

# Curriculum Leadership Institute E-Hint

## The Secondary Education Culture

Numerous and diverse professional cultures can exist in just one school district, caused by distinctions in subjects taught, grade level assignments, specific job descriptions, special categories of service to students, and perceived goals of subunits (usually buildings). The specific culture in this **E-Hint** pertains to secondary education, defined here as high schools that contain grades 9 through 12.

High schools across the country are the targets of criticisms related to (1) size (critics such as Microsoft's Bill Gates want to reduce high school enrollments to no more than 500), (2) mission (viewed primarily as being college preparation), (3) a smorgasbord elective curriculum, (4) allegiance to traditional forms of grading and reporting progress, (5) the inadequacy of twelfth grade requirements, and (6) a frequently perceived over-emphasis on interscholastic sports programs.

However, critics of secondary education should realize it: (1) has many positive characteristics, (2) is in a position to define excellence in the academics and sports, (3) sits atop the vertical grade level hierarchy, and (4) is closest to the post-secondary market and its perceived needs.

The secondary education culture is sometimes one of righteous indignation when it suggests that incoming students from previous grades have been poorly prepared. It is fair to say that a good percentage of high school teachers perceive themselves as being more akin to college professors than their colleagues in the lower public school grades. Therefore, the professional educators they most wish to emulate are their professors, not the teachers they once had in elementary or middle school. In fact, many seasoned high school teachers still accept the lecture and note-taking process for conducting class, and may even stick with text-based assessments and the bell curve approach for evaluating student learning.

The situation is certainly better now than it was 10 to 20 years ago, possibly because high school teachers and administrators see themselves in the same boat with other district colleagues when it comes to complying with NCLB stipulations and meeting AYP requirements. Today, instead of blithely accepting the notion that all students — regardless of their talents and interests — will be admitted to and graduated from a liberal arts college, many high school educators are creating a broader kind of mission

TheodoreSizer, founder of the Coalition of Essential Schools and author of many highly regarded books, has had much to say through the years about how high schools should be reformed. Sizer's ideas are still relevant, and align pretty well with what elementary and middle level educators believe and do, but with a twist. Here are a few of his thoughts:

<b>BASIC SIZER PRINCIPLES</b>	<b>QUOTES TAKEN FROM SIZER'S WRITINGS</b>
<b>A good teacher is a good coach</b>	<i>The only way to learn and think well is by practice. The way a teacher assists this learning is by coaching.</i>
<b>Real learning is developing a "habit of mind"</b>	<i>True education means students who exhibit the right "habits of mind" ask inquiring questions and utilize knowledge in thoughtful ways.</i>

THE SECONDARY EDUCATION CULTURE

<b>Curriculum should go way beyond lists</b>	<i>The average school is "stuck with the notion that a curriculum is primarily a list."</i>
<b>Developing intuitive thinking skills</b>	<i>Schools that always insist on the right answer, with no concern as to how a student reaches it, smother the student's efforts to become an effective intuitive thinker.</i>
<b>Skill development and an intellectual education are compatible approaches</b>	<i>Skills are acquired by a demanding intellectual education</i>
<b>Five imperatives for better schools</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Give room to teachers and students to work and learn in their own, appropriate ways.</i></li> <li>• <i>Insist that students clearly exhibit mastery of their school work.</i></li> <li>• <i>Get the incentives right, for students and for teachers.</i></li> <li>• <i>Focus the students' work on the use of their minds.</i></li> <li>• <i>Keep the structure simple and thus flexible.</i></li> </ul>
<b>Student performance is a better measurement than pencil and paper tests</b>	<i>Measuring achievement should come from student presentation of "exhibitions" rather than standardized tests mandated by the national and state government.</i>
<b>Curriculum is constantly in motion because not everyone can agree</b>	<i>Beyond the obvious matters of literacy, numeracy, and understandings of civics, thoughtful and decent people can disagree, especially about curriculum.</i>
<b>Preparing students for universities as a primary goal is not sufficient</b>	<i>The majority of the people in the universities really don't understand what's going on or keep up with the fact that society's changing and that what kids need now is different from what they needed in 1981.</i>
<b>Good teachers should change to meet societal needs</b>	<i>The world shifts and good teachers are with the world as it shifts.</i>

Much of Sizer's academic career was as a member of the faculties at Harvard and Brown Universities, but you can see that his attitude toward higher education isn't very positive. Sizer believes the primary role of a high school is to help students use their minds well. That way they can be contributing members of society in any appropriate context, including readiness for various kinds of post-secondary education (vocational-technical schools, community colleges, industry-based training programs, training programs in governmental agencies or the military).

Reflection, teamwork, writing, speaking, problem-solving, research skills, cultural literacy, and creativity are not the exclusive domain of four year liberal arts colleges. They are necessary characteristics in all aspects of our society, and high schools can do a better job of preparing students for that society if their teachers:

- "coach" students in ways that insist on quality performance
- challenge them to think/advocate/justify
- cause them to realize that a skill is more than a rote reflex; that it is the result of intellectual processing
- depend less on pencil and paper tests, and depend more on performance or "exhibitions" to assess learning
- give students a chance to disagree and even debate, as an appropriate part of using the mind well
- prove to students that they are cognizant of contemporary and evolving conditions in our society, and that students must be similarly motivated

Many districts are already making decisions and taking actions that emphasize the above principles in all subjects and grades. The continuing challenge is that *every* pedagogical culture in the district accepts and uses those principles in the context of professional performance and intended student learning outcomes.