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## Restructuring Schools for Early Adolescent Learners

By Mark Crockett

**Reforms in education often neglect the ability of students to think rationally; gather, evaluate, and use data; and apply knowledge.**

**M**uch discussion about educational reform does little to address factors that truly affect teaching and learning. Declining SAT scores, poor performance by American students on international assessment measures, and lack of adequate job skills by high school graduates are often cited as evidence that public education needs to return to the "basics."\* But the "basics" are what most American classrooms and schools already emphasize.

John Goodlad (1984) summarized this emphasis on the "basics" of instruction in *A Place Called School*:

If predominance of rote learning, memorization, and paper-and-pencil activity is what people have in mind in getting schools back to the basics, they probably should rest assured that this is where most classrooms are and always have been.

Reforms in education are too frequently of the top-down variety that focus on such peripheral issues as time on task, basic

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skills instruction, increased graduation requirements, or longer school days. What is usually neglected is the ability of students to think rationally; to gather, evaluate, and use data; and to apply knowledge to meaningful problems and issues.

Public education does need to adjust and adapt to meet the needs of a rapidly changing society. But the reform effort to revitalize and restructure American education should be built carefully on a solid foundation of research that makes success likely because it takes teaching and learning seriously. This may be particularly important at the middle level, a time in schooling when early adolescents are increasingly susceptible to behaviors that may diminish their ability to be academically, personally, and socially productive.

### Organization for Instruction

The challenges and demands of teaching are well documented. Each school day caring teachers help students to make important learning connections. Each day teachers touch students' lives in meaningful ways.

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\*Interested readers are referred to a growing body of evidence (see, e.g., David Berliner, Gerald Bracey, Harold Hodgkinson, Michael Kirst, Iris Rotberg, the Sandia Report) that refutes these assertions.

The organized structure of schooling, however, presents serious problems. Responding to the various needs of 25 elementary students is demanding and exhausting, and trying to teach and meet the needs of five or six classes of up to 30 students each may be virtually impossible (Goodlad, 1984). Interdisciplinary teaming, flexible scheduling, and common learning experiences may alleviate much of the stress inherent in traditional schooling.

**The discovery of personal meaning is essential to effective learning.**

Interdisciplinary teaming allows teachers to work collaboratively to meet the academic and personal needs of students. Further, the team serves as a support group for individual teachers and as a source of morale when times get tough (Carnegie, 1989). The team approach (used increasingly in business organizations) can be used to orient new teachers to school programs and practices—usually referred to as mentoring—and to promote shared decision making and professional collegiality (George and Stevenson, 1989). Interdisciplinary team organization increases opportunities for integrating content from the various subject disciplines into class-

room activities, and it helps teachers develop better understanding of students as individuals.

Learning does not naturally happen in discrete 40 or 50-minute blocks of time. Why should school days be structured that way? Flexible scheduling allows teachers—or teams of teachers—to carve out larger blocks of time into units that fit the instructional needs of the students with whom they work. Time can be adjusted to suit curricular priorities or important events. Through flexible scheduling, time may be used by teachers and students as an ally for, rather than seen as an obstacle to, learning.

Implementing a common set of learning expectations for all students reduces educational disparity, helps students reach their personal potential, and more effectively prepares students for citizenship. A common set of learning expectations that is based on shared philosophy of how students learn, and anchored by the assumption that all students can learn, is the foundation on which equal educational opportunity and integrative learning are built.

### Active Learning

The discovery of personal meaning is essential to effective learning. Students (and adults) learn best through experiential activities that help them integrate new ideas and information

into their store of knowledge. Interactions among students (group assignments, class discussions, debates and simulations) facilitate their acquisition and development of personal meaning.

Adolescents are motivated to learn when learning tasks are developmentally appropriate, relevant to their lives in some way, challenging yet attainable, and likely to enhance positive self-esteem (Beane, 1991; Covington, 1984a, 1984b; Eccles and Midgley, 1989; Goodlad, 1984). The key to tapping this motivation well rests on the premise that learning is personal, takes time, and can be facilitated. The following principles of learning apply:

- Personal motivation enhances learning, and learners are more likely to use data and ideas that have personal meaning or are relevant to needs and problems.
- Learning takes time, and learning works best when it is experiential.
- Learning is unique and personal; everybody can learn, but they do it at different rates and in different ways.
- Learning is an intellectual and emotional process, and learning can be facilitated by cooperation and collaboration.

Effective education builds on motivated students. Instead of narrowly focusing on time on task, for example, educators would do better to see that during instructional time stu-

dents are actively involved in learning, and remain engaged when instructional time is increased (Goodlad, 1984). Instead of homogeneous grouping by ability, students might be grouped heterogeneously and given frequent opportunities to work cooperatively with others on assignments in thematic curricula (Carnegie Council, 1989; Epstein, 1987, 1990; Goodlad, 1984; Oakes, 1985; Oakes and Lipton, 1992; Slavin, 1987, 1990).

Learning is a constructive process that requires physical and/or cognitive action (Wadsworth, 1984). Group discussion of problems and issues is an instructional approach ideally suited to adolescents (George et al., 1992). Students learn that others do not necessarily think like them. They learn to value interdependence and appreciate individual differences (George et al., 1992). Cooperative learning groups, used correctly, lead to higher achievement and deeper understanding in virtually all subject areas and at all grade levels (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1992; Slavin, 1990).

### Citizenship

Democratic values (equality, freedom, justice, tolerance, etc.) are the cornerstones of American society. Since public education is the common thread in the social fabric of American democracy, democratic values have a special place in the curriculum.

Students receive few opportunities in school to make decisions or to learn about social problems through participatory experiences. However, students between the ages of 10 and 18 usually see the number of family rules decrease while opportunity for adolescent participation in decision making increases (Epstein, 1987). Schools and classrooms need to reflect that.

**Democratic values (equality, freedom, justice, tolerance, etc.) are the cornerstones of American society.**

American society is changing rapidly. If we expect our students to be able to solve the complex problems of the future, then we must give them experiences in problem solving now. If we expect them to become informed, involved citizens, schools must provide them with ample opportunities to grow and develop in that direction.

### Communitarianism

Successful schools emphasize more than academics. They also create environments that nurture social development (Lipsitz, 1984; Rogers, 1983).

Creating and extending a sense of community within a school can be

facilitated by including students, parents, and teachers in decision making, by developing and improving advisory programs for students, by establishing school-business partnerships and parental outreach programs, and by adding community service projects to the formal or informal school curriculum (Carnegie Council, 1989; Council of Chief State School Officers, 1992; George et al., 1992; Lipsitz, 1984). There are many ways to create and maintain a sense of community in schools. It is imperative, though, that schools acknowledge the importance of and take the lead in attending to the developing social needs of students.

One way to create a sense of community in schools is to group students and teachers in teams to foster the feeling of membership. This practice may be especially beneficial to youths making the transition from an elementary to a middle level school. Teaming, however it is envisioned, helps to reduce the impersonalness of a large school population so that students and teachers become more authentically involved with each other.

Advisory programs can help students develop close relationships with peers and teachers. Paul George and his colleagues suggest that advisory programs serve at least five distinct purposes that relate to and enhance the sense of community in the middle level school. Advisory programs:

- Supplement and augment formal guidance services
- Enhance a student's sense of belonging, thus meeting the need for a strong affiliation with a group of peers within the school
- Can be used as a catalyst for ethical discussions, personal decision making, and group decision making in solving school-related problems
- Can help teachers become better informed about the students in their group, so they can serve as advisers and mediators for students when needed
- Lead to the "building of intergenerational partnerships based on mutual understanding, advocacy, and loyalty," thereby meeting a powerful need of adolescents (George et al., 1992).

Parental involvement programs are important because they connect the home with the school. When parents are either directly or indirectly enlisted in promoting the school's mission, the quality of the school and the education children receive may be enhanced (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1992). Ideas to increase parental involvement include orientation programs for parents on the developmental characteristics of adolescents and research-based "best practices" of instruction; invitations to parents to visit school, observe in classrooms, and take part in school activities; the development

of parent handbooks that list school rules and regulations, set forth learning expectations, and articulate a school philosophy of learning; and parental seats on school councils or improvement committees so that parents have vested interests in fundamental school decision making.

Linking the school community more tightly to the community at large creates a connection between schooling and lifelong learning that continues when formal education ends. The community is seen as an extension of the classroom (Beane, 1990). Partnerships between community organizations and schools are useful in broadening and deepening social perspectives of students and in securing needed resources. Community service projects offer students and schools valuable opportunities to promote the general welfare of the community and its citizens (Carnegie Council, 1989; Lipsitz, 1984).

### **Communication and Leadership**

There is ample evidence to suggest that there is a serious theory-practice dilemma in our schools, and perhaps this is especially true at the middle level (Beane, 1990; Eccles and Midgley, 1989; Epstein, 1990; Epstein and Mac Iver, 1990; Goodlad, 1984; Midgley and Urdan, 1992). Instructional practices are too often incongruent with "best practices" identified

by research. Subject matter is not usually relevant to students, and instructional techniques are not usually varied. Principals value basic skills instruction over higher level thinking skills and citizenship, and many, if not most, teachers do not know how to teach for higher order thinking (Epstein, 1990; Goodlad, 1984). The organizational structure of schools may actually coerce teachers into a traditional mode of instruction.

For change to occur, there must exist in a school a common sense or vision of purpose regarding why change is needed and what changes need to be made (Senge, 1990; Urdan, Beck, and Midgley, 1992). Communication between students, teachers, administrators, and community members is necessary to answer these questions. Without effective communication, it is improbable, perhaps impossible, for the entire school community to unite in a shared commitment to school improvement.

Building leadership is crucial to effecting change (Epstein, 1990; Epstein and Mac Iver, 1990). The principal must be a true leader; not an autocrat, but a motivator, a helper, a problem solver, a risk taker, and a visionary; in other words, a model. The principal must be willing to help develop and finance training programs that assist teachers in getting from where they are to where they want to go.

### Professional Development

Inservice and staff development programs will differ in each school. However, research studies confirm the need for the practical application of human growth and development knowledge to the classroom, and for training in the development of teaching strategies for high-level thinking (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1992; George et al., 1992). Schools in the process of restructuring might create school councils or improvement teams charged with articulating a philosophy of learning, assessing the magnitude and direction of change needed, and enlisting the support of staff and community.

Whatever the form of restructuring, time is an absolutely essential element. Teaching is exhausting work, and teachers already feel stressed in coping with the various roles and responsibilities placed on them. No matter what a staff determines it needs in the way of inservice and professional development, time must be allocated for planning, dialogue and discussion, and reflection. If the time element is disregarded or minimized, restructuring efforts may end up "on the shelf" like so many other well-intended reforms (Purnell and Hill, 1992).

### Conclusion

Early adolescence is a unique and dynamic period in the lives of students. Young girls and boys are exper-

riencing dramatic change in their cognitive, emotional, physical, and social growth and development, all of which have implications for their capacity to learn. Thus, middle level reform efforts would do well to focus on helping schools fit students, rather than making students fit schools.

Restructuring middle level education calls for broad, fundamental, and multi-faceted changes in schooling. This change in the nature of schooling should be based on a clear articulation of how students learn, and supported by programs, practices, and expectations that are congruent. Perhaps the essence of middle level restructuring is the resolution of the theory-practice dilemma that currently plagues early adolescent education toward a common goal of positively affecting adolescents.

Effective education builds on the innate motivation of students to learn. It builds on practices and policies that facilitate thinking and problem solving. Indeed, our form of democratic governance is increasingly dependent upon a citizenry that not only accepts democratic principles but also has the ability to make knowledgeable decisions on complex issues. If our democratic nation is to survive and improve over time, then schools will need to focus on more authentic learning processes for students. School communities that improve the developmental fit

between students, curriculum, instruction, and assessment can enhance higher order thinking, good citizenship, and lifelong learning. ~B

The viewpoints expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the Virginia Department of Education.

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## School-Based Management

### School Improvement and Restructuring: A Threefold Approach

By John J. DiNatale

**Successful implementation of school-based management is a critical element in school improvement and restructuring efforts.**

School-based management can succeed only if it involves all those individuals who are responsible for implementing decisions at the school level. Those individuals include the principal, teachers, parents, school board members, and district-level staff. While the district level has often controlled school improvement in a traditional organization, a greater degree of autonomy must be fostered. While central office administrators should remain involved throughout the process of school improvement, this involvement must be exhibited by support of the building level processes and active participation in innovation and change.

It is not enough for boards of education and central level administrators to believe in participatory management and decentralization at the building level. Central level leaders must also

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