



Idaho High School Redesign Proposal

Northwest Professional Educators (NWPE) applauds the Idaho State Board of Education for its efforts to improve the educational experience of Idaho's students as well as its collaboration with education-related organizations, businesses, the legislature, parents, and citizens, to implement a vision of education worthy of the great state of Idaho.

Northwest Professional Educators, a nonprofit professional educator association affiliated with the Association of American Educators, believes that public education will be improved if:

- we always remember that our first duty is to the child;
- we aim to develop a young person's character as well as his or her intellect;
- educators are free from all forms of compulsory membership and are not forced to join or otherwise pay dues or fees to a labor union in order to teach;
- our schools are free from strikes or any other work stoppage tactics or coercive threats; and,
- public schools, their administration, instructional services, and curriculum are primarily accountable to the citizens and taxpayers of the *local* communities they serve.

With the foregoing beliefs in mind, NWPE offers the following comments regarding the Board's proposal for high school redesign.

Support for High School Redesign

Gaining support for high school redesign will entail gathering the best available research on effective elements of high school organization, identifying schools that exemplify those elements (no matter who runs them), and creating venues to share these with educators, citizens, and policymakers. Research should *not* be limited to public schools but should encompass *all* education delivery models, e.g., public, private, charter, virtual, etc., letting student-interest drive research gathering and implementation, not self-interest of any major education stakeholders.

Consistent High Expectations

When students witness and believe that *their* academic and personal interests are the top priorities of teachers and policymakers, they are more likely to engage themselves as learners and contributors to the school community. Believing that educators care for them by ensuring students have every opportunity to succeed will result in less alienation and the discipline problems that can eventually lead to dropping out. Adults should develop a school culture that values students as individuals, supports them, and challenges them to reach their full potential.

Increasing credits for math and science is a positive recommendation concomitant with high expectations and standards for academic achievement at all *earlier* grades. Increasing math and science credits is laudable but the foundation of all education is reading and writing. Far too many students do too little of both. Additionally, students must receive *the right type of instruction*.

There is a need for increased accountability for attendance, achievement, and parent involvement. Social promotion and poor attendance without consequences contribute to academic problems. We must find ways to keep students in school by assuring that they learn critical foundational reading and math skills in the early grades and by keeping them on track to graduate with their peers when at all possible.

There must be creative opportunities and support for students who are off-track before and during high school—for whatever reason—to meet the requirements for earning a diploma. Tracking students into boring remedial classes is not effective. We want students' learning accelerated so that they can get back into rigorous courses as soon as possible.

Time must be made in the students' schedules for mastering critical foundational reading and math skills using proven research-based instruction, e.g., double-doses of math or reading to help the student catch up, deferring some courses to later in the student's schooling, taking some classes through alternative delivery methods, such as an independent class designed for credit for learning gained outside the school house walls.

Curriculum

As stated above, in addition to increasing the *quantity* of math, science and reading instruction, students need the *right kind of instruction* to succeed at higher levels. The math wars are heating up and should receive due attention.

Math Matters, a coalition of university professors, K-12 math educators, and parents (www.parentsformathmatters.net), believes that the current K-12 curriculum trend towards "reform math," such as *Everyday Math*, *Mathland*, *Number Power*, *Connected Math*, *Core-Plus*, *Cognitive Tutor Algebra* (which focus on concepts and theory, scorning textbooks, basic algorithms and pen/paper calculations as "rote drill"), is shortchanging students.

To study the effectiveness of *Core-Plus* as a high school math curriculum, Michigan State University Department of Mathematics professors, Richard O. Hill and Thomas H. Parker, analyzed the records of students arriving at Michigan State University from four high schools which adopted the *Core-Plus* mathematics program. Those students placed into, and enrolled in, increasingly *lower* level courses as the implementation progressed and the grades these students earned in their university mathematics courses were also *below average*. (<http://www.math.msu.edu/~hill/HillParker5.pdf>)

Dr. Thomas McKenzie, an Associate Professor of Mathematics at Gonzaga University, is an active research mathematician, but he is also interested in elementary and high school math education. He states:

The problem with *Core Plus* math is that it is simply not rigorous enough for students who wish to study science. An inordinate amount of time is spent on simple topics like mean, median, mode, and reading bar charts like the ones on the front page of the *USA Today*. Not enough time is spent on algebra. The critics of traditional math suggest it is a mile wide and an inch deep. I suggest that *Core Plus* math is an inch wide and an inch deep.

The supporters of reformed math point to studies that suggest it is effective. I have looked at those studies, and I do not find them convincing. I do find the following bit of common sense convincing. Our students will compete against

students across the world. If it were self-evident that reformed math is effective, China, India, and Singapore would be adopting it. These countries are not. They have kept their traditional programs. I am so concerned about the lack of basics in my children's math programs, that every night, I study a page of Singapore math with them.

The concepts and algorithms of traditional math are some of the greatest inventions of the human mind. They are treasures that we pass on to our children. They are the best possible algorithms, and thus, they are perfect starting points for theoretical discussions. Traditional math is not old math that has been replaced by the shinier model of reformed math. Traditional math is a rock upon which the foundations of modern physics, biology, and economics are being built.

Perhaps "reform math" meets the needs of some students, but it is apparently not meeting the needs of all students and is causing considerable concern. Dr. McKenzie urges school boards to consider forming a committee of leading scientists, engineers, and business people in the technology sector to study this issue. We must ensure that curriculum results in knowledge and skills for advanced courses—not remedial courses.

In Louisiana, it has been suggested that teams of educators working with representatives from business/industry should design alternatives for certain core college prep courses connecting them to student interest, e.g., a forensic science sequence that incorporates core concepts of biology, chemistry, and physics. Sustaining students' interest in math and science by allowing cross credit for applied math/science in classes such as automotive technology, cosmetology, may keep students learning. Flexibility and innovation are critical to meet diverse student needs and interests.

Students need curriculum that meets their cognitive skills, perceptual abilities, and learning styles. For example, students who do not pick up reading through phonics or whole language *can learn reading* through research-based instruction such as that provided by the Lindamood Bell Learning Processes program.

In 1998, Lindamood-Bell Learning Processes launched a school reform partnership with Pueblo School District 60, a large urban district in Colorado with a 62% minority and 61% free and reduced lunch student population. The goal of the collaboration was to implement a comprehensive district reform model that would significantly increase student achievement. It worked! Pueblo, CO, is a case-study of one school district implementing the Lindamood-Bell Human Learning Management® program to break new ground in developing literacy skills for all of its students. The district-wide educational reform model that Pueblo School District 60 and Lindamood-Bell implemented is, they believe, second to none in its development of literacy skills, regardless of socio-economic factors. See www.lindamoodbell.com/schoolservices/districtreform.shtml.

As a former Speech-Language Pathologist, I can attest to the remarkable reading gains made by students with auditory perceptual delays/disorders using the Lindamood-Bell strategies. These students find phonics difficult or impossible to learn and too often receive the traumatic label of "learning disabled" when, in fact, it was the curriculum that was disabled, not the child. I strongly encourage Idaho to investigate the instructional techniques and implementation model utilized by Pueblo School District 60 and Lindamood-Bell.

Students need to adequately prepare for pursuing post-secondary options but often lack the knowledge and awareness of what skills their plans will require. Many do not realize that the same skills needed to do well in college English and math are the same skills needed to obtain a good job and advance in today's workplace—including "blue collar" jobs. Students should be helped to see which classes are necessary for pursuing their aspirations early enough to make a difference in their school careers. Classes need to be high quality, challenging, and viewed as *relevant* to the students' goals in order to motivate them to work hard. Samples of reading, writing, and math that employees of various professions and trades encounter in their jobs could be collected from Idaho's employers and incorporated into classes as a way to increase real world relevance of class content.

Advanced Opportunities

Adding advanced opportunities for students will meet more students' needs for challenging coursework.

Instead of offering *early release* for seniors who do not need to take a full load of courses to earn a diploma, students should be offered an *early start* on college or advanced workplace training as a way to keep students motivated, learning, and engaged. Perhaps dual enrollment for courses at community or technical colleges leading to "industry-based certifications" in top-demand occupations is worthwhile. Consider working with colleges to develop statewide guidelines making it easier to craft agreements with high schools for "early college" programs to allow ambitious students to take college-level coursework while still in high school, possible even accruing enough college credits to earn a two-year associate's degree by the time they graduate from high school.

Schools should support advanced opportunities for students but also increased flexibility for providing those opportunities, especially where location limits opportunities for certain options. Consider other ways to provide advanced options such as virtual learning, mentoring, internships, etc. Allow school leadership and staff to use professional judgment to pose out-of-the-box solutions. Innovate, evaluate, and redesign as needed.

Testing

For what purpose is the Board proposing that all students take the ACT or SAT in eleventh grade? How will the information be interpreted and used? Requiring the ACT or SAT in eleventh grade may assist students in becoming "test-wise" and stimulate students to consider college and even to study harder. However, the test may also negatively impact students who might otherwise consider college but become discouraged from the initial ACT/SAT results. According to Dr. Charles Clock, a Management and Educational Consultant with a doctorate in Educational Evaluation, Measurement, Statistics, numerous studies over the years have shown that these tests are poor predictors of college or life success.

Clock notes that even when added to high school GPA, the tests' contribution is very low. He writes about college admission testing in his unpublished document, *The Crooked Road to Academic Assessment*.

381 students were admitted to University of California (Berkeley) in 2002 with SAT scores falling between 600 and 1000 — well below the 1330 average for entering freshmen. (Remember, this was based on the old SAT I. The New SAT

was revised in 2005, so the current score scale has changed. However, with the exception of two subtests, it is the same test.) What about the 381 who had the low SAT scores? They were in the top 4% of students who completed UC course requirements and graduated in the top 4% of their class; showed promise as community leaders, athletes, musicians or artists, or had overcome hardships. These data are very consistent with the research that shows there is a weak correlation between the SAT or ACT and college or life success.

Interestingly, some colleges are looking beyond the ACT/SAT tests to determine who will be most successful in college. The July 6, 2006, *Boston Globe* article, "Application process will go beyond SAT scores and seek original thinking," states that this fall,

Tufts (University) will try a more scientific approach to its toughest decisions, using its application to measure aspects of intelligence that cannot be approximated by SAT scores. A top Tufts dean believes that creativity and practical skills -- the ability to implement ideas and win other people's backing -- are just as important as the analytical skills typically measured by standardized tests.

The university will ask applicants to show original thinking and imagine, for example, an alternative version of history: What if civil rights pioneer Rosa Parks had given up her seat on the bus? Or, they could be asked to write an off-the-wall mini-story with the title, "My roommate is a space alien."

The first question might not sound so different than those on a typical application essay, but this year's questions will be designed and evaluated based on psychological research. Tufts officials hope to better identify future leaders and predict college grades. Such methods could also boost diversity among those accepted, because research indicates that the assessment erases much of the gap between racial and socioeconomic groups seen on traditional standardized tests.

Requiring students to take the ACT or SAT in eleventh grade may have some benefits. The goals for requiring this as an element of high school redesign should be very clearly defined with potential negative impacts minimized.

Flexibility, Local Control, Freedom of Choice

The state should not micro-manage schools, but should provide standards, freedom, guidance, support, and accountability mechanisms to encourage school design to meet students' needs and to capitalize on special skills of educators.

The Senior Project proposal is a good example of how local communities are provided the freedom to determine the project parameters. Local districts must be cautious of outside pressure to conform a senior project program to other's determinations of what is best for their community.

Some teachers believe that the Senior Project idea is a trendy, unnecessary and unjustified use of time and effort because by the time most students graduate they should have done a major project in any of several disciplines, e.g., research paper, science project, mural, community-

related activity, which makes the Senior Project requirement redundant. Additionally, some teachers believe that the Senior Project wastes time and wreaks havoc on students' schedules.

Are Senior Projects accomplishing what they intend where they are currently used, and, if so, are they worth the time and effort and negative impact they cause? Some parents think the Senior Project is a waste of time. Will the Senior Project drain time and detract from students' college admissions activities, such as college and scholarship applications, studying for college admission tests, etc? Additionally, there is concern for students' varying financial capacities to invest in a Senior Project. Should the Senior Project be a voluntary rather than mandatory program for students?

We need to trust local communities (citizens, school administration, teachers) to act in the best interest of students while holding students accountable but *free to determine their own futures*. It violates the individual human dignity of students to put them on career tracks that may limit their choices. Any post-secondary planning should help students explore without restricting their options. It is often not until students are in their twenties that they are drawn to a particular profession or vocation. A student's focus on auto mechanics early in his high school years, for example, should not preclude him from taking courses that would enable the student to pursue college should he change his mind about post-secondary pursuits.

Schools should broaden choices for students by providing alternative ways for students to master material and stay on track, e.g., regular class, shorten time to earn credit, online tutorial at student's own pace, allow use of end-of-course exams for students who fail courses, summer courses, tutoring, work with college students, or independent learning projects with experts in the community, etc. Students who fail due to excessive absences to make up missed time need options in order to get credit for work done. Schools should be flexible as to when students take certain classes. Delaying some curricular areas to ensure reading and math mastery is achieved first may be indicated, as the richness of other curricular areas will be severely diminished by weak literacy.

We must encourage students to stay in school even if they won't graduate with their classmates. An education is more important than a graduation with fellow students.

Consider how collective bargaining agreements tie the hands of management and individual teachers from instituting creative, flexible programs to meet diverse student needs. Ensure that collective bargaining encompasses mandatory subjects only so as to protect management rights and flexibility to best organize instruction and to deploy time, people and other resources.

Ensure local school leaders are accountable to the public and have the authority and flexibility to motivate all students to achieve the academic mission of the schools. Flexibility is needed to provide alternatives such as that given students at the Life Skills Center of Miami-Dade. These students were destined for a life of crime before they found the alternative charter school. The students are responding to the motivational message that appears in the school's lab, "Minimum effort. Minimum wage." The Center for Education Reform reports that, "The at-risk kids, who range from 16 to 21 years old and are mainly dropouts from conventional public schools, have found pride and a new interest in education at Life Skills Center. The school's daily four-hour sessions stress core classes along with important life skills, including how to interview for jobs and how to pay bills, allowing students who are working full time or raising a child on their own to gain a high school diploma and leave a dead-end life of crime or minimum wage jobs behind. More than 100 students are on the school's waiting list, hoping to seize this opportunity to turn their lives around."

Increase charter schools to develop schools that can meet the needs of unique student populations and student interests.

Education of all students is the goal—not training or compliance to a one-size-fits-all system focused primarily on the world of work. Education is about opening up choices, not limiting choices or pre-determining which options are available to certain students. Those running public schools must remember that citizens are not cogs in the wheel of the state. Rather, the state serves the interests of the people. Students' educations should prepare them to be good citizens and good people whether *they* choose college, workforce training, entrepreneurialism, or another postsecondary pursuit.

Teacher Representation

Exclusive bargaining by a teacher union imposes a one-size-fits-all model that focuses on compliance with a union contract rather than on student achievement and excellence. It hinders meeting student needs and the ability to capitalize on individual teacher talents. It shuts nonmember teachers out of the decision-making process, can contribute to staff coercion, and can create a hostile, polarized environment that damages the educational culture of the school.

Exclusive bargaining often results in inordinate third-party control over issues that should be left to the board, the administration, and the community. School management should limit bargaining language to mandatory subjects and protect the rights of management and the community to direct issues of budget, curriculum, education delivery models, etc.

Teachers should be allowed to, but not forced to, negotiate collectively. Teachers should be allowed to choose their own professional representation and yet remain respected professional participants in the educational system. Teachers should be allowed to individually opt out of the union negotiated collective bargaining contract. If these teachers have chosen not to be members of the union, why should they be held hostage to a contract negotiated against their will by an organization that does not reflect their personal or professional values? This onerous burden on nonunion teachers is an unnecessary construct of state labor law. As such, it is both unjust for teachers and is, likewise, ineffective for student achievement.

Teachers' rights under Idaho's Right to Work law should be enforced to ensure schools function as free marketplaces of ideas.

Teachers' rights to organize locally without compulsory ties to a state or national union best respects local needs and community culture.

Prioritize Funding

Too many unfunded mandates and regulations are hampering the ability to direct money to programs that work. Additionally, many education programs stem from good intentions but don't produce the desired results. They continue to drain money from proven strategies.

Eliminate programs that are ineffective and keep regulations to a minimum. Are there more cost-effective ways to produce better student achievement? Redirect dollars as indicated.

Audit academic and fiscal programs to determine efficient and effective use of dollars to accomplish a rigorous academic mission.

Prioritize funding of high school redesign to first target schools needing improvement. Middle and high schools with large numbers of students who are behind should receive assistance in revising master schedules to provide these students with the extra instruction time they need for math and reading. Teachers in these schools should receive additional training to “catch up” their reading and math programs.

In conclusion, Northwest Professional Educators appreciates this opportunity to participate in the dialogue aimed at helping Idaho students achieve their hopes and dreams!

Sincerely,



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