

Restructuring a Comprehensive High School

Through their "Direction 2000" project, the faculty at Littleton High School in Colorado are redesigning their school to be receptive to the challenges of the future.

Littleton High School is in the second year of a process that will, with central office and board of education approval, restructure schooling beginning with the freshman class in the fall of 1991. Our experiences in creating what could be the first truly alternative comprehensive high school in this country have been both exciting and challenging.

Littleton is a 9-12 school of 1,400 students and 90 staff members located about 20 minutes south of Denver, Colorado. We have a diverse student population and a range of achievement levels to match. Most students come from families with more than adequate resources, but the proportion of students from low-income families qualifies Littleton for Chapter 1 funds. As in other large comprehensive high schools, the academic performance of our students falls into three distinct groups. About one-third perform very well. Their standardized test scores, grades, and performance in extracurricular activities indicate academic excellence and positive personal growth. Another group of stu-

dents, those at the other end of the continuum, cut classes, fail their courses, do not get involved in school activities, and even drop out of school.

They are quite likely unemployable or are illiterate on the job. The largest group of students—the middle group—are doing enough to "get by."

Photographs by Dianne Gurn



In 1988 the principal and 35 staff members formed "Direction 2000: Rethinking the American School." Shown here is the steering committee at work during the Awareness Phase.

but are grossly undereducated for the Information Age of the 21st century.

Clearly, Littleton High is not a school in crisis, but neither is all well. Littleton is not affluent nor is it dysfunctionally poor. We aspire to more than "seat occupancy" for our students. However, we are not interested in creating still another alternative school for dropouts and low achievers. For one thing, public high schools must avoid building a class system in the United States. As Peter Drucker recently pointed out, "education in and for the knowledge society" ought to be an open system: "It must not make into an impenetrable barrier the line between the highly schooled and the 'other half.'" This is why we believe that Littleton High School must remain comprehensive while restructuring.

The Awareness Phase

In September 1988, the principal and 35 interested staff members formed "Direction 2000: Rethinking the American School," a framework for restructuring our school to better prepare students for the future. The seeds of the project had been planted a year earlier with the release of *The Focus of the High Schools in Preparing Students for the Future*, a report researched and written by 10 high school teachers in the Littleton Public School District. Calling for the restructuring of the purposes, goals, and organization of high school education, the authors advocated changing curriculum and assessment, methods of instruction, organization, and decision making, as well as increasing community involvement, the use of technology, and accountability. At that time, our district was engaged in a strategic planning process that yielded four district priorities, one of which was "restructuring" and all of which are compatible with the goals we set for Direction 2000.

We started with the basic premise that the issues facing today's schools go beyond quality control problems to design problems. That is, we realized that our efforts must go beyond basic school improvement to the redesign of the purposes, goals, and structure of

For the building council of Littleton High School the idea of shared decision making comes alive in discussions about budget items, the master schedule, and the like, such as this one on whether to purchase IBMs or Apples.



schooling. We also recognized that to bring about the kinds of changes we envisioned would require the commitment of school people, parents, students, and the business community.

From September through February, we focused on raising the awareness of staff members about the need to redesign high school education. During Direction 2000's Awareness Phase, teachers read articles and reports, engaged in discussions, and heard presentations about the implications for young people and for public education of the political, social, and economic realities of the Information Age. Twenty-eight administrators and teachers also attended conferences and workshops and visited schools in Colorado, Washington, and Wisconsin to hear about and see other people's changes in action. As a result, many of us developed a feeling of creative dissatisfaction with our traditional system of schooling.

We are delighted by the extraordinary level of participation and enthusiasm on the part of the staff and the school community.

The Planning Phase

Two half-days of activities ushered in Phase II, the Planning Phase, in March 1989. Several key staff members who were ready to move beyond talk to action developed the outline of what is now our six-year plan. That basic plan, which includes a listing of major activities, target dates, and budget requirements, continues to guide our actions, although it is subject to modification as the project unfolds and conditions change. A subsequent planning meeting for 12 faculty members and the principal in May enabled us to clarify our vision of the future.

With substantial grants from the school district and The Denver Foundation, we were able to get Direction 2000 off the ground during the summer. For a week in August, a planning team met to develop the organizational arrangements (committee structure, election procedures, communications, staff responsibilities, and so on) needed to carry out the tasks of the upcoming year.

During the Awareness Phase, each participant in the discussions had known change was needed and had probably sensed why. But although individuals had spoken passionately about barriers to learning and groups had imagined the ideal school, no one had demanded consensus. The meetings were simply a means for seeing more clearly the school as it is and then collecting our thoughts about what needed to be done. It was not until the weeklong planning session in August that a committee had ventured to ask, "Why?" In responding to that question, the eight members of that summer team generated three statements. Three lists do not a restructuring make, yet they do bring into the open, directly or indirectly, the frustrations of teaching and learning today in one public school.

Statement of strengths. The planning team began by listing the school's strengths. They agreed, first, that Littleton High School, with a diverse and intelligent student body and a talented, caring staff, is backed by a supportive community that values education. They went on to list, among other qualities, "a solid core of innovative staff members willing to take risks," a

staff "moving toward shared decision making," and building principals "committed to making those changes necessary to meet the needs of students." All in all, the team concluded, Littleton High and its community were strong enough to change.

The "Why Change?" list. Next, the group compiled a list that identified not only the problems of the system we wanted to improve but also recognized problems outside the system that prompted us to examine the status quo. The list appears here because we feel it describes explicitly what many

teachers, students, and principals face each school year (see fig. 1).

Characteristics of a restructured school. Third, the team listed the attributes of a restructured school. This list (fig. 2) is of necessity a statement of ideals. What is notable, we think, is that it advocates some new methods and knowledge as means to raise standards of discipline and achievement. Further, the characteristics reflect our recognition that in the future, as we perceive it, our faculty will expect some different skills and viewpoints of those who want to succeed.

Fig. 1. Why Change?
(Problems with the Status Quo)

1. The system of arranging learning has become an end in itself and therefore a barrier to learning. For example, it often:

- a. allows teachers and administrators to perpetuate the system rather than accept the responsibility for constructive change;
 - b. separates people from each other and from the real world and isolates disciplines and tasks, creating problems of communication, understanding, and priorities;
 - c. ignores interdisciplinary opportunities, discourages caring and trust, hinders the development of common standards, and allows excessive specialization;
 - d. rewards covering and recalling of material, rote learning, grades, and GPAs;
 - e. substitutes for the goal of learning the goal of graduating;
 - f. promotes the "normal curve" approach to categorize students, discriminating against their potential and encouraging them to manipulate, play games with, or resist the system rather than master material, develop responsibility for their own learning, and build lifelong skills;
 - g. consumes the time needed for reflection on the use of material, solving problems individually and collectively, and relating material to the real world;
 - h. leads to excessive teacher activity and to student passivity, thereby exhausting and frustrating both groups while promoting mediocre performance;
 - i. grants freedom and opportunity to students but demands too little responsibility and self-discipline;
 - j. encourages, and may depend upon, an ethically neutral, valueless, depersonalized, do-your-own-thing, smorgasbord approach to education and to life;
 - k. limits the influence of teachers in decisions while it solicits renewal and reform from those distant from the classroom;
 - l. produces an unhealthy cynicism among teachers, students, administrators, and at times, the public;
 - m. limits parental and community involvement in the education of young people;
 - n. makes of education a dull routine instead of a stimulating activity.
2. Financial realities indicate that the public will no longer support an outdated education system.
3. Recent affluence, commercialism, media influence, and so on, have produced a generation that cannot be successfully taught in the ways earlier generations were.
 4. Business and industry, facing new foreign and domestic realities, can no longer rely on the educational system to produce competent workers, creators, and decision makers.
5. The nature of social, political, and environmental problems at home and worldwide demands a well-rounded and active citizenry.

Fig. 2. Characteristics of a Restructured School

1. **Outcome-Based Education.** Littleton High School has challenging, clearly defined, measurable learning outcomes. Progress toward mastery of concepts, skills, and abilities is valued, and monitored regularly. Students earn graduation by demonstrating the mastery of stated school goals through such methods as exhibitions, demonstrations, and portfolios.
2. **Intellectual Development.** Students demonstrate the intellectual skills and knowledge necessary to thrive in a changing world. These include basic knowledge and information, information processing, problem solving, knowledge about how to learn, higher-order thinking skills, creativity, and reflection and thoughtfulness.
3. **Character Development.** Students demonstrate a positive work ethic and the behaviors often associated with good citizenship including reliability, responsibility, punctuality, regular attendance, self-respect, self-discipline, community involvement, and respect for the dignity, worth, and property of others.
4. **Personalized Education.** Education is individualized, accommodating the particular needs and learning styles of each student. Each student's program of study promotes sound intellectual, social, physical, ethical, artistic, and emotional development. Personalized education provides for treating each student with care, giving personal attention to each individual to ensure no student "disconnects" or drifts through school anonymously.
5. **Shared Decision Making.** Faculty and staff, parents, students, and other members of the community participate in decision making for the school.
6. **Use of Time.** The needs of students and staff dictate the school schedule and calendar. Teachers have time to establish priorities, to engage in thoughtful and creative planning, and to work with students.
7. **Integrated Learning.** Learning projects and activities go beyond the traditional lecture and textbook approach, often involve several disciplines, teach students to work cooperatively, and have application to real situations.
8. **Interactive Learning.** Students take ownership and are actively involved in their own education. They function as active workers and learners, while teachers, parents, and community members serve as mentors, instructors, coaches, facilitators, and guides.
9. **Application of Technology.** Students demonstrate the responsible use of technology to solve problems and assist in everyday living.
10. **Accountability.** The staff designs, and will be accountable for, the success of the school's objectives.

At the beginning of the 1989-90 school year, our summer planning team presented the results of their efforts to the entire staff and announced the procedures for the election of regular project committees. In addition to a steering committee, we have seven other planning committees. Faculty members, parents, and students are working together in the areas of public relations, graduation requirements, project evaluation, curriculum, K-12 articulation, post-graduation articulation, and staff development. Meanwhile, a new building council is embarking on shared decision making, giving the staff decision-making authority in such areas as budget, the master schedule, facilities improvement, and school policies and procedures. We are delighted by the extraordinary level of participation and enthusiasm on the part of the staff and the school community. To involve and enlist support from the business community, we are planning to form an advisory board. We are under way.

The Early Realities of a Changing School

Our enthusiasm level is running high now. We have made great strides in visualizing the kind of school we want and in putting some of our thoughts into action. But this would not be an accurate account of our journey thus far if we did not mention some of the hard realities of restructuring that appeared the moment change was mentioned.

First, we began to appreciate the gulf between those teachers who often think of change and design restructuring plans now and then and those teachers who simply will make no time for it. Then we noticed the briefly stated or tacit opposition of those who are satisfied with the system: (1) because they think, desperately or confidently, that it works; (2) because they never have to change their lesson plans or teaching style again; (3) because it protects them; (4) because it pays well enough and leaves them time to pursue other (sometimes profitable) interests; or

(5) because it gives them someone besides themselves to blame for what goes wrong. Other teachers fear that restructuring will become still another flashy but flimsy fad that will consume teachers' energies, empower administrators and businesses, cost money, and do students no good. Some departments are afraid of extinction. The local association fears the loss of protection for teachers. And some colleagues ask, "What about the honors classes?" And so it goes.

Would-be restructurers sometimes lead a manic-depressive existence. Meetings can be so intellectually stimulating that our return the next day to the realities of day-to-day education and its rigid 50-minute segments may leave us with a sense of defeat. Hopes are sometimes so high that even the most trivial opposition can seem like "the Ruin of the Dream." The progress toward restructuring, in fact, is slow, sometimes tedious, often frustrating. But it makes education an exciting place to be, and that in itself represents a substantial change in a public school.

Everybody Wants It

Change has to occur. Business wants it but hasn't yet forced it; legislators want it but haven't yet mandated it; parents and communities want it but haven't yet demanded it. Teachers and administrators, however, not only want it but are ready to make it happen. At Littleton High School, we want to restructure our comprehensive school because, as our project vision statement affirms, "as workers, parents, citizens, and individuals, members of the next generation should know how to question, invent, anticipate, and dream . . . so that they [are] . . . prepared to make a living, make a life, and make a difference." □

¹P. Drucker, (1989). *The New Realities* (New York: Harper and Row), p. 242.

Dan Brickley is a History and Latin Teacher and **Tim Westerberg** is Principal at Littleton High School, 199 E. Littleton Blvd., Littleton, CO 80121.

Copyright © 1990 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.