

The ASCD High School Network: Impressions From on the Road

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Unlike other national studies, ASCD's "Redefining General Education" is an effort by local school faculties to rethink their curricula.



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With apologies to Charles Kuralt, this is an "On the Road" report of some of my first impressions of the story behind the formal summaries submitted by 14 high schools in the ASCD Project on Redefining General Education in the American High School.

In the summer of 1983, ASCD brought me to Vail, Colorado, to meet representatives from the Network schools, which my wife and I began visiting in September. As I write this, it is now three months and 15,000 miles later, and we are still on the road. We have survived the worst floods of the century in Arizona, temperatures ranging from 101 degrees to 23 degrees, and travel over another kind of national risk: a crumbling interstate system of highways. Since our travels are still not finished, I have not yet had the time to sort through a briefcase full of notes I took during interviews with hundreds of teachers, students, building and district administrators, board members, and a variety of community people. These, however, are my off-the-cuff impressions.

ASCD chose well in putting together this network. From hundreds of applicants, the Association selected a group of schools that represents well this country's diversity—in size, geographic representation, ethnic composition, and funding. For example, the number of graduates that these schools send on to college ranges from 20 percent to over 90 percent. Moreover, in every instance, these schools are very special places. Although they may have a little or a lot to work with in the way of funding and facilities, their trophy cases are loaded with academic and athletic

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awards. I found teachers in practically every school who were leaders in their professional organizations at the state or national levels, who had won awards as outstanding educators, who had held one-person exhibits or made scholarly presentations. Even though I heard apologies that "We haven't accomplished as much as other schools in the network," in every case there was a strong sense of pride that "we live and work in a good school."

Many of these schools had already begun to reexamine their curricula even before joining the network. They were worried about a curriculum bulging with too many electives, a crazy-quilt patchwork that didn't make sense for many students. Teachers in particular were concerned about students who were sliding through and not getting the help or attention they needed: the spe-

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cial students' needs were well-planned for, and programs of the college-bound usually went well beyond any list of requirements likely to be mandated, but some of the "average" youngsters were taking minimal courses just to get by. The ASCD network provided a vehicle to reevaluate the general education that all learners should have. This process of taking a hard look at the curriculum and what was to be expected of all students had begun some two years before the publication of *A Nation at Risk*.

There is nearly unanimous agreement among the network schools that this opportunity to discuss what was being taught and what *should* be taught in the future was exciting and profitable. Network participants who met with and heard the ideas of Ernest Boyer, Mortimer

Adler, Herman Kahn, Gordon Cawelti, and Harry Broudy enjoyed an intellectual and professional turn on. Many participants wished that their colleagues back home could have experienced the same inspiration they had, and that more teachers, administrators, and board members could have attended the meetings. It was very difficult, they said, to transmit the excitement of what they had experienced. Too often, it just didn't work.

What did work, however, were the group discussions that were held early in the process in each district. Time and time again I heard, "Before this, we never got to talk to the teachers in the other departments in our school. We were delighted to break out of our own disciplines and get a broader view of

education. We heard what our colleagues were doing, and we began to see ways we could reinforce each other's teaching."

All this seemed to promote a sense of community in the network schools. Teachers continue to be enthusiastic about discussing what the curriculum should be in these changing times, and they are excited about getting back to the business of teaching. The turmoil of the 1960s and early 70s is finally over, and students seem to be much more serious about their education. Only a few teachers are nostalgic about the way they were challenged by the students during those years.

New Leadership

Much of the responsibility for conducting the local studies fell to a central task force or coordinating committee. In most cases these committees operated at the building level, although in Baltimore County, the guiding committee was a districtwide organization. In every case, it was the members of these committees who had the greatest sense of ownership for the networking process and for the results that came out of that process.

It is interesting to examine the "new" leadership that has emerged from these committees. An accepted tenet of educational administration is that the school's chief instructional leader is the principal. As one principal put it, "This may be the greatest myth in American education today. What principal has the time to do all that should be done?" I found many principals who would disagree with this comment, but I also found principals who largely delegated leadership to others, either because they believe in the concept of shared leadership or because they have faith in an assistant. In other schools, leadership emerged from the group, and one or two



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key teachers were seen by all as the spark plugs who fired the process. In some instances where schools changed principals, the persons who were the de facto leaders had to do the job because the new principals did not have either the time or the inclination to support what had taken place. However, as long as old or new principals were supportive, the process could go on.

The composition of the steering committee was of paramount importance. Some committees were either too small or did not represent the faculty power blocks. The committees that worked best were composed of a cross section of the faculty, including representatives from all the major groupings, and more often than not, representatives from the community and board of education. In a few instances the student body was represented.

Results

The results of all the projects' work are far too complex to discuss here, but I will make a few observations. Territoriality was a faculty concern in several of the schools: some vocational education teachers and teachers of elective courses were afraid they might lose their jobs. A few were willing to take that risk because they felt strongly that students did need more math, science, English, humanities—whatever. However, in those schools where a set of common learnings was carefully determined first, this was not a problem. The common learnings were seen as permeating all courses whether they were required, elective, vocational, or pre-college. Indeed there will be fewer courses offered in most schools, but the elements of a general education will be taught in all courses in those network schools that have agreed in advance on the common learnings they want students to have.

It is also interesting to note that schools where courses and graduation

requirements were emphasized, or where new requirements had been mandated by the state, are now having to back-track to decide what will be taught in those courses. Although at first some teachers saw the redefinition process as an academic exercise, they soon came to realize that the topic under discussion was changes in their teaching content. This was serious business.

Time has had its effect on the network schools. There have been peaks and valleys in people's enthusiasm for the process. It has taken the schools more time than they originally envisioned, and in nearly all the schools the work will continue for at least one to two more years. The publication of other national reports (*Nation at Risk*, *College Board, Twentieth Century Fund, Carnegie*, and so on) have all had their impact; for example, some of the schools used the College Board's *Academic Preparation for College: What Students Need to Know and Be Able to Do*. Several people noted, "There are many points in that document that apply to all students, college-bound or not."

Many state legislatures and school boards are calling for and mandating changes. For the network schools, what had begun as a look at the future has been altered by political realities. Many of the network teachers are afraid of a new bandwagon and the quick fix. In California, however, the state sought opinions from San Rafael school administrators, including Principal Steve Collins. As a result, new legislation will enhance the work begun by ASCD.

In communities such as Oak Park, Illinois, no one was surprised to learn that the high school was already discussing the issues raised by the national reports, because these communities have had a tradition of self-examination. In other communities, though, teachers feel they are being blamed for

the situation and therefore ignored by the politicians. "You haven't put your house in order, so we will do it for you," is the message teachers get. Network teachers resent this deeply because they have already begun to rectify whatever shortcomings existed.

Professional Self-Examination

Knowing that these societal pressures exist, I expected to find a good deal of cynicism, especially among older teachers. "We've seen that pendulum swing before. Stay put. You're bound to be right at least once every 15 years." Indeed, there was some cynicism, but I was very impressed by the many who stayed with the project. By and large, this was a very professional self-examination.

Nevertheless, a cautionary note for other schools: teachers will take leadership, but the process must have widespread support, and it must be seen through to its conclusion. Teachers will indeed become cynical if they find that the process is only an academic exercise. The process takes a lot of time—from three to five years—which came as a surprise to everybody. As several teachers noted, "You're never finished. Everything ties in. . . . How are we going to evaluate? . . . We need staff development. . . . We need to go back and refine what we've already done. . . . The process is a bit frightening, but the results will be worth it. . . ." No one sees the results as final: as Oak Park, Illinois, board member Leah Marcus put it, "Excellence is a moving target." But as Pinellas County Florida Assistant Superintendent of Secondary Education Kenneth Webster promises, "If we do our homework now and continue to reexamine what goes into general education, we won't have to have another *Nation at Risk* report in ten years." □

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