teachers alike at Pacific Ridge, but they seem always to be celebrated as interesting sidebars rather than the primary purpose of our experience.

**The Changes:**

The mindset shift necessary to achieve the dream is a simple flip: in all subjects *content* must be learned for the sole purpose of expanding our minds, while *skills* are first and foremost built in order to enter into dialogue in the adult world at a professional level. On the one hand, this approach is thoroughly and purposefully utilitarian: we want to help our students develop skills that have direct applications in the real world, and help them see their work towards building these skills as self-directed and beneficial rather than imposed and arbitrary. But on the other, we want to divorce the sense of “utility” from the subjects we teach, encouraging students to see the acquisition of knowledge as a powerful and absorbing end in itself: we learn calculus not in order to balance our checkbooks but in order to transform the way we see the world.

How subject content affects students’ worldview:

* Sciences have the power to transform the way we view the natural world and our place in it.
* Mathematics can transform how we quantify physical and numeric relationships, in both concrete and beautifully abstract ways.
* Arts and Literature can illuminate the human passion for self-expression and understanding
* Social Sciences have the power to transform the way we view human behavior, both individually and in groups
* World Languages can illuminate the power of language as a medium of identity and expression

How skill development can prepare students to be influential contributors in the adult world:

* Writing allows students to engage in communication to a wide and diverse audience
* Critical reading allows students to analyze and assess the ideas of other writers
* Public speaking allows students to bring a high-impact personal influence to bear on a group of people
* Quantitative analysis allows students to both use and to assess arguments built on numerical logic
* Aesthetic awareness allows students to both use and to assess visual and auditory artistic expression

**The Step:**

A mindset is a daunting thing to go about changing, since no one policy or white paper is going to transform a community’s way of thinking. That said, there are several key ways to plant the seeds of slow change that can shift the mindset of a group over time: through the celebration of bright spots, the reshuffling of collaborative groups, and the opening of targeted conversations on “hot button” issues.

1. Celebrating bright spots: We can plant the seeds of change by finding ways to celebrate two key “bright spots” in our daily experience: 1) teacher-developed projects that emphasize skill development as a way to access the adult world, 2) student “eureka” moments in which they learn a concept that expands their minds and transforms their worldview.
2. Reshuffling collaborative groups: Currently, skill development is mostly discussed in intra-disciplinary groups, where rubrics and college-focused standards are king. If we shift conversations about how to develop skills to interdisciplinary groups then we can break some old habits and shift the focus towards an adult-world rather than a school-world reason for learning how to write, read, reason, etc.
3. Open targeted conversations on “hot button” issues: While it is difficult to attack a mindset head-on in an entire community, there are some key “hot button” issues (homework, grading, etc.) that trigger thinking that gets at the heart of the larger mindset. By opening conversations along these lines, we can encourage people to become more comfortable with questioning accepted modes of thought.