

*Spotlight on Success:
What's Working in Oregon
High Schools?*

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Introduction -- a Personal Reflection

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Throughout the 2007-2008 school year, I visited eight Oregon high schools in the midst of high school reform. These schools were identified by educational leaders as *high schools making innovations and changes in their school, and having some measure of success in their efforts*. Two of the products compiled from the research data are included on the Oregon Department of Education website: (1) a scholarly summary of the research results, based on themes identified when the data from all schools was analyzed, and (2) a story about each high school written from the perspectives of students, teachers, and administrators to describe what was working at their school.

Personal Background. Where did my interest in high school reform come from? In the 1990's I taught at South Albany High School for the Greater Albany School District and was involved in various leadership roles. These included participating in district-wide committees, writing curriculum for Oregon Department of Education, and serving as the coordinator for a group of SAHS faculty designing a CAM (Certificate of Advanced Mastery) program at South Albany. In 1998, I left South Albany High School and began a doctoral program at Oregon State University. I finished the requirements for a PhD in Education in 2001.

While in school at OSU, I was privileged to have an assistantship with Dr. George Copa, director of the *New Designs for Learning* project. As part of my role, I traveled with him to several high schools across the country as he consulted with them on how to change schools to enhance learning. The "bug" bit me, and I have been interested in educational reform, school change, and innovation ever since.

Teacher education at GFU. In the fall of 2000, I started teaching at George Fox University in the MAT (Master of Arts in Teaching) program in the School of Education, where I still teach. In my second year at GFU, I wrote a new course called "Rethinking High School" for all of our MAT students preparing to teach at the high school level. I believe we need to prepare our future high school students to: (1) be aware of the nationwide discourse and efforts around high school reform, (2) understand what innovations and changes are having positive results, and (3) be motivated to both embrace and initiate change at their future high school sites. I personally wanted to be involved in helping our students meet these goals.

National Discourse. So let's step back a minute...As you know, there is a national conversation going on around the country that high school doesn't work very well for many adolescents. The question for each school is -- what do we do about it?

Contiuuum. Based on my reading and personal experience with high school students, I have a philosophy that I often share with my graduate students. If I put all high school students on a continuum of how well high school works for them, I can draw some conclusions:

- One end of the continuum represents the students for whom high school is wonderful. These students enjoy going to school, are involved in activities, are connected to fellow students, and enjoy their teachers and the adults around them. Their success hardly matters whether they are in the worst school in the state or the best school in the state. For whatever reason, school works for them and they will be successful in school—they may have the support at home, or maybe something inside drives their ability to achieve, or maybe they are the kind of person who can thrive anywhere, again for whatever reason. I am guessing these students represent approximately 15% of all high school students.
- At the other end of the continuum are those students for whom high school is less than a positive experience. For whatever reason, school doesn't work for them at all—they may be at risk, they may be struggling academically or socially, they may have behavioral issues, or they may have learning disabilities. My guess is that this might represent 7-8% of a student body.
- Then there are the rest of the students, approximately 78% of them, who are students in the middle of those two ends of the continuum. Many of them get A's and B's and maybe C's. As teachers we assume school is working for them. They come to class, they do their work, they are compliant, and give us no challenges. The assumption that school works for them is especially true for student teachers. However, in honest conversations with these students, we soon learn that they appear to be engaged, or at least not as much as we think. They are there, but see little relevance in what they are doing. They are going through the motions and "life" really begins on graduation day.

My guess is we can do a better job teaching and working with that 78% in the middle. This doesn't mean we ignore those at the upper end of the continuum, but this group will continue to do well as long as we keep doing the good things we're doing now. However, if we can create programs, interventions, and support for the middle group, we can help the ones at the lower end of the continuum as well as many of those in the middle. My thoughts related to the continuum just described are shared with my *Rethinking High School* students near the beginning of the class as a way for us to begin thinking about what doesn't work and what does work in high schools today. I hope it is the beginning of a journey for them to continually examine the perspectives of their students and to be challenged to work with colleagues to make changes if they are necessary.

Veteran teachers and principals can also benefit from considering this continuum. If nothing else, it can be the basis for a conversation with colleagues. So what should educators do to help school work better for adolescents? There are as many responses to the question as there are teachers and principals. Is it so big for us to tackle that we give up and leave the profession? Should we keep teaching but focus only on what happens inside our classroom, forming relationships and increasing the quality of what we do to help students meet content standards? Should we have informal and formal conversations with our colleagues about how to make the larger school work better for students? Should we plan programs, interventions, and activities that build relationships and help students achieve academically? Should we do all of the above? Are some of these solutions better than others? Are the answers the same for each high school? What can we learn from each other?

The goal of the new Oregon graduation requirements, adopted by the State Board of Education in January 2007, is that "each student demonstrates the knowledge and skills necessary to transition

successfully to their next steps: advanced learning, work, and citizenship.”¹ These requirements give us additional opportunities to “rethink” what makes high school relevant for students, and then take the necessary steps to get there.

Sabbatical research project. Spending time in high schools this year was possible because George Fox University approved my sabbatical research proposal to conduct a research study in selected Oregon high schools. The questions stated earlier motivated me to search for some solutions. Knowing there were model schools around the country that were making the headlines, being written about in research journals, and described on a number of websites related to a high school reform initiative, I said to myself, “If there are some good things going on outside of Oregon, I’m sure there are some good things going on *in* Oregon!” Thus my sabbatical plan was written and approved by George Fox University.

There is much research that supports teacher quality and the use of best practices in the classroom. This study did not look at what happens inside the classroom – what I want to say is that I hope teaching quality is a “given.” Teachers need to continually work at improving their teaching strategies, assessments, and relationships with students. School reform cannot happen without this component. But for this project, I chose to look at what was happening school-wide and was affecting the “culture” of the whole school. These changes did not have to cross all elements of the school, but could also relate to specific initiatives that targeted specific student or teacher populations, programs, or subject areas. However, the changes or initiatives took place outside of one single classroom and one single teacher. In fact, any school-wide change forces us to collaborate and work together with the common goal of helping our students.

Getting started. In the fall of 2007, I met personally with many educational leaders around the state to discuss my plan and to gain their insight and suggestions for my project. As I formulated a direction for my work, my support from George Fox University was strengthened with a partnership with Oregon Department of Education. As a result, my research project is being shared with others in the hopes that what I learned can be helpful to anyone interested in a variety of successful models and practices from these Oregon high schools.

Qualitative study. This research study is a very qualitative one. It is in no way a generalization of what is true for all high schools. It is simply an attempt to “tell the story” of several high schools who invited me to join them for a day, and to ask the question “What is working here?” I spent an entire day, from seven to nine hours, at each high school. During that time, I interviewed three to six students, three to six teachers, the principal, and sometimes other staff who had specific insight into what was working for students at their school. I used a digital tape recorder for all of the interviews; the data was then transcribed so I could analyze it to write the individual stories as well as find overall themes.

The qualitative nature of this project also allowed me to use the “asset” model versus the “deficit” model. Sometimes in education, it seems we only hear about what is wrong with the way we educate or run our schools. On the contrary, I think we are doing a better job than we did when I started teaching many years ago. So I chose only to look at what was working at these schools. To be honest, it is what made the project such a fun one to do! There *are* so many things that are working in Oregon high schools and I wanted to share some of it.

¹ *Update on the Oregon Diploma* (March 2008). Oregon Department of Education.

Disclaimers. One of the risks of writing extensively about some high schools and not others is that to the reader, it may appear that these are the only Oregon schools that are being successful with students. I cannot claim that. I know there are many wonderful things going on in other high schools in our state.

More details of how I chose the schools is written in “Spotlight on Success: What’s Working in Oregon High Schools,” a scholarly paper to describe the research study. But in a nutshell, I gathered recommendations from educational leaders all over Oregon and chose schools that were recommended by several persons. I then selected different schools based on a variety of factors: geographical locations in Oregon, small/large, rural/urban, resources available, etc. I then contacted the principals of these schools with a request to visit. Some replied; some did not. If a principal I contacted invited me to come, we set the date and I followed up.

The Oregon high schools included in this study were: Tillamook High School, Powers High School, Scappoose High School, South Wasco County High School, Pendleton High School, Sisters High School, North Eugene High School, and Sprague High School.

While I cannot claim these are the “best” high schools in Oregon, I can tell you they are wonderful schools with many wonderful things to share with the rest of us. In fact, they are even more wonderful than the stories describe. When writing the stories, time and space limitations caused me to “make myself” stop writing!

It is also important to point out that the story was written based on *my* perceptions and representations of what the participants said related to what was working and why. Every effort was made to portray the perspectives of those interviewed to get an accurate picture of what the high school was doing to help students be successful and engaged in school. In addition, each principal read the completed story and affirmed that what was written was accurate.

Thank you. I want to especially thank George Fox University for the privilege of being granted a sabbatical leave this last year and giving me the opportunity to conduct a meaningful research project. I feel refreshed and at the same time, have new information to share with my GFU MAT students. Thanks also go to the Oregon Department of Education for their partnership with me and their additional support in this project. I hope the models shared will help you do the important work you do for all educators and students in the state.

This project would not have been possible without the eight principals who were willing to take a risk and let me spend a day in their school. I’ve totally “bonded” with your school and staff and hope we can do something together again in the future. Thank you to each teacher, secretary, aide, counselor and other adult that helped me understand what you were doing for kids at your high school. And last of all, thanks to each student I interviewed. Your perspectives were invaluable. It is because of you that we seek to do a better job educating youth and trying to help you succeed academically as well as personally. You hold the future and we value our relationships with you.

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