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Improving the Schools of Today

Inventing the Schools of Tomorrow

RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

Twelfth Grade: Wasteland or World of Opportunity?

In a Nutshell

Many critics say that 12th grade is an academic wasteland. Most requirements have been completed, schools relax supervision for seniors, and many students work long hours outside of school. Increasingly, though, states and districts are preparing innovations to help kids earn college credit, transition to the workplace, or get technical education. Some programs fit into existing school structures, others are pretty radical. All seek to reclaim the “lost” or “wasted” senior year.

For a long time, the senior year has enjoyed a special place in both the education system and in adolescent legend and lore about high school. In fact, in a recent informal survey of doctoral students in education at a major research university in which they were asked to recall the most significant and important events from their senior year in high school (excluding romantic or other amorous encounters), more than 90% of these 90 students reported a social or “status” event (such as Senior Skip Day or the Senior Trip) rather than anything remotely resembling an academic or transition-to-adulthood experience. We even have a name for this condition: “senioritis” – the opportunity to “blow off” a year of schooling without very serious consequences.

The reasons for this relatively depressing finding can be summed up pretty succinctly: for many, perhaps most, high schools, especially those without special programs or interventions, the senior year is an academic wasteland. For the vast majority of students, state accountability testing is behind them, early admission decisions by colleges relieve the pressure of maintaining high grades, college admissions testing is probably completed, and most of the credits needed for graduation have been secured. Struggling students, if they make it to the senior year without dropping out or moving to a GED track, are kept busy with preparing for state mandated testing and credit recovery, many of them attending part time in order to get work experience outside of the school in preparation for entry into the work force upon graduation.

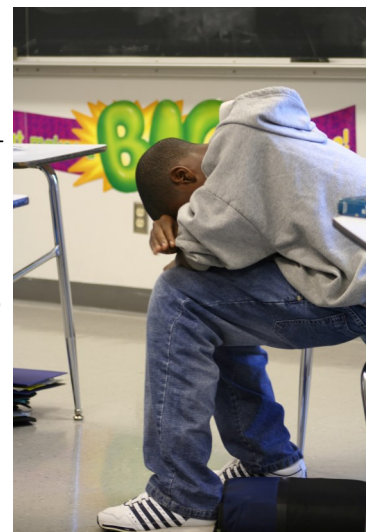
The senior year has special social and ceremonial status as well. Many schools honor their seniors with special events, more lax regulation and supervision, and lighter academic schedules. These special privileges hearken back to a time when most students did not either plan for or need to prepare for higher education. It marked the end of their education, not the transition to another phase. This hold-over has produced what some education writers have called “a huge waste of time, opportunity and money!” (Bernstein, 2013).

What’s the Problem?

The problems with the senior year are many and complex. They are created by state and local policy as well as tradition and local cultures.

Academic Requirements. Requirements vary by state and district, but if students progress at a relatively normal pace through the first 3 years of high school, there isn’t much left to do in the last year. Ironically, this affects both high and low achievers. College-bound kids have already attained early admission, and most schools have a silent agreement that once a student has been admitted to college, they will earn at least passing grades in the courses they are taking in their senior year. Furthermore, most state testing programs require 9th or 10th grade level content and performance, so there is little incentive to excel in order to meet high state standards.

The lower performing students still enrolled in school are scrambling to amass the credits they need to graduate and are typically assigned to remedial or credit-recovery courses that may focus on only one or two subjects. So they, too, have greatly reduced academic schedules. By the second semester of the senior year, most students’ fates are sealed, so motivation to strive for better performance is pretty low.



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According to the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) only about one-third of American students are enrolled in advanced mathematics or science courses – or any non-remedial math or science courses – in their senior year. That is the lowest of any nation included in the study. Even students who did well in high school are shocked when they arrive at college and find they cannot take credit-bearing courses until they pass English and math placement tests. Because many of them took their last mathematics course as juniors, they have forgotten much of the algebra, geometry and trigonometry they once knew, so they find themselves in remedial courses at considerable personal and public expense.

Work. American students work long hours. Those over 18 are treated as adults in most states, so few restrictions are placed on their employment. "No other advanced country expects students to work, or permits them to work long hours just to have spending money." (National Commission on the High School Senior Year – NCHSSY, 2001).

Psychologist Laurence Steinberg (1996) found that seniors spend as much as 15-20 hours per week at work, 20-25 hours/week socializing, 15 hours in extra-curricular activities, and 15 hours watching television or interacting with digital media. As a result, they have little time left for studying. Sadly, students are able to maintain such schedules because schools and parents do not demand that significant time be spent on homework or school projects.

K-12 and Post-Secondary Alignment. According to the NCHSSY study, there is generally poor curriculum alignment between K-12 programs and post-secondary institutions. That has improved somewhat in the past decade, but too many students enter college or technical school, or even the workplace, without the skills necessary to succeed. According to Ross Miller, "Students may easily encounter four different sets of requirements governing what they need to do to 1) graduate from high school, 2) be admitted to college, 3) be permitted to enroll in credit-bearing college courses, or 4) get a job." As a result, their preparation for any of these options is usually incomplete.

Rethinking the Senior Year

Can the senior year be salvaged from its historic doldrums? In some states and local communities, the answer is a resounding "yes." Some actions to bolster the senior year modify existing requirements and expectations; others revamp the last year completely. Most of these interventions have several things in common:

- They reduce wasted time in the senior year.
- They link special privileges (e.g., out-of-school experiences) to academic and career goals, maturity, and success in school rather than simply rewarding senior "status."
- They give students a head start on college or other post-secondary education and training.
- They link students to high interest, career-focused fields.
- They boost academic rigor.
- They provide "authentic," real-world learning and service experiences and capitalize on student leadership abilities.

Transition Programs

These programs treat the senior year as a major transition step – from high school to post-secondary education or to work and career. The emphasis is upon building skills, knowledge and networks that facilitate success in post-secondary life.

At Chelsea High School (MA), the ExPo (Exploring Possibilities) program showcases the features of most successful 12th grade innovations:

- Create smaller learning communities for 11th and 12th grade students and teachers.



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- Offer an innovative curriculum that integrates career and technical education and academics to prepare students for both college and career.
- Make curriculum more meaningful for students by connecting their classes to their interests.
- Connect students to the community by partnering with businesses, non-profits, city government and post secondary institutions.
- Expose students to many career options and show them the path to achieve their goals.

The initial program at Chelsea focused on two areas: Health and Life Sciences and Law and Public Policy. Five other “communities” are planned as the program grows.

College Credit Programs

Dozens of programs exist that allow students to earn college credit while attending high school. These range from Advanced Placement classes taught by high school teachers, to dual-enrollment classes (college classes that count for both high school graduation and college degrees), and actual college level courses taught by college instructors in high schools or on nearby campuses.

In Wyoming, students can remain in high school and, in partnership with local community colleges, complete their first year of college by the time they graduate. If they stay in high school a fifth year, they can complete a second year of college. This program is particularly helpful for controlling family costs in a largely rural state with only one 4-year college, although other states (including Oregon) and more urban districts are experimenting with these programs to ease the transition to college, especially for first-generation college attendees. Search the internet for “earning college credit in high school [name of state]” for programs operating in other states as well.



Authentic Learning and Products

In other schools, students engage in authentic projects and create products that reflect high levels of learning, typically by preparing electronic portfolios documenting their achievements. In some schools, these activities co-exist with the existing curriculum; in others, they are the curriculum.

At Al Kennedy High School (OR), creating sustainability in contemporary life is the curriculum of the school. Students study everything from organic gardening and water management to beekeeping, fish farming, and bicycle-making. The products are so concrete and authentic that they are donated to local food banks, sold, or used by the students themselves for other projects. Kennedy is certainly an ex-

traordinary example of this kind of authenticity, but other schools create authentic experiences in more conventional school settings as well. (Hansen, 2011).

New Tech High School in Napa, CA, is designed “to inspire students to be responsible, resilient, and personally successful in the rapidly changing 21st century, and to be a student-centered model for educational innovation.” Students complete major projects – such as a recent collection of student-made films on suicide prevention used in the county to promote Mental Health Awareness Month. The capstone is an on-going electronic portfolio in which students keep the products of their work to document achievement of the school’s (and the State of California’s) core goals.

San Diego’s High Tech High School tapped corporate sponsors to actually create a 21st Century learning space that includes individual work stations for students, project studios where kids plan and design products, construction labs (a biocom lab, animation lab, and engineering lab) where students create useful products, and meeting/presentation spaces for visiting lecturers, mentors, and site supervisors. Students are expected to complete sophisticated, authentic projects – ranging from entrepreneurial start-ups to community service initiatives – which are evaluated by experts, consumers, and community leaders. The school attempts to make all learning experiences completely “authentic,” from planning through production to evaluation.

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Bob Pearlman writes, “The adult workplace of the 21st century is project-based. Employees work individually and in teams. They write memos, create PowerPoint presentations, and publish Web sites to present their plans to their coworkers, their managers, their clients, and their professional communities. [Schools like those described above] are, above all, workplaces for students, similar to today’s adult workplaces. These small high schools give students spaces to work in and learn—individual work-cubicles, project rooms, presentation rooms, advisory rooms, and real-world workplaces—and technology tools to do their work, to learn through projects, and to turn projects into products that they can exhibit and share with others.”

Internships and Mentorships

High schools are also starting to use internships and mentorships in ways that are directly related to workplace transition or career interests. In Orange County (CA), a foundation sponsored internships for high school students to work in area nonprofit agencies, thereby magnifying the effects of their philanthropy by supporting both the students and the nonprofits. The students were placed in positions related to their career interests (e.g., environmental science, human services, medical services, youth agencies, etc.) and had to maintain high academic performance in order to keep their internship. In addition, students had to complete a 10 week pre-internship training program on the contemporary workplace taught by one of the district’s teachers.

The results were outstanding: both the students and the nonprofits rated the experience as “transformative.” Students benefited from “doing good” in an actual 21st Century workplace, and the agencies were delighted with the interns’ energy, commitment, technological savvy and creativity (Johnston, 2010). Similar programs exist in many other communities, even those that are quite small. In some cases, internships are arranged with adults in the school itself: teachers, administrators, athletic directors, and other staff. This allows students to develop productive adult relationships at the same time they are refining workplace skills and learning workplace ethics and behavior.

Goodbye, 12th Grade – and Maybe 11th, Too

As radical as it sounds, there are also numerous proposals to do away with the 12th grade altogether (and maybe the 11th, too). In Ohio, efforts are under way to better align secondary education with college, including preparing students so they do not need remedial courses when they enter college and offering work-force training for those who don’t want to attend college. In addition, officials are encouraging students to earn college credits in high school so they could graduate earlier and save money. (Farkas, 2012).



Because it is unlikely that states could absorb early graduates into the workforce, most of these plans call for some kind of continuing education. Formal high school education may end at the 11th grade, but it is with the intention of placing students in post-secondary education programs, technical training options, or actual skilled apprenticeships. One superintendent observed, “we’re not talking about just turning a bunch of 16-year-olds loose on the world.”

In some states, students can leave high school whenever they have secured enough credits and passed state assessments. Florida requires all high school students to complete at least one course online, and many opt into full-time online programs offered through the Florida Virtual School or local districts. As a result, more and more students are completing their high school education without direct supervision by the school and without specific time-in-school requirements. In practice, this amounts to eliminating the 12th grade so students can get on with their post-high-school lives.

Follow the Money

Some policy makers are even calling for a shift in funding because of the evidence in favor of early childhood interventions. In this scenario, state funding would cover students from age 4 through 11th grade, eliminating grade 12. In Ohio, an education task force is considering making the 12th grade a “neutral year” – where the funding follows the student. (Farkas, 2012). If they stay in

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high school, the district gets the subsidy; if they go to college or technical school, the college or tech school gets it. If they enter an official apprenticeship, state funds would support their training in that setting. Already-strapped school districts are not happy about this kind of plan, but according to advocates it's forcing schools to make real strides in improving the 12th grade experience.

The Bottom Line

Social, economic, political and demographic changes are driving major initiatives to change the way we educate high school students. New technologies and new ways of funding schools are beginning to create some very innovative approaches to secondary education in general and the senior year in particular. Given these radical changes and even more radical proposals, it is not very likely that the old privilege-driven, senioritis-prone experience will last much longer.

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