Where Do "Multiple Pathways" Take Us? Clarifying a New Catchphrase in High School Reform.

By Robert Shireman

Over the past nine months, I have been trying to clarify what reformers mean by multiple pathways and where those pathways are supposed to go. The varied use of the term is concealing the real issue that we need to confront: namely, how the current models of high school reform should change the actual day-by-day instructional processes, which will result in students' staying in school and learning more.

The Holy Grail of high school reform is to get students to spend time and mental energy grappling with problems that, over time, increase in complexity. That's how people learn; the goal is what the scientists call "deep cognitive engagement…. attentiveness and active problem-solving that will promote learning, understanding, and the development of new skills." This learning process is most obvious in mathematics, where the skills and knowledge build in a hierarchical way: Mastering one level makes it possible to pursue the next. But it is also true in other disciplines. History lessons begin rather simplistically, with heroes and villains and the events that they were a part of. But study of history evolves toward a much more nuanced understanding of the personalities and the conflicts that have led to our current place in the world and will influence our future. For learning to occur, students need to practice some discrete skills, but also need to spend time reading, thinking, talking, and writing about the subjects of their studies.

Knowing how people learn doesn't make it easy. Just as we cannot force people to engage in aerobic exercise to improve their health, we cannot mandate where and how students address their mental energies. That's why reform strategies focus on creating conditions in which students are most likely to exercise their brains. To accomplish this, change efforts tend to focus on one or more of what I call the three R's of high school learning: relationships, relevance, and the rigor of the curriculum.

Relationships are important because students are most likely to stay engaged when they know that somebody-especially an adult-actually cares. Relevance is important because students learn better when the topic is connected to something that they know or are interested in. Teaching is also more effective when individual lessons are connected to the students' pre-existing knowledge and interests. A rigorous curriculum is one that guides students through progressively deeper interactions with subject matter. It is not only about difficult subject matter; it also refers to the type of instruction. Aiming students towards high levels of achievement, rigorous instruction requires using a variety of mechanisms to determine whether students are understanding and making progress. By doing so, effective teachers decide when to review material, when to move on, and how to revisit a difficult concept. When it's done right, the experts say that a more demanding curriculum actually increase students motivation and engagement in ways that are more powerful than the other two R's. It makes a difference to focus on learning.

The call for multiple pathways usually is a call for help, a plea to find a different way of providing relevance, or rigor, or both. Often, the call is in reaction to the inadequacy of "college" as a motivator for some students.

In discussions among education leaders and experts, we have probed further to determine whether these students-who see themselves aiming toward someplace other than a traditional college-should be expected to pursue a set of skills in high school different from what other students pursue. In other words, is the pathway different during the high school years, or just after? The answer, after some discussion, has been that these students still need, and should take, the core academic subjects that college-bound students take, but the content should be customized, to the extent possible, to fit the theme of the school or program. It means that they need to be taught differently. The courses can be (and in some places are) taught in creative ways that are more relevant.

There might be rigorous courses of study that could some day replace some of the ones on the list, but let's figure out what they are before denying our most vulnerable young people the benefit of the ones that have already been identified. And in our discussions of high school reform, let's stop talking about multiple pathways and start focusing on how the reforms are supposed to affect teaching and learning of core courses, and whether they are having the effects that are intended.

Robert Shireman is a senior fellow of the Aspen Institute, working with its program on education and society in Oakland, California.

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School Notes

Contact Information:

Should you have any questions regarding your child and/or special education services, you may contact the Diagnostician or High School Support Specialist at your child's campus.

There may be times when you need to contact the district's special education office.

The contact information is as follows:

Jane Flinn, Director of Special Education
10300 Jones Road, Houston TX 77065
Phone: 281-897-6416
Fax: 281-897-6403
Email: jane.flinn@cfisd.net -or-

Nadine Fidler, Assistant Superintendent
Phone: 281-897-6416
Fax: 281-897-6403
Email: nadine.fidler@cfisd.net

ChildFind

The Cy-Fair ISD provides support services for students with disabilities residing within the district. Through Child Find efforts, eligible children, birth to 21, may be identified for needed services. Anyone who has a child or knows of a child who may qualify for services should call the Special Education Department (281-897-6400) or the child's home campus for information.

Education Service Center

The state of Texas is divided into 20 regions served by Education Service Centers. Our Education Service Center is Region 4 and is located in Houston. Region 4 has staff trained in special education who may be a resource to parents. The telephone number of the special education department at Region 4 is 713-462-7708.

The November issues will focus on the importance of self-advocacy for students with disabilities, and the important roles that parents and teachers play in the process.

Transitions Are Challenging

By Ginger Sewell

Transitions are challenging at any age and at any stage in life. So often we prefer to remain in our comfort zone even though it is not what we wish life to be. As parents, we can first and foremost believe in our children. Our children take their cues from us and when we project confidence in them they respond with greater self-esteem. Sharing how we have felt in similar times of transition and what we have done in the past that worked for us is helpful for our children to realize that all people go through times of transition, Confidence breeds confidence.

Ginger Sewell is the parent of a young adult with a disability and a former Director of Special Education. Currently an educational consultant, she is the recipient of both the Parent of the Year and Professional of the Year awards from the Learning Disabilities Association

Dear Parents:

The 2004-05 school year has begun and the staff of CFISD has been provided an opportunity to work with almost 79,000 students. Over 4,400 students in CFISD are new to our district this year. Our student population is diverse, representing cultures and backgrounds from throughout the United States and around the world. Each of our students is different, whether in the area of first language, economics, ethnicity, family structure, or learning disabilities. The responsibility of the educators in CFISD is to take children where they are and move them to where they need to be. Having only been in the CFISD for about two months, I have been very impressed by the dedication and commitment of all CFISD employees to "children first," so I do believe that the culture of this district is based on providing an excellent education for each child.

The legally established terminology for students with disabilities is "special education." However, all CFISD students receive "a special education" when one considers that our goal is to provide an appropriate, quality education for every student in the most appropriate setting. Many of our students require additional, and sometimes, intensive strategies by our professionals and support personnel to progress in their educational preparation. That is the goal of CFISD.

Sincerely wishing all of you a successful year, Dr. David Anthony, Superintendent