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# The Evolution of American High Schools

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**W**hile public education certainly has its share of “because that’s the way we’ve always done it” types, it is also in the midst of an unprecedented innovation. No Child Left Behind, now the education law of the land for almost fifteen years, had its most profound effects on K-8 education, but a renewed discussion of college readiness and workforce development has deeply affected high schools. As in the previous century, the economic position of the United States among the world economies and a wave of innovation in key industries have contributed to a reassessment of what students learn in high schools and how they learn it. A look back at earlier reform movements and a survey of the current landscape might yield some insight into what aspects of high school reform will ultimately prevail. This examination will reveal not so much a straight trajectory toward a common goal, but more of a jagged attempt to provide balance between perdurable antagonisms—group versus individual, basic versus advanced, etc.

### Origins of the Comprehensive High School

The dominant model for organizing high school content and student experiences for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was known as the comprehensive high school. In 1918, as the United States seemed poised to follow Europe and its two-tiered system of vocational and college preparatory tracks, the *Cardinal Principles Of Secondary Education* was published. It contained a vigorous repudiation of tracking, advocating instead that all students should be taught a broad but common curriculum in which students could pursue their individual interests, but also cultivate interests and ideals common to the broader culture.

Notable here is what constituted a broad, common curriculum. The general outline for high school offerings was created by a group of education luminaries convened by the National Education Association in 1892 and referred to as the Committee of Ten. Their recommendations, still generally followed today in comprehensive high schools, included twelve years of education, with eight years of elementary education followed by four years of high school. On the issue of tracking, the committee responded



unanimously that instruction should not be differentiated (to use the modern term). In addition to promoting equality in instruction, they stated that by standardizing courses of study, school instruction and the training of new teachers could be simplified (National Education Association, *passim*). With respect to school curriculum, schools interpreted the recommendations as a call to teach English, mathematics, and history or civics to every student each academic year in high school. The recommendations also led to the teaching of biology, chemistry, and physics (in that order) in high school (6).

The economic and social context of this position was one of optimism, at least nationally. During and after World War I the United States was asserting itself as an industrial leader. New production techniques and growing international markets for manufactured goods provided plentiful jobs for a relatively low skilled workforce, which was generally productive with only a small amount of on-the-job training. Workplace demands on the schools were minimal.

The social context, however, was far more demanding. Large numbers of immigrants, and less well-prepared students from rural areas, depended on the high schools for most of their knowledge of the ambient culture of the nation. Despite the growth of radio beginning in the 1920s, and until the appearance of inexpensive paperback books beginning in 1939, school was the place most people went to seek and acquire knowledge, of both the formal and informal kind. In such a context, the broad liberal

arts education advocated by the Committee of Ten seemed reasonable to most people. Buoyed by the appearance of two affirming publications, *Education for ALL American Youth* (1944 and 1952), this model generally held together through much of the 1950s.

### The Consensus Fails

The optimistic orientation of the United States toward the rest of the world began to unravel with the advent of the Cold War and the perceived threat of the U.S.S.R. to seek world domination. In such an atmosphere, American attitudes toward all basic institutions came into question. The motion picture industry was investigated by the House Un-American Activities committee, as was the radio industry, both accused of harboring Communists and brainwashing the American public. This postwar era fear of Communist infiltration led to scrutiny of the contents of textbooks and the conduct and teachings of individual teachers and institutions. And with the Soviet launch of the Sputnik satellite in 1957 the outcry extended further. The national resolve was questioned, and Americans were accused of being more concerned with the giant tail fins on their cars than the defeat of foreign enemies. At last the accusing finger pointed toward public schools in general for the U.S.' failure to compete in and win the "space race." Just as knowledge was becoming increasingly specialized in the research universities, there was a call for ever more specialized coursework in the high schools.

Since then, a general emphasis on the importance of mathematics and science study has been interrupted only twice—once when the "relevance" reforms of the 1970s (arising from the decade of protest proceeding them) led to a proliferation of personal interest-based electives, and immediately following, the back-to-basics movement engendered by the 1983 *A Nation At Risk* report and characterized by writings of E. D. Hirsch Jr. (1987) and Allan Bloom (1987). Both writers lamented the perceived fall of American literate culture as envisioned by the Committee of Ten.

### A Reimagining Begins

Through the late 1970s and 1980s the social and economic context for education remained uncertain. The near-collapse of the U.S. automobile industry

and the international conflicts that led to the gasoline shortages in the United States kept Americans on edge, fearing that the so-called American century was coming to a close a bit early. New economic competitors in Asia led American companies to scrutinize the business strategies of Japanese and Korean manufacturers. The struggle to find new business, manufacturing, and education/training models continued.

A prescient book published in 1982 seemed to point to a way forward. *Megatrends*, by John Naisbitt, very simply put forth ten trends that promised to change American society for the good—if only they were embraced. One trend in particular seemed to spell the end of any monolithic organizational pattern for education. As Naisbitt characterized it, traditional ways of organizing business, government, education, entertainment, etc. would yield to widespread experimentation with a number of new models—what he called the change from either/or to multiple option (300). But it would take another decade or so and a brand new technology for that trend to broadly affect public education.

### Toward The Future: Multiple Options

Adherence to the comprehensive high school model was always consensual. There was no de facto American public school "system." The 10<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution "reserves" the power to educate for the states, but even the states have some difficulty in regulating the activities of the thousands of school boards in the country with whom most of the power to educate is vested. That there was ever such deference to a handful of self-appointed education leaders and so much acceptance to the recommendations made in a handful of reports for so long should truly be the surprise.

Also surprising was the failure of educators to appropriate two of the most powerful technological advances specifically designed to communicate with large number of people—radio and television. Attempts were made to use these as educational media—an image of students watching satellite or manned spacecraft launches on television comes to mind—but these mass media failed to make the impact on the classroom once hoped for.



Emerging in the mid 1980s, digital technology appeared to be headed to the same fate. Early technologies were not user-friendly and teachers could not figure out how to use them to transform their work or student learning. Again Naisbitt was correct when he noted that most new technologies are initially used to perform the tasks of the past. Early applications of computer technology included computer-generated “flash cards.” It was the Internet that really unleashed digital technology in the schools. The changes in the technologies and in education have come so quickly since the mid 1990s that it would take a separate paper to chronicle them all. It is possible, though, to tease out some general and fundamental changes that have affected high schools and will further affect how they are organized and conceive of their missions.

- The notion of the teacher as the sole provider of content knowledge has yielded to a view of a teacher as a mediator or curator of knowledge; the teacher likely cannot know all the content that a student can access, but can help the student make informed judgments about which content is accurate and worth learning.
- Freed of the responsibility of sole provider, the teacher can hone new skills, such as using analytics/adaptive technology to understand student’s individual needs better.
- Knowledge is proliferating so rapidly on the Internet that it cannot be contained in a typical course of study; learning does not begin or stop at the schoolhouse door.
- Students can easily access additional content or additional ways of explaining content with or without a teacher’s assistance.
- Access to learning/knowledge is 24/7.
- Entire new fields of knowledge are now available for students to investigate and specialize in (coding, digital film editing, etc.).
- The school/classroom is no longer the sole arbiter of cultural knowledge.
- More than ever it is possible and desirable for schools and teachers to experiment with new ways to organize content and students’ learning experiences.

As educators begin to understand these changes and use them to their (and to their students’) advantage,

we may begin to move beyond traditional either/or antagonisms (basic versus advanced, broad versus narrow, etc.) and move to taxonomies that yield consistent progress.

### **State of the Art: Alternative Models and Trends**

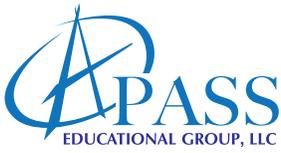
For some time there have been quasi-experimental models: magnet schools, charter schools, disciplinary campuses, and so on. Magnet schools were first conceived of as a means to desegregate school districts. Some successful campuses remain even after that goal has been reached. Charter schools exist for many disparate reasons, and like magnets, some are more successful than others. In recent years newer models have emerged and thrived in an atmosphere of what Clayton Christensen defines as “disruptive innovation.” (Christensen) Here are some of the most notable innovations. For institutions interested in innovation on their own campuses, these models and examples can provide guidance and inspiration.

#### **Virtual Schools and Courses**

Simply put, these are schools and courses conducted entirely or mostly on the computer. Moving forward after initial experiments in what was called “distance learning,” twenty-six states now have virtual schools and served 741,516 supplemental online course enrollments in SY 2013-14 (Watson, et. al., 27). But the fastest growing segment of the virtual school market is in district virtual schools. Districts often opt to create their own in-house virtual schools, or to use a service such as Village Virtual LLC to open and run them. In high schools a variety of digital learning options is common, including the availability of fully online courses, computer labs, learning management platforms, and many forms of digital content. The role of the teacher in virtual learning settings is much different than in traditional schools, as teachers are often expected to be online to assist students for many more hours than in a traditional school day.

#### **Project-Based Learning (PBL) High Schools**

PBL is defined by the Buck Institute (“What is PBL?”) as a teaching method in which students gain knowledge and skills by working for an extended period of time to investigate and respond to a complex question, problem, or challenge. Such pedagogical



techniques have been around for decades in the form of Future Problem Solvers, Science Fair, and National History Day, but now entire campuses are using PBL to teach all subjects all year. The New Tech Network alone supports over 150 schools in 26 states and Australia (“What We Do”). Central to the approach is learning based on real-world problems and solutions that demand more than the usual answers to teacher questions. New models of staff development and scheduling support this approach.

### **Single Gender High Schools**

The National Association for Single-Sex Public Education estimates that approximately 400 public schools now offer some form of single-sex education. Their research suggests that academic achievement is higher in single-sex settings. All-female institutions are gaining support in particular. A successful example in Austin, TX is the Ann Richards School for Young Women Leaders. It is one of the largest single gender schools in the nation with an enrollment of 773 students. The Ann Richards School has been successful in addressing the needs of economically disadvantaged students wanting to pursue college and challenging careers. Also project-based, the Ann Richards School heavily emphasizes science, technology, engineering, art, and math (STEAM), areas and careers where girls are typically under-represented (“School Overview & History”).

A number of associations support the work of schools like the Ann Richards School, including the Young Women’s Preparatory Network, the National Coalition of Girls’ Schools, and Young Women’s Leadership Network.

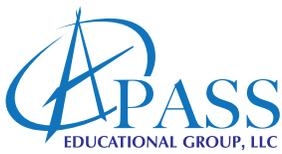
### **Academies**

Originating as magnet schools, and originally created to desegregate urban districts, academies have come into their own as high schools that focus on single subject areas or clusters, such as the arts or STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). One such highly successful school, which began as a magnet campus, is the Booker T. Washington High School for the Performing and Visual Arts (HSPVA) in Dallas, TX. The school provides intensive training in the arts and academics. Booker T. Washington HSPVA prepares students to attend college, conservatory, or to enter a professional field. Since its creation

the school has taught 18 presidential scholars and won 194 DeeBee awards sponsored by Downbeat Magazine—more than any other high school, college or university in the country. The National Foundation for Advancement in the Arts named Booker T. Washington HSPVA as one of five Distinguished Schools in the Arts. The graduation rate is 99%, with 90% going on to higher education. Students select an arts “cluster” as a major. The options are dance, music, visual arts, or theater. The school’s dual emphasis on arts and academics consistently produces a wide range of performers as graduates. Among those are Grammy winners such as R&B vocalist Erykah Badu, jazz singer Norah Jones, jazz trumpeter Roy Hargrove, members of the gospel group God’s Property, and Brave Combo. Other notable alums include dancer Jay Franke, Philadelphia Orchestra cellist John Koen, visual artists Christian Schumann and Chris Arnold, and Edie Brickell (“About Booker T. Washington HSPVA”).

### **The Innovation Industry Supports Schools**

In addition to the examples above, there is a virtual “innovation industry” designed to help move schools and teachers forward. To an extent unheard-of in past years, and largely due to rapid changes in technology that make communicating and sharing easier than ever, there is a large and diverse group of associations, publications, thought leaders, and conferences supporting innovation in the schools. The Christensen Institute, led by Clayton Christensen, is a major voice for innovation in the schools. The International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNacol) hosts an annual conference attended by thousands interested in virtual learning, and technical innovation is highlighted each year at South by Southwest (SXSWedu), which amidst an array of sessions also hosts two days of competition between some of the most innovative startups in education. Today’s educators need not be guided by a small handful of writings stating general principles, as in the past. The innovation community is large, diverse, and accessible.



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