

Restructuring a Comprehensive High School

Through their hard work, teachers, parents, students, and community members are reshaping Littleton High School.

A year ago we wrote about our experiences in planning the restructuring of Littleton High School—a comprehensive public high school with 1,400 students (*Educational Leadership*, April 1990, p. 28). Today we are feverishly working to complete the final structural arrangements to implement our new program with the freshman class entering school in the fall.

Now, as we conclude the research and development phase of our effort—Direction 2000: Rethinking the American School—we have new school board-approved, performance-based graduation requirements and a redesigned course structure for many disciplines. Themes and questions allow us to approach teaching and learning from an interdisciplinary perspective. Teachers have endorsed a program in which they will become advisors to students. Our tax-exempt Direction 2000 Foundation is raising \$1.5 million for the transition to the new system. A board of more than 30 prominent business executives and college and university officials advises our steering committee, and one of Denver's largest marketing and advertising firms is developing our marketing plan. Our planning and support network involves more than 100 people directly in this project.



Littleton High students talk with Colorado State representative Phil Pankey about Littleton's Direction 2000 program. Students played an active role on the Graduation Requirements Committee; they helped devise 19 proposed graduation requirements.

The Realities

It's easier to talk about the features of our program than it has been to put them into place. This year we have really had to deal with the tough issues of restructuring to make our dreams come true. In our work, we have encountered seven realities, which we'd like to share.

Reality #1: Sacrifice. True restructuring requires hard work and sacrifice from many members of the school

staff. The members of our steering committee must now meet each week for two and one-half hours. Sometimes they have additional "homework" assignments to complete as well. Other Direction 2000 committees meet monthly or bimonthly, with occasional weekly meetings. Chairs of key committees often must complete organizational, communication, and "sidebar negotiation" tasks; and the school principal now devotes between

one-third and one-half of his time, to the project. Secretarial and clerical staff members, who now have added communication and word-processing tasks, are also affected. Reality tells us that those committed to this quiet revolution must be prepared to make sacrifices of time and energy.

Reality #2: Money. True restructuring takes time, particularly teacher time; and time costs money. Developing performance-based graduation requirements, interdisciplinary curriculums, new courses, calendars, and schedules and preparing a staff to accept new roles and a school community for dramatic change—all take an enormous amount of time. These tasks cannot be done completely on the backs of volunteers. Money must be available to provide teachers and other school personnel with released time and stipends to accomplish these and the many other tasks of restructuring.

Over the last two years, Direction 2000 has spent \$55,000 at Littleton High School, and that is just the beginning. Our budget for the next two and a half years of design and implementation calls for an additional \$1.2 million, most of which must come from outside sources. In the long run, a restructured system of schooling need not cost significantly more money than a traditional system; but research, design, and implementation are expensive. Reality tells us that restructurers cannot expect to achieve serious change without spending substantial amounts of money.

Reality #3: Talk. Those engaged in creating a new order of things must have time to talk. School people, parents, and students must make dramatic mental and emotional paradigm shifts in order to accept the changes brought about by restructuring. Direction 2000 committees have conquered a number of very difficult and frustrating issues in their efforts to redefine the role of the teacher to include academic assessment and overcome traditional "turf protecting" to establish student-centered graduation requirements. But the only way they have been able to do so is to talk through those issues. Reality tells us that people in the school community must have time for

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dialogue if they are to collaboratively rethink the American school.

Reality #4: Outside perspectives. We cannot restructure public education by ourselves. As Direction 2000 unfolded, the perspectives of people outside the school and school district became invaluable. In the developmental stages, parents on Direction 2000 committees provided the necessary reality checks for teachers. As our proposal took definite shape, Direction 2000 committee members sought reactions from parents through a series of neighborhood coffees. The parent perspective strengthened our proposal and enabled us to more effectively communicate our ideas to the larger community.

Approximately 50 community members, most of them business people, serve our restructuring project in an advisory and/or support capacity. The Direction 2000 Advisory Board provides us with reactions, insightful suggestions, and direct support. For example, their suggestions regarding our proposed graduation requirements helped validate our work and prompted us to make revisions in a couple of areas. Members of the Direction 2000 Foundation Board apprise us of the financial requirements for our efforts as they present Direction 2000 to potential financial supporters.

Education and business consultants round out our outside perspectives. Education consultants from New York

and Virginia have helped us over the daunting hurdles of developing our performance-based graduation requirements and corresponding assessment strategies. An assessment and evaluation expert from the University of Colorado in Boulder and a private-sector researcher from Denver provide technical assistance to our Project Evaluation committee. A full-service marketing and advertising firm in Denver has donated hundreds of hours to our project, assisting us with communication and marketing. All these people serve us by providing information and skills our faculty members do not have. Reality tells us that restructurers can't go it alone.

Reality #5: Fear and rumor. As the time for implementation draws near, students, parents, and teachers are prone to doubt, even panic, as they are bombarded with rumors and speculations about the future. "What if our students can't meet your new standards?" "Do we dare proceed without answers to all questions?" "Will I be sued if one of my advisees doesn't graduate?" "What will restructuring mean to my department (courses, job)?" Reality tells us that schools considering restructuring should be prepared to handle the inevitable fears and rumors that accompany change.

Reality #6: Sense of humor. Revolutions are often characterized, it seems, by lack of a sense of humor and a drive to "kill off" people who do have a sense of humor. Humor is necessary, especially when the going is toughest: when a letter to the editor of the local newspaper suggests that Direction 2000 is a plot to prevent students from getting into college or when not one parent shows up at the first coffee for interested parents. Take your work, not yourself, seriously, goes the adage. Reality tells us that a sense of humor helps us achieve that goal.

Reality #7: Political compromise. Different disciplines have different perspectives on teaching, learning, and change. Different departments within a school are at different stages in the change process. Different people respond differently to change, depending in part on where they are in their professional careers. All these differences

Photograph by Carol LaVaque



Jim Hecke, chair of Littleton High School's Building Council, supervises the voting during the staff graduation requirements referendum.

require political compromise; failure to compromise will almost assuredly freeze the organization.

Restructuring is a process of constant mutual adaptation—the adaptation of the new program to the existing program and vice versa, until the original problems that gave rise to the restructuring effort are solved. No one at Littleton High School is completely satisfied with every aspect of our new program. But most of us feel that, taken as a whole, the restructured school will be far superior to the old. Reality tells us that the process of political compromise will continue indefinitely in the restructured school.

Our Experience of the Realities

The activities of Littleton's Graduation Requirements Committee (GRC) reflect the influences of these realities of restructuring. For example, during the 1989–90 school year the committee met 21 times. The first 10 meetings (1 all-day and 9 after-school sessions) were attended by the 12 teacher members. In mid-February, 6 parents and 6 students joined the teachers; 5 of the next 11 meetings were in the evening, 2 were all-day sessions. These dull details illustrate the need for sacrifice (after-school and evening meetings) and the need for money for released

time (all-day sessions). Teachers, though they may be willing to donate some time, cannot completely restructure public education after a day of wrestling with students, and free of charge at that.

Money also made possible 5 days of meetings during the summer of 1990, when a team of 10 teachers discussed and wrote detailed descriptions of our brief graduation statements. But 60-some hours of meetings, plus 40 summer hours—why so much time? Because we found we needed time to talk. We have learned how hard it is for teachers and parents to set aside traditional beliefs about education, most of which, after all, are like religious beliefs and are religiously held. What

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people most needed to do was to talk themselves out of some of the old practices and beliefs and into something new. And that takes time.

Talking, we forced ourselves and each other to listen, think, refine, and redefine, as well as to see things that have sometimes gone under the names of "the whole picture" and "the whole child." Our talking also broke down some of the corrupting isolation of traditional arrangements. Teachers, parents, and students come from different starting points—horizontal and vertical, if you will. Talk unites them in many ways. Those who have not engaged in all the talking, via this committee or others, often remain isolated, suspicious, resentful, and cynical. It is nice that participation in Direction 2000 has not been imposed from above but sad that some teachers have been unable to escape the old system's tyranny.

The advice of consultants has also been invaluable. Vincent Campbell forced us to think and rethink, with his questions, "How will you evaluate this, and when?" and "How can you measure that?"

When Grant Wiggins spoke to members of the committee, who were bogged down in details and frustrated by their inability to agree on exact wording, it was a pivotal moment. "You don't need to be perfect, do you?" Wiggins asked. "Why create a perfect document? Submit your flawed document to the staff and ask for help."

So we did. And the staff did. Perhaps this activity explains faculty support for the graduation requirements eight months later. When teachers voted in December on the 19 requirements, 90 percent accepted 17 of them, 88 percent accepted 1, and 74 percent accepted 1.

Obstacles created by fear and rumor are not easily ignored or overlooked. These are erected by those who may accuse us of building requirements only for bright college-bound kids or, on the other hand, those who charge that we are watering down standards on behalf of the average or below average, so that the college-bound will never achieve their goal.

Fig. 1. Level 1 Graduation Requirements

The Littleton High School graduate:

1. Speaks and writes articulately and effectively.
2. Reads and listens actively.
3. Uses another language at an intermediate level, so as to appreciate the relationship between language and culture.
4. Reads and evaluates literature.
5. Uses the problem solving process in various fields to qualify and quantify information, to make critical distinctions, and to arrive at a decision.
6. Uses his/her knowledge of the past to explain the present and anticipate the future.
7. Applies physical and cultural geography to his/her understanding of societies.
8. Understands the structures, operations, and relationships of governments in the United States.
9. Applies skills and scientific concepts to explain his/her world, find solutions for its problems, and suggest improvements in the quality of life.
10. Effectively applies mathematical principles and operations to solve a range of problems.
11. Participates in and is aesthetically aware of the visual and performing arts.
12. Demonstrates a practical knowledge of specific, current tools and technical systems used by society.
13. Demonstrates an awareness of how his/her environment is affected by technology in everyday life.
14. Implements a plan for physical and mental health.
15. Evaluates his/her own goals and demonstrates self-discipline.
16. Interacts well and works cooperatively with others.
17. Understands the importance of ethical conduct.
18. Has actively contributed to community or school service organizations.
19. Understands the nature of economics as it applies to everyday living.

Colleagues raise some obstacles: a few teachers may simply want to avoid having to change much during their last years of teaching. Parents raise other obstacles: rumors of low standards and no more honors classes can sweep through a neighborhood and provoke great antagonism, while inspiring few requests for confirmation or denial.

"What if colleges won't accept graduates of this new system?" "What about the student who transfers in the middle of the junior year?" "What about the student who can't pass a requirement?" Are these questions designed to help us keep reality in mind, or are they intended as time-consuming derailments? The restructurers see such criticism as nit-picking, and it is only with a sense of humor that they can survive it.

Humor is a very important reality. The lack of it can leave restructurers on the point of collapse and make a

committee meeting more maddening than it needs to be. Humor enabled members to keep a healthy attitude and take their work, instead of themselves, seriously. Understandably, tempers did flare now and then. One parent abandoned the committee, apparently because it did not function as efficiently and quickly as his office committees. Their sense of humor gave the other members some perspective on that event.

Compromise is another reality. Because they have seldom been involved directly in arranging education or in operating schools, classroom teachers have much to learn, and quickly, about politics and compromise. Others have politicked and compromised for them in the past; now teachers must do so for themselves. "Sink or compromise" could have been the motto of the committee, so many members learned to show restraint, settle for half a loaf, and achieve temporary advances, rather than

fight to the death for this or that belief. The committee members, in fact, became quite proficient in the very skills of cooperative learning and decision making they had decided all Littleton High School graduates should possess.

Our New Realities

The committee, in its talkative encounters with reality, produced two documents. One, included here (see fig. 1), is a list of graduation requirements in brief, somewhat general form. The other is a working draft that describes in detail each requirement. These descriptions are already helping to guide us as we design demonstrations and identify standards for measuring both proficiency and excellence.

A glance at the list of requirements will show that the 19 items are products of compromises. Departmental concerns cannot be ignored; for, whether we like it or not, we still have departments. Our desire for more interdisciplinary requirements may have to wait; perhaps the demonstrations instead of the requirement can be interdisciplinary.

Staying Flexible for the Future

As we move forward with Direction 2000, we will try to maintain "creative flexibility"—we are not locking ourselves into a plan and a process with no hope of modification or change. Since we have never been where we are about to go, we know modifications and changes will be necessary. Creating an exact map detailing every decision before the journey begins may provide a sense of security, but it is a great way to invite accidents, or even disasters.

The saying "If it works, don't fix it" has been popular off and on. But Direction 2000 is based on the notion that if it doesn't work, you must fix it. That is why we are trying to fix the present system and why we must always be ready and willing to fix the new one. □

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