

Oregon School District - Visioning For the Future

I. Building Upon Accountability

In 2004, the Oregon School District Board of Education adopted a position paper in which we addressed the factors by which the District would assess "success" in the District and the structures around which we would measure it. Since that time, we have been on a steady and deliberate path of implementation of those accountability measures. We have learned a great deal.

We found out that it was hard to identify what data sources are the best assessment of student achievement (we have labeled them Tier 1 indicators). While we adopted Tier 1 indicators for our elementary, intermediate/middle and high schools, we learned through the process of our initial data reviews that there might be other, more meaningful data assessments. We learned that we needed different technologies and tools to pull together all of the data we were using. We learned that to be valid, our assessment techniques needed to be consistent.

More importantly, the process has caused us to step back and take a serious look at the core principles of how we educate our students to find out what set of data best informs us in our practices. Assessment is not just a number at the end of a process. To be truly meaningful, assessment should be directly linked to curriculum, standards and teaching methods. Our goal of establishing an accountability system has enhanced a culture in which our faculty and administrators use data to ask fundamental questions about what it is we are teaching, why we are teaching it, how we are doing so and how we can get better.

This is particularly true when we examine what it means for our students to graduate from Oregon High School. Should graduating simply mean that a student has met the modest credit and course work required by current District policy? Or should it mean something more; namely, that each student leaves us having completed individually established educational goals and acquired the tools and skills necessary to achieve his or her full potential and become a life-long learner. If we believe the latter is the more important assessment, then it should be our ultimate Tier 1 indicator. To measure that outcome requires us to look, for each student, at issues of curriculum - because our graduates will be heading on different paths for which they will need different substantive knowledge bases - and at issues of delivery of that curriculum - because our students learn in individual ways.

If our ultimate accountability goal is to measure whether students who leave Oregon High School with a diploma have achieved their educational goals and have been prepared in that context for their post-high school journey, it is critical that we know the world that we are sending them into, what we need to teach them to be successful in that world and how we can effectively do so.

II. The New World and its Impact Upon Education

The world which our graduates enter is a vastly different place than it was twenty years ago. Numerous authors have commented on this and they universally cite three factors as creating this different world.¹

1. Globalization

Transportation and communication advances have shrunk the world. Immediate and frequent communications and contacts with different cultures are routine and necessary.

2. Digitization

Digitization has revolutionized information sharing through the internet and personal computers. Anyone can access information from anywhere. What can be digitized can be automated. Former high-level tasks which used to be performed by humans, can now be digitized or converted into algorithms and performed by computers or low wage earners in other countries.

3. Individualization

Globalization and digitization have empowered individuals. Empowerment used to be accomplished through governments or corporations under a vertical command and control structural hierarchy. In a world with constant access to information regardless of location, a hierarchical command and control structure is not a prerequisite for personal success. Interactions, whether political, business or personal, can take place across the world with anyone without the need for a superimposed hierarchy.

The focus on these driving influences of the changing world has been on their impact on business and governments. However, these three factors also have a profound effect on how we educate our students.

The prevailing educational model mirrors the historical vertical command and control business models of the 19th and 20th centuries. It is predicated on attendance at specific locations and at specific times. It processes all students through a uniform curriculum which is assessed on a macro basis through identical graduation standards and criteria. The school year and day is predicated upon an 18th century agrarian calendar. We question whether that model is relevant or educationally sound.

¹ Perhaps the most popular being Thomas Friedman's best selling "The World is Flat."

The current educational structure is fundamentally flawed.

Some signs of problems in the current public education structure include unmotivated learners reflected in lower academic achievement levels, high incidence of alcohol, drug and violence issues, increasing drop-out rates, particularly among the poor and minorities, and the rise in alternate delivery systems (private and virtual schools).

Several current studies advocate drastic reform to the current public education system. Two recent ones are significant.

The first is a national study by the National Center on the Education and the Economy which was funded, in part, through Anne E. Casey and Bill and Melinda Gates Foundations. It issued a report in 2006 titled "Tough Choices Tough Times – The Report of the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce." The Commission concluded that the structure of the American educational system is deeply flawed and that the "core problem is that our education and training systems were built for another era, an era in which most workers needed only a rudimentary education. *It is not possible to get where we have to go by patching that system.*"²

Therefore, the Commission envisioned a vastly different structure in which to educate America's children. To allow our children to compete in a more competitive and intertwined world, the Commission called for a restructuring of curriculum and assessments to match 21st century skills. It also recommended the creation of universal Board Exams at the completion of 10th grade to assess whether a student takes a path through a two-year technical program, two-year program designed to enable the student to transfer to a four-year college or a four-year program. Those in the four-year path would again be tested at the completion of their high school academic preparation. More significantly, the Commission believes that the current structure for running schools is fundamentally flawed and calls for the centralized control of school systems and the abandonment of locally controlled schools in favor of independent-contractor operated schools.

The second significant report issued last year was from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction High School Task Force which was convened to "ensure that Wisconsin high school students continue to graduate with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in postsecondary education, the high-skills workplace, and as citizens of our global economy."³ In assessing the state of education in Wisconsin, the Task Force concluded that "serious achievement gaps exist, and the preponderance of evidence indicates that achievement and opportunity gaps will only be closed with determined efforts."⁴ *One of its primary recommendations was the need to focus on individual students rather than a "one size fits all" system so that "pathways to success not be limited."* It recognized the need for rigorous, authentic learning using multiple instructional and assessment strategies; high schools that establish a personal connection

² "Tough Choice Tough Times" Executive Summary, p. 8.

³ Wisconsin Department of Public Instructions High School Task Force Report, Executive Summary, p. 1.

⁴ Id.

for each student; learning plans that help individual students accomplish their goals, and solid business and community partnerships.

The Board agrees with the assessment of these two vastly different committees that the rapid changes in the world require us to critically examine the way in which we educate our children. We feel the effects of the changing world in our own careers and understand the need to adapt to those changes if we are to succeed in our career paths. When we sit at expulsion hearings, we see, far too often, the ways in which we as a District have failed to meet the needs of students who do not function well in our current model; for example, those students who have challenging family environments, those with different learning styles and those who are disconnected from stable peer groups. We have come to recognize that true accountability is not just the creation of a group of relevant, numerical criteria, but also the building of a curriculum and delivery system that makes those criteria meaningful for all of our students.

Therefore, the Board believes that it is imperative to immediately undertake a District-wide visioning process to chart a course for the future of the District. It is the right time given the rapid changes occurring in the world. If we want our children to be successful and prepared for that world, we need to make that happen now. The visioning process must look at the three fundamental areas which comprise the education process; curriculum content, curriculum delivery and assessment.

III. The Visioning Process

The Board believes that the District must critically examine all aspects of how we educate our children, including the content of our curriculum, how it is delivered and how we measure whether our students have mastered it. We need to do this at all levels of our District, from early childhood through graduation.

A. Curriculum content

The Oregon School District has long aligned its curriculum internally with state standards and we should continue to organize and evaluate our curriculum within the context of a standards-based model. As we envision what our District will look like in the future, we need to ensure that our curriculum has the following characteristics: it guides our students to learn how to learn; it makes them use critical thinking skills; it is relevant and meaningful to all; it establishes high standards and expectations; and it prepares them to interact and communicate effectively with people from backgrounds different from their own.

Our curriculum should cultivate in our students the desire and skills to be lifelong learners. This will be particularly critical in the future.

The first, and most important, ability you can develop in a flat world is the ability to ‘learn how to learn’ – to constantly absorb, and teach yourself, new ways of doing old things or new ways of doing new things. That is

an ability every worker should cultivate in an age when part or all of many jobs are constantly going to be exposed to digitization, automation, and outsourcing, and where new jobs, and whole new industries, will be churned up faster and faster. In such a world, it is not only what you know but how you learn that will set you apart.”⁵

In this digital age, students can access information from anywhere in the world at any time. What will distinguish students in the future is not whether they know certain information, but whether they have learned to think critically and creatively utilizing information they can readily obtain. Teaching these skills enables students "to analyze an argument, think critically, understand quantitative arguments and reasoning, speak persuasively and write effectively. These are the skills that help us function effectively in our professions and, more importantly, think through moral and ethical issues of our lives”.⁶

If students are not engaged in the learning process, they will not learn. We need to inspire their creativity and interest in learning. To do this, we must make learning relevant to each individual. The Wisconsin Task Force recommended that "all students have access to a variety of options for learning, including the arts; co-curricular activities, work-based learning, service learning, and accelerated offerings, to fully engage all types of learners.”⁷

Our students no longer compete just against students in this community, state and country. They now compete against students from all over the world. Competition based upon academic skills is significantly greater. “This is a world in which a very high level of preparation in reading, writing, speaking, mathematics and the arts will be indispensable for everything that comes after for most members of the workforce.”⁸ *We need to ensure that our students are challenged, that our curriculum is rigorous and that our expectations are high.*

Finally, we need to recognize that not only does this global competition require us to establish vigor in our curriculum, but also that we know and understand those with whom our students will interact. The District is homogenous, but we have seen increasing amounts of diversity in our District. Our students' interactions when they leave the District will be with a much more diverse community, state, country and world. While we have terrific programs in place through our diversity studies course, foreign exchange programs, sister school arrangements, and foreign language programs, we need to continue to find more ways to provide our students and staff with continued exposure

⁵ Thomas Friedman, "The World is Flat" (2d ed), p. 302.

⁶ Michael Beseda, “College Admission: As if Learning Mattered” in College Unranked, ed. Lloyd Thacker, Harvard University Press (2005), p. 126.

⁷ Wisconsin Department of Public Instructions High School Task Force Report, p. .3.

⁸ *Tough Choices or Tough Times*, Executive Summary, pp. 6, 7.

to different cultures, both within and outside of the United States. We have already begun this task through the World Language Task Force, which is examining ways to bring foreign languages and cultures to our elementary schools.

B. Curriculum delivery

Students learn differently – at different paces, in different settings and by different means. While we recognize that we provide differentiated learning in our schools, that our teachers use multiple intelligences theories and that we have some ability to create independent study programs at the high school; nonetheless, the District primarily educates our students under a "one size fits all" model. That model is based upon an economy and society that is no longer relevant. Therefore, it is not surprising that the current delivery system works for some, but not all. It is those who become disengaged in their education because the process is not relevant to them who develop issues with truancy, alcohol and drugs, acts of violence and educational failure.

We need to critically examine the box in which we place curriculum content delivery. Technology has opened doors for delivering content in a variety of ways, places and times. Those districts which have by economic necessity been forced to explore virtual delivery, while in a financially worse place than our District, are actually ahead of us in the implementation and understanding of alternate curriculum delivery systems. "(T)he best way to make kids love learning is either to instill in them a sense of curiosity, by great teaching, or stimulate their own innate curiosity by making available to them all the technologies of the flat-world platform."⁹

In addition to looking at the ability to structure delivery differently because of technology advances, we also need to examine the model in which we deliver curriculum because that model is no longer relevant to the world. We need to visualize what a different box might look like. This includes looking at such fundamental issues as the school year, school day and other educational delivery systems. Our focus must be on student achievement. We must look at how best to structure our delivery within the context of determining the model(s) that best help(s) our students achieve, rather than confining our delivery to a historical model and fitting delivery into that model.

C. Assessment

The genesis of this paper came from discussions we had with high school administrators concerning the Tier 1 indicators at the high school. The more we explored that topic, the more we began to realize that the system we had in place at the high school was flawed and that to meaningfully assess our students, we need to consider a model in which each student is evaluated on personalized criteria. While this section examines our assessment of high school students, our belief that we ought to individualize our assessments is applicable at all levels. By looking specifically at the standards by which

⁹ Friedman, p. 304.

the District will measure what is necessary to graduate, we necessarily implicate assessment practices at all levels.

1. **The District's Current Assessment Models**

Currently we have in place Tier 1 indicators for all levels. The current high school indicators are:

- a. The percent of students with all 4's or 5's on subject area outcomes;
- b. Median scale score on WKCE 10th grade test;
- c. Percent of students with growth from 8th grade to 10th grade WKCE at or above the expected growth rate;
- d. Percent of students who graduate with class;
- e. Percent of students who complete at least one course at the highest level in a curricular area; and
- f. Percent of students who earn a Responsibility and Attitude Pass.

As we have begun to work with these indicators, we have realized that they assess only a portion of our high school students. They do not assess those whose post- high school path is toward something other than an academic four-year institution. We do not assess whether we have been successful for students whose careers paths are in the trades, music, arts, and agriculture.

Furthermore, we have District Exit Outcomes that are not assessed or used in any manner to determine whether each graduate has met those standards. They are consistent with much of what we have discussed about the skills necessary for students in the 21st century and we believe they continue to be relevant in the assessment of each student as he/she graduate from the Oregon School District.

In addition to these indicators, all high school classes measure achievement by grades. The high school maintains a student's cumulative grade point average and a ranking of all students in each class. We specially honor those students who are ranked first and second in their class, providing a special emphasis on this evaluation formula. We have serious questions whether our grading system on the whole accurately measures content mastery.

Finally, graduation from the District is based upon criteria established by Board policy many years ago in conjunction with state law. To graduate from Oregon High School, a student must complete 23 high school credits comprised of four in English, three in social studies, two in math, two in science, one and one-half in physical education, one half in health education and the remainder in electives. These criteria tell

us nothing as to whether we have successfully prepared individual students for the world after high school. They tell us nothing about whether we have taken them to their potential. They have no correlation to our District Exit Outcomes.

2. Assessment in the 21st Century

In a global community in which technology provides us with instant access to information and the ability to deliver and adapt that information on a personal level, we ought to be adapting our educational assessment practices accordingly. Many commentators on the subject agree and recommend a model which focuses on individualized assessment. In particular, the Wisconsin Task Force recommends that Wisconsin high schools assess students by means of individualized learning plans.

“All high school redesign models emphasize the need for personal connections.... Having a learning plan helps students focus on their learning styles, goals, and course of action to accomplish those goals. Plans should be developed as students are transitioning to high school and should be reviewed and updated at least annually, including actions that address post-high school plans.”¹⁰

Utilizing individual learning plans for all students allows Districts to individualize instruction for each student based upon the particular needs and goals of each student. In addition, such plans permit the measurement of a student's status on a multitude of factors rather than relying on a single factor that may or may not be relevant to the student.

If ... the goal is to monitor the attainment of individual students with respect to specific curricular goals and standards, then one needs assessments designed to meet that purpose.... In particular, it is now possible to characterize students in terms of multiple aspects of proficiency, rather than a single score; chart students' progress over time, instead of simply measuring performance at a particular point in time; deal with multiple paths or alternative patterns of valued performance; model, monitor and improve judgments based on informed evaluations....¹¹

Our current assessment measures “are designed to measure the acquisition of discipline-based knowledge in the core subjects in the curriculum, but, more often than not, little or nothing is done to measure many of the other qualities that we have suggested may spell the difference between success and failure for the students who will grow up to be the workers of 21st century America: creativity

¹⁰ Wisconsin Department of Public Instructions High School Task Force Report, p. 3.

¹¹ James W. Pellegrino, “Rethinking and Redesigning Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment: What Contemporary Research and Theory Suggests” (November 2006), pp6, 8, and 10.

and innovation, facility with the use of ideas and abstractions, the self-discipline and organization needed to manage one's work and drive it through to a successful conclusion, the ability to function well as a member of a team, and so on.¹²

This individualized approach to assessment is consistent with a trend at universities and colleges toward evaluating high school graduates holistically.

Holistic evaluation entails consideration of all aspects of a student's background and accomplishments, utilizing many different sources of information. These sources typically include biographical information, student essays, a transcript of academic work, standardized test scores, recommendations from teachers and counselors, and, in many cases, personal interviews. .. In the end, holistic evaluation attempts to understand the authenticity of talent, accomplishment, and potential in the context of background and opportunity, or lack thereof. Individualized consideration refers to the fact that individual applicants are considered one by one on their own merits and judged against the overall criteria for selection, never as members of a sub-group or category within the larger applicant pool.¹³

If the District adopted an assessment model in which each student would be evaluated by means of a learning plan, our primary Tier I indicator could be the percent of students who graduate. Graduation would depend upon meeting the criteria established by that student's plan which would include not only requirements universal to all students, but also requirements individual to each student.

IV. Action Plan

The Board directs the Administration to immediately begin a community-wide visioning process to set the course for our District for the next generation. It is the right time to do this. The central question is how do we best facilitate student achievement for each and every student? Everything else follows from our best answer to that question.

Our faculty has done tremendous work over the last twenty years by creating a curriculum and delivery system that is standards-based and by teaching that curriculum in a dynamic and creative way. They have worked hard over the last four years to utilize data to inform their practices. We want our faculty to be a critical component in this

¹² *Tough Choice, Tough Times*, Executive Summary p. 14.

¹³ Karl M Fursenburg: "Admission Selection :Discerning Intrinsic Talents in a Confounding Era" in *College Unranked*, ed. Lloyd Thacker, Harvard University Press (2005), p. 99.

visioning process. We want them to provide us with their expertise and vision to create a District that they will be excited to work in for the next decades.

We have an administrative team in whom we have great confidence. We expect that team to keep us on our path towards continuous improvement. We place no restrictions on what subjects are on the table in the visioning process. However, we particularly request that the visioning process assess the three areas discussed in this paper:

1. We direct the Administration to include in the visioning process a review of our curriculum and bring such recommendations to us which will ensure that our curriculum is relevant to all students and prepares them for a changing world. This includes any recommendations from the World Language Task Force.
2. We direct the Administration to include within the visioning process the manner in which we deliver our curriculum. All issues of delivery are on the table, including the school calendar, school hours, block scheduling, four-year old kindergarten, attendance, pod-casting, virtual schools, alternate schools, dimensions of learning, etc. The Board directs the Administration to bring to us options which will improve the manner in which we deliver our services to all students.
3. The Board directs the Administration to study and report back to the Board on the feasibility of adopting an individualized assessment model that takes into account the following factors:
 - a. Exit outcomes at each school connected to retention and promotion.
 - b. The criteria we use to measure whether a student can graduate.
 1. The minimum level of competence in core academic areas we expect of all of our students regardless of career path.
 2. The development by every student by a certain point of a career path and goals which must be met so as to be able to pursue that path upon graduation.
 3. The standards which a student must demonstrate to show attainment of attributes of character, culture and community.
 - c. The various ways in which an individual assessment model can be structured, which addresses these factors:

1. At what point are the learning plans started and reviewed;
- 2.. Who guides the students through the process (guidance, teachers?), who trains them and what role is expected/required of parents; and,
3. How do we implement this system?

In addition to our faculty and administrative team, we expect that all District constituents have a voice in this process. In addition to the collective wisdom that inclusion brings to the table, we all play a vital role in the way in which we prepare our children for their lives. The visioning process should be structured so that all who wish to have a voice in the process have an opportunity to be heard.

We recognize that recommended changes will bring with them economic and other challenges. In order to afford the new changes, the District will need to find expenditures which are not relevant to our new vision and abandon them. It is our expectation that the administration will bring to us not only recommended changes, but also options for funding those changes, including the abandonment of current expenditure items. This will not be without pain. While it is not easy to let go of old practices and ways of doing business, we must do so if our ultimate goal is to educate our youth for success in the 21st century.

Finally, it is our hope that the visioning process takes us on a bold and innovative course.

V. Conclusion

We have long believed that every child can succeed. We still do. It is our obligation to provide each child with every opportunity to succeed and to structure how we engage them to ensure that they succeed. This is made more difficult in a world which is dramatically changing and that necessarily means that we must change with it. We owe it to our children to make sure that we do.

The Oregon School District Board of Education
June 11, 2007

APPENDIX

1. The learner will demonstrate skills necessary to be a quality producer
 - A. Communicate effectively using a variety of media
 - B. Demonstrate use of appropriate technology
 - C. Demonstrate cooperative independent work skills

2. The learner will demonstrate proficiency in problem solving and critical thinking.
 - A. Identify problems and set goals.
 - B. Gather and analyze relevant information
 - C. Critically evaluate information.
 - D. Develop strategies for attaining goals.
 - E. Implement selected strategy.
 - F. Evaluate process and results

3. The Learner will demonstrate skills and understanding necessary to contribute to local and global communities.
 - A. Understand the importance of individual differences and cultural diversity.
 - B. Understand the importance of responsible citizenship.
 - C. Understand the importance of environmental responsibility.

4. The Learner will develop a substantial knowledge of essential skills.
 - A. Demonstrate proficiency in academic skills, including the arts.
 - B. Demonstrate proficiency in living skills.
 - C. Demonstrate proficiency in employment skills.
 - D. Demonstrate proficiency in technology skills.

5. The Learner will demonstrate skills that foster continued personal growth, learning, responsibility and accountability.
 - A. Set and strive to attain challenging career and educational goals.
 - B. Anticipate and accept consequences of her/his actions.

