

Curriculum Leadership Institute E-Hint

The Case for Academic Leadership

If you haven't already heard, the word is out that American high schools in 20 years will look much different than they do now. While that vision isn't fully clear yet, the ideas currently publicized suggest that high schools will be small (not to exceed 500 students) with a curriculum more like that found in a liberal arts college. The large comprehensive high schools found in urban and suburban centers will be replaced by smaller multi-purpose schools, some of which will be privately run under charters or some other sponsoring entity. Students will apply for admission, identify "majors" relatively early, and be held accountable through rigorous testing and close advisement.

While similar ideas about transforming the high school can be heard in education circles, the most dramatic (such as the descriptions above) are being offered by the business community. Some states now have nonprofit organizations that refer to themselves as *business and education coalitions*, and those groups are often behind such goals as the "65% Principle," which is designed to ensure that at least 65% of a school district's budget is used to directly support classroom teaching and learning. Such business-oriented organizations employ lobbyists and others who conduct studies, create policies, and publicize initiatives.

The coalitions obviously feel they have a right and even an obligation to be concerned about the state of America's schools, and point to evidence that high schools, particularly, are failing to serve the nation's institutions and business organizations. They view with alarm what they consider to be large drop-out rates, poor test scores, and an excessive need for remedial training among entry-level employees and students entering post-secondary training.

The Curriculum Leadership Institute is aware of the growing interest in changing high schools, and is staying abreast of such well-funded initiatives as the Gates Foundation's experiments in a few of America's largest cities. It is our position that some good might come from those and similar initiatives, but we strongly believe that tinkering with school enrollment size and budget allocations constitutes nothing more than nibbling around the edges of the real problem. The real problem, in our opinion, is that many school districts (not just

high schools) don't provide the academic leadership needed to develop, articulate, and follow-up on their view of what learning should be. Consequently, they do not develop and manage a curriculum that systematically helps students achieve that intended goal. Leaders reading this *E-hint*, who are already working with the CLI, may agree with that perspective.

In a recent *NASSP Bulletin* article titled *Academic Leadership in America's Public Schools*, Stu Ervay, founder of the CLI, suggests that the culture for decision-making and action-taking in school districts must be dramatically changed. The following is an excerpt taken from that article.

The CLI defines and applies academic leadership as anything done by a faculty member, administrative leader or professional support person that improves the quantity and quality of student learning. Using that definition, anyone who regularly leads a decision-making and action-taking process in curriculum, instruction, and assessment of student learning can be called an academic leader. True academic leadership can improve conditions associated with teaching and learning in today's schools by including specific processes in administrator and teacher job descriptions, and by strengthening organizational support structures.

Academic leadership has always been important because a teacher's success is contingent on the professional culture in which he or she works, one that either encourages or discourages professional and scholastic growth. New teachers need guidance beyond simple mentoring from experienced peers. They need to know they work in a school or district that dynamically and continuously strives for excellence, and is willing and able to help them become part of that energetic and focused organization.

Schools that use the CLI model are in the process of further developing a cadre of academic leaders, typically among the membership of the Curriculum Coordinating Council. The council's mission is to oversee the development, implementation, management and evaluation of a strong curriculum in grades pre-K through 12. In order to accomplish that task, council members strive to: (1) read professional journals, reports, and other literature, (2) initiate and maintain clearly intellectual or professional interactions with colleagues, (3) participate in courses, workshops or research when possible, (4) work collaboratively with colleagues for developing in-depth teaching materials for the target subject, and (5) work with language so that wording of standards and local curriculum is fully understood and translated for teachers.

Building the case for academic leadership is not simply a matter of changing organizational configurations, but is instead the ability of people in positions of responsibility to become intellectually motivated. Such an intellectual motivation can transform both a district's curriculum and the kind of dynamic decision-making and action-taking that result in a more vigorous learning culture.