

TEACHERS AT WORK

SIX EXEMPLARS OF EVERYDAY PRACTICE

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MARCH 2012

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE EDITORS, *STUDENTS AT THE CENTER* SERIES

What do teaching and learning actually look like in student-centered schools? In visits to six such schools, Barbara Cervone and Kathleen Cushman observed a range of proven models for enacting student-centered learning that are raising academic achievement for underserved populations.

Through interviews with teachers, students, and administrators and observations of them at work—in classrooms, teams, exhibitions, and the community—the authors found that student-centered learning environments are varied and emerge from specific local conditions. At the same time, all student-centered learning environments share a common foundation of practices. These begin with teachers supporting students in developing a new relationship to learning. Moreover, student-centered learning—where adolescents exercise both choice and responsibility—demands a new approach to teaching, which involves facilitating and coaching more than direct instruction. Student-centered teachers develop a fresh relationship to their craft, playing multiple roles at each moment and always learning new skills.

Cervone and Cushman found that:

- > Student-centered teachers support each student in developing a new relationship to learning—defined by ever more complex challenges, increasing autonomy, and expanding awareness of connections of one's own work to the larger world.
- > Student-centered teachers forge a new relationship to teaching—one in which the teacher constantly shifts among multiple roles, from curriculum planner, classroom facilitator, and assessor, to advisor and community connector.
- > Student-centered teachers see themselves as continual learners. Student-centered teaching requires common planning time so teachers can collaborate, as well as opportunities for their classrooms to be observed by skilled

peers so they can improve their practice based on ongoing, constructive feedback.

- > Each student-centered school reflects and responds to its origins and local context. And each school evolves, thanks to a culture that encourages teachers to try new things and move past ineffective practices.

The Research Schools: Six Exemplars of Everyday Practice

The study looked at six high schools, representing a range of models for enacting student-centered learning:

- > **Alief Early College High School**, a partnership with Houston Community College, is part of the Early College High School Initiative.
- > **Bronx International High School**, part of the Internationals Network of Public Schools, serves primarily immigrants and non-native English speakers.
- > **The Dayton Early College Academy**, located on the campus of the University of Dayton, is part of the Early College High School Initiative.
- > **MetWest**, one of 60 Big Picture Learning schools, is part of the Oakland (California) Unified School District.
- > **NYC iSchool**, a flagship for the NYC Department of Education's new Innovation Zone, is a collaboration with Cisco Systems
- > **Noble High School**, a rural comprehensive high school in southern Maine, is part of the Coalition of Essential Schools.

Almost all of the students at these schools are low-income and minority, and most will be the first in their families to attend college. All of the schools except Noble are small, with fewer than 500 students.

TEACHERS SUPPORT EACH STUDENT IN DEVELOPING A NEW RELATIONSHIP TO LEARNING

What does teaching look like when it centers on students' learning needs? Eight core elements give rise to deep adolescent learning. While many engaging practices are apparent in the six schools, these elements were chosen for their prevalence and, in some cases, their inventiveness. Each element makes a meaningful difference in the effectiveness of the learning environment for the students on whom they center.

The foundation of each teaching element is supporting every student in developing a new relationship to learning—defined by ever more complex challenges, increasing autonomy in addressing those challenges, and expanding awareness of the connections of the learner's work to the larger world. The elements act in a dynamic relationship, affecting and contributing to one another. Student-centered teaching is not a single strategy but rather a cultural shift involving virtually every aspect of what takes place in a school.

ELEMENT 1: STRONG RELATIONSHIPS WITH STUDENTS

Teachers who take the time to know their students well can create trusting and respectful relationships that support learning. Acting as coaches and facilitators as well as the providers of knowledge, they often develop students' academic knowledge and skills through collaborative interaction. Many other adults also become involved, inside and outside school.

Practices include: Teacher-student advisement to keep a close eye on individual social, emotional, and academic development; norms of trust, respect, and inclusiveness; easy contact between teachers and students; reaching out to families; connecting students with community mentors

Example: Every school studied includes community mentors as part of a critical web of adult-student relationships. The Dayton Early College Academy connects students with writing mentors, college students, and lifetime readers who share their passion for books. A Dayton staff member explained: "If there's one thing this school recognizes for sure, it's that students at this school need every adult on deck."

ELEMENT 2: PERSONALIZATION AND CHOICE IN CURRICULAR AND INSTRUCTIONAL TASKS

Adolescents place a high value on taking charge of their own lives. When they initiate and have a say in learning activities, they invest in them more.

Practices include: Students creating and monitoring personal learning plans; exercising substantial choice among assignments, readings, and topics;

demonstrating mastery in different forms and media; pursuing independent projects and extended learning opportunities that build on special interests, involve public presentations, and often are graduation requirements

Example: Several schools require students to design personal learning plans, much like the individualized educational programs that federal law requires to meet the needs of students with disabilities. All ninth graders at NYC iSchool take a quarter-long course on the psychology and neuroscience of learning. This helps them to figure out how they each learn best and create their own plans for learning at school and beyond. At a 20-minute conference with parents and the advisor four times a year, each student reviews his or her work and chooses personal and academic goals for the next quarter. At the end of tenth grade, the students personalize their plans further, with each choosing an academic "focus area" to explore in depth before graduation.

ELEMENT 3: APPROPRIATE CHALLENGE LEVELS FOR EACH LEARNER, LEADING TO STRETCH

The key is to know students well enough to set tasks that are neither too easy nor too hard, and to set in motion a cycle of effort, practice, intrinsic satisfaction, and growing confidence. This often counters past feelings of being discouraged or humiliated by academic failure.

Practices include: Scaffolding; differentiating instruction; instilling habits of practice and revision; providing thoughtful supports for students with special needs

Example: Student-centered teaching scaffolds instruction and differentiates learning tasks, so that each individual is ready for just the right stretch. At MetWest, teacher-advisors focus on habits of persistence and revision. A veteran English teacher describes how she scaffolds writing: "Basically it's teaching them how to be their own best editor. . . . Part of that . . . is letting go a little bit as time goes by. We don't hold their hands too much, or they can't get to that next place and do it themselves." Bronx International uses the term "Not Yet" as an assessment code to send students a clear signal to keep trying until they get it.

ELEMENT 4: SUPPORTING SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL GROWTH AND IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

An adolescent's central developmental needs include forming an identity, belonging, being heard, feeling powerful, and understanding the world. Student-centered approaches take into account students' conflicting narratives, such as "I am bad at math" or "I can do whatever I put my mind to."

Practices include: Knowing students well and educating the whole child; requiring personal reflection; nourishing peer relationships, teamwork, and mentoring; coaching students how to present themselves in public

Example: Reflection is integral: The schools routinely require students to complete reflective writing assignments, keep response journals when reading, and include their own "takeaways" in reports and presentations. Three schools require a 25-page autobiography for graduation. Noble students participate in a student-led "roundtable" before a panel, each year focusing on a different question: Who am I? Where am I going? How will I get there? How can I exhibit what I have learned?

ELEMENT 5: ANYWHERE, ANYTIME, AND REAL-WORLD LEARNING

With their developmental drive to "become someone" in the larger world, adolescents often feel constrained when their learning is confined to the classroom. Recognizing this, the schools open their doors wide in all directions.

Practices include: Flexible schedules; enabling students to participate in outside activities like internships; encouraging community members as partners in curricula, instruction, and assessment

Example: Several schools ground much of the curriculum in real contexts in the larger community. At MetWest, this focus emerges naturally from the central role of internships in each student's learning. For example, interns at the American Friends Service Committee collaborated on creating a media campaign, including a press kit and a grant proposal to highlight the situation of undocumented youth after the DREAM immigration act failed in Congress.

ELEMENT 6: TECHNOLOGY THAT IS INTEGRAL TO TEACHING AND LEARNING

Technology is changing the way teaching and learning take place in classrooms. The six schools in the study fall at various points along the spectrum of how much they integrate technology into what they do so well.

Practices include: Online learning adapted to the needs of each student; online tools that promote student collaboration; heavy reliance on email to reach teachers whenever needed

Example: NYC iSchool students have Internet access to all assignments, teacher feedback, reading material, multimedia content, class notes, self-correcting quizzes, and group discussion boards. Video conferencing via Skype connects them with peers worldwide. In an iSchool module called "Sixteen," two classes interviewed teenagers from around the world, using anthropological methods to compare adolescence in different cultures.

ELEMENT 7: CLEAR, TIMELY ASSESSMENT AND SUPPORT

Training young people in intellectual inquiry involves teacher and novice looking together at exemplary work and analyzing what makes it good.

Practices include: "Just in time" feedback; exhibitions; customized assessments; student feedback to staff on curriculum and instruction

Example: All students share their work publicly and receive feedback through a detailed rubric, demonstrating their readiness to move forward. The practices vary in timing, the stakes involved, and the media students use, but all share the value placed on "show what you know." To graduate, Bronx International students must complete a major culminating task in each core subject area: math, English language arts, social studies, and science. Each senior assembles these tasks in a portfolio, along with a resume, personal essay, and statement of future goals, and presents it in an hour-long exhibition before a panel of classmates and teachers and sometimes community members.

ELEMENT 8: FOSTERING AUTONOMY AND LIFELONG LEARNING

Most of the practices described underscore one of the most unique features of student-centered learning environments: giving students the opportunities, skill sets, and work ethic they need to become independent learners. Teachers strike a fine balance between encouraging students to be self-directed and keeping a close watch.

Practices include: Building skills for planning, managing time, self-pacing, taking initiative, and learning how to learn

Example: To track daily work and projects, DECA students fill out daily planners and Bronx International students use laptops.

STUDENT-CENTERED TEACHERS FORGE A NEW RELATIONSHIP TO TEACHING

Student-centered schools depend on classroom practices and structures, as well as the ability of staff to take on a range of roles in the course of each day. The schools studied support all teachers in forging a new relationship to teaching—one where they serve in multiple capacities, from curriculum planner, classroom facilitator, and assessor to advisor and community connector.

Curriculum Planner: Developing curricula is a constant aspect of the work. Most student-centered schools replace textbooks with multiple sources for ideas and materials. They choose depth over the wide coverage typical of texts. Teachers collaborate with colleagues whenever possible to design and revise lessons. Many go to great lengths to integrate their teaching across disciplines. For example, a three-week Noble High School unit on immigration took the place of regular daily English and history classes.

Classroom Facilitator and Coach: Teachers act more as guides than as lecturers. Staff members said this works best when they set up scenarios in which students can explore, ask their own questions, and discover their own answers.

Assessor: Teachers consider assessment an art interwoven with teaching. More than a single test, assessment is an active process that requires teachers to stay alert to evidence of student learning. As teachers circulate in class, they engage with every student in a way that enables them to measure understanding and adjust instruction as needed.

Advisor: Each school structures advising differently, but all of the teachers in the study see the advisor role as central to their work. A Dayton teacher meets with her advisory group students individually once a week, in part because many teens get too little support from home. “Students build a strong relationship with someone who can support them academically, emotionally, really be there for them, get to know their family, that one-on-one,” she explained. “I’m also a motivator and pusher, making sure that students are working on whatever they need.”

TEACHERS SEE THEMSELVES AS LEARNERS

Teachers need much of what students require in a truly student-centered learning environment: strong relationships, clear goals, choice, challenge, feedback, autonomy, and a culture of constant personal growth and learning. In fact, a common characteristic of these schools is that all of the educators see themselves as learners as much as teachers, and they recognize that professional development never ends.

The most important professional development is regular, frequent common planning time so teachers can collaborate. They compare notes on shared students and plan curriculum across content areas.

Another critical piece is observation and sharing. These schools open up their classroom doors, creating regular and frequent opportunities for administrators and teaching colleagues to observe, mentor, and learn from one another. They improve their practice based on constructive feedback from peers as well as supervisors.

EACH SCHOOL EVOLVES FROM A PARTICULAR LOCAL CONTEXT

Each school reflects its origins, including its model and local context of policy, financing, and community interests. But each evolves over time, with staff continually examining, rethinking, and revising, not afraid to get rid of what doesn’t work and try new things.

All six schools make it a priority to take stock of their progress and shortfalls at regular intervals with respect to student learning. They gather faculty once or twice a year to share and reflect on data—collected not just from standardized test scores, but through close observation and careful listening. Several of the schools survey students and incorporate their feedback and suggestions as they move forward.

Students at the Center synthesizes existing research on key components of student-centered approaches to learning. The papers that launch this project renew attention to the importance of engaging each student in acquiring the skills, knowledge, and expertise needed for success in college and a career. *Students at the Center* is supported generously by funds from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation.

To download *Teachers at Work—Six Exemplars of Everyday Practice* and all papers in the **Students at the Center** series, go to the project website: www.studentsatthecenter.org



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