

Introduction

Honors Night

JOSEPH DIMARTINO
Education Alliance at Brown University

I sat alone at the Honors Night celebration on that June evening in 1995—mortified that my wife, Pat, had stormed out of the high school rather than suffer through another minute of hypocrisy. At that ceremony, we were lavished with praise for being outstanding parents. I sat alone through it all because Pat had the courage to express her indignation publicly by leaving. Maybe I should have joined her protest, but, as I sheepishly asked others for a ride home after the dinner was complete, I reflected on the events that prompted her to abandon the celebration of her parenthood in the middle of the principal’s speech. Pat had launched her public demonstration against a school environment that had failed all of our children. She had seen better than I that perhaps all of the children who attend the American High School of the 20th century are being shortchanged in unnecessary ways. Her departure from the honors ceremony fueled my own quest for high schools that serve all students, a quest that now includes my part in developing this book with educators from across the Northeast.

FAILING EACH IN THE NAME OF ALL

To appreciate what precipitated Pat’s demonstration, you will need some background on our family, our commitment to public education, and the events that led up to the emotions of “Honors Night.” Having graduated from the schools in the same town, where both Pat and I had strong family roots, I was convinced that our children would benefit

from exposure to diverse learners and ethnic populations who fill our high school. After all, the high school had worked well enough for me and for all my siblings. Our family had developed the belief that it is the public's obligation to provide a high quality education for all—the foundation of a democratic society. So, we were unprepared for the inequities and shortfalls that we would discover as our children advanced through public schools.

In the fall of 1985, Pat and I made a life-changing decision to complete our family by adopting two older boys from Guatemala. Mauricio was twelve years old at the time and Erick was six, making a family of six children, all approaching high school age. Tom, a biological son and our oldest, was twelve years old that summer. Mick, who was adopted from Korea in 1981, was ten. Gina, adopted from Korea as an infant in 1976, was also ten. And Lisa, a biological daughter, was eight. It was that fall when we began to despair for the fate of public education in America. Clustered from age eight to twelve, our children began to prepare for high school in the '90s.

In 1981, when Mick was adopted, we had been totally oblivious of the needs of children from a different culture that spoke a different language. We enrolled Mick in a regular kindergarten program and waited while everyone assured us that it would take a year for him to be fully fluent in English. When he began to fall behind in the first grade and was referred for special education services, we were thankful for what we perceived to be the knowledge and caring that would address Mick's specific "learning disability." Five years later, Mauricio and Erick came to this country speaking only Spanish. We also were aware that their schooling in Guatemala had been woefully inadequate. It was obvious to us that the boys, especially Mauricio in the fifth grade, would need more than a year's kindergarten to catch up to their peers in their command of the English language.

Although we requested that Mauricio and Erick be placed in the elementary school that our other four children had attended, we were informed that the only way they could get English as a Second Language (ESL) services was to be bused to an elementary school several miles away. At Mauricio's and Erick's school open house that fall, we discovered that the boys had been placed in basement classrooms which had been a wood storage closet and a locker room when I had

attended junior high in that very same building. We were firsthand witnesses to the “services gap” that is the precursor of the achievement gap in high school that so often occurs for children of different cultural backgrounds. The dark basement setting where our boys were first exposed to the “promise” of an American education was a despairing place indeed!

As we began to understand how the ESL program worked, we also came to the realization that we had already failed Mick, our Korean son, who had been tagged as a special education student in his elementary years. His only “learning disability” was that he spoke a different language and experienced his formative years in a cultural setting that is unfamiliar to us here in America. Rather than receiving special education remediation, he needed to be taught English as a second language. During the next several years as we advocated for better educational conditions for all immigrant children, we saw that our problems were not unique. In school after school, we encountered the same low expectations, poor facilities, and highly impersonal programs.

Mauricio is an outstanding athlete with a winning personality who tries hard to please. In high school, he wasn’t any trouble in his classes. In fact, he had a calming influence on those around him. He was careful to turn in all his homework assignments, so he got through high school with reasonably good grades. But, as we so rudely discovered, he was nowhere near possessing the minimal skills needed to succeed in college. In Mauricio’s high school classes, virtually every teacher counted the completion of homework as 25 to 30 percent of the final grade. Also, in every one of those classes, the homework was not examined to determine whether it was done properly. Mauricio’s desire to please resulted in his always turning in his homework. (Amazingly, it didn’t seem curious at the time that he seemed to always have a girlfriend who was in all of the same classes that he was.) So, Mauricio, by merely turning in all of his homework and by getting the additional 25 percent of the grade that accompanied good behavior in class, started out with fifty points toward his term grade. He could bring that up to a solid “C” average without knowing much of anything at all!

When faced with 130 sets of homework papers daily, a cursory two-minute examination of each of them would require more than four

hours of a teacher's time! Besides, the teachers had no way of knowing whether any individual student had actually done the homework alone, or whether it was merely copied from a friend's copy. In 1916, Professor Eugene C. Brooks, a North Carolina professor, concluded that because of homework, schools either "consciously or unconsciously" reproduce social inequality. Unfortunately, we discovered this too late.

During that fateful second semester in 1995, Erick began running from school, the first of what would turn out to be Erick's three years as a high school freshman. Erick repeated the ninth grade three times because he hadn't earned enough credits to advance to sophomore standing. He absolutely hated being at the school. We spent much of the semester doing all that we could to get Erick to go to school. We would drag him to the front entrance kicking and screaming. At the first opportunity, he would escape out a back door. At that time, the consequence for leaving school without permission was a three-day suspension—four free days for the price of one.

While he wouldn't admit it at the time, we are certain that Erick felt incapable of doing the work at the school. Not being seen as stupid by his peers was very important to him. In the culture that existed in the high school with his friends, it was okay for him to be delinquent but it was decidedly not cool to be dumb! During that semester, his English teacher called for a disciplinary meeting because of his failure to attend her class—a memorable meeting with the assistant principal. In fact, on days when Erick was actually in school, he would often sneak up to the library rather than attend this particular class. I asked if she could just tell us about something she had done that might make Erick want to be in her class. She stuttered and made it very clear to us that she had made no attempt to make her class appealing to students. "After all, this is high school and high schools don't do such things as make learning interesting or entertaining." Unfortunately, the whole high school day leaves little room for student interests or aspirations to be considered as integral to their learning.

Mick's first semester grades included a grade in meteorology that was so low that passing the course was an impossibility. Although he had accumulated enough total credits, Mick would not be able to graduate with his class because failing in May would leave him one credit short of the science requirement. In a flurry of meetings at the school,

we sought ways to allow Mick to meet the science requirement in an alternative way. School policy allowed students who failed a course to be tutored for thirty hours on the same content, giving the student a grade for the tutoring to be averaged in with the class grade. After suggesting this course of action, we were informed that the policy existed only for students who had actually failed a course. Mick had not yet failed the course and would not be allowed to utilize the tutoring option until he did.

Still struggling to get Mick through high school, we discovered that the local community college offered a course that he could take that would allow him to meet the science requirement. When we asked about that possibility, we were informed that the courses at the community college were semester courses. Even though the content covered in the course was comparable to the high school course, it did not include enough seat time to earn the one Carnegie Unit necessary to meet the graduation requirement. Again, the rules prevailed over common sense.

As the year was drawing to a close, Pat and I had come to be seen by both teachers and administrators alike as the most annoying and irresponsible parents in the town. Teachers and administrators at the school made it clear that they believed a lack of appropriate parental guidance was behind the failure of Mauricio, Mick, and Erick. During the same semester, Tom, who had always been motivated for good grades but never became truly engaged in learning, was getting by but clearly not excelling as a junior at Drew. Gina, a strong student in high school, was struggling as a freshman at Wheaton College. With the receipt of her first semester grades, we discovered that Gina was totally unprepared to deal with the quantity of research and writing that was required at a competitive college. We also received Mauricio's first semester grades at Salve Regina College. It was only then that we realized that he had somehow managed to get through high school without learning anything. Their college malaise brought us to a rude awakening. High school had failed to prepare all our children, even those who seemed successful.

HONORING THE FEW WHO FIT

It was against this backdrop that we attended honors night. Lisa was graduating in the top 5 percent of her class and was receiving recogni-

tion for that accomplishment. At honors night, we were being praised as outstanding parents—all because Lisa happened to be the kind of student who could do well in that high school setting. After a certain amount of praise from the podium, Pat tapped me on the shoulder and whispered, “What do you think was harder, getting Mick to miss graduation by one credit or getting Lisa to make honors?” A few minutes passed and Pat poked me again. “Look around the room. Do you think any of these parents could have gotten Mick to graduate with his class?” Another few minutes and more praise for the parents in the room and I got another poke. By this time the pokes were stronger. “How much harder was it for us to get Mauricio, Erick, and Mick an adequate education through high school than it was for Gina, Lisa, and Tom?” Her face was getting red. The final poke came from a rigid finger with a sharp fingernail and caused some serious pain. “Don’t you think that Lisa could have learned just as much if she had been given the course syllabi and a library card?”

I knew the answer to these questions. We believed that Lisa, Tom, and Gina would have learned just as much with the syllabi and library card as from fitting into the four-year high school system. We also knew that for every hour we spent supporting, monitoring, or advocating for Lisa, Tom, or Gina, we spent at least *one hundred hours* doing the same for Mauricio, Mick, or Erick. The school had made no effort to gain from the vast knowledge and experiences our children brought to school. So as the principal congratulated us again for Lisa’s school achievement, Pat staged her lonely protest and stormed out of the room. I wished I had joined her.

PERSONALIZED LEARNING FOR EACH STUDENT

Although our children have moved on, we have continued to push the school district to seek ways to reach all of the students who attend the high school. During the next school year, I discovered that the State Department of Education reported that the dropout rate in our high school had soared from 17 percent to 46 percent! When I reported this publicly at a school board meeting, the board attempted to deny the veracity of the numbers. After much discussion, the superintendent in

our district decided to form a committee to look into the cause and suggest strategies to address the dropout problem. Naturally, I volunteered to be part of the effort. And, since we had new administrative leadership in the district, someone who truly cared about making school a success for all students, I was asked to serve! I immediately accepted.

When I took a new position as director for Student Centered Learning of the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University, the LAB joined my town to conduct a survey of dropouts. This study, which included open-ended interviews of dropouts, documented a deep sense of alienation and anger that these former students had for their high school. When asked why they dropped out of school, virtually all of the respondents began by taking all of the blame on themselves. When we asked why other students quit school, the tone of our conversations changed, and the students began to identify problems that they had with the school. Their own sense of disenfranchisement became very apparent.

Nearly all of the students felt that the high school didn't care about "kids like me." They stated that teachers, and particularly administrators, cared about some other group or groups of students much more than their group. The identified groups were not always the same. It might have been the college prep students, the special education students, or the athletes, but it was always a group other than the respondent's group. Higher achieving students felt that the school favored athletes and special needs students. The athletes thought that the high achievers were favored. The special needs students thought that the school favored athletes. And, the immigrants felt particularly disenfranchised, believing that all were favored over them.

All those students who had chosen to drop out of school felt that the school didn't care about them. Their emotions are best illustrated by the student who said, "Teachers only care about smart kids." Interestingly, one respondent recognized his own favor in the school: "Teachers favor a lot of people, and have problems with others. I was one of the favored ones." A majority of the respondents' comments included statements that expressed disenfranchisement, such as "teachers (and/or administrators) don't care about me." Furthermore, an even greater majority commented that boredom was a significant factor in the deci-

sion to drop out. One student, when asked if he felt working too many hours outside of school was a contributing factor stated, "The real issue is at school. Not work."

Many of our interviewees mentioned the guidance they received at the school. In some instances students reported that guidance-related problems profoundly affected them. In one case a student discovered halfway through his senior year that an art class he had taken at a neighboring school could not be counted toward graduation credit because he had taken a similar course in his ninth grade year at a private high school. In another case a student discovered that he would be unable to graduate with his class without incurring substantial tutoring expenses in order to make up for a lost credit. He chose to take the GED instead. Another student contended that guidance had made a mistake in calculating his credits. He, too, found out late in his senior year that an error had been made and he wouldn't be able to graduate. Another student, responding to uncaring attitudes, simply said, "Guidance there stinks."

Our dropout study also included interviews with the parents of dropouts. Even though the families were more likely to allocate a good portion of the blame to their children, they expressed strong feelings of bitterness towards the high school. Most mentioned that their children were disenfranchised by the schools. Their perception was that the school didn't care to have their son or daughter in attendance. One mother stated, "Teachers have no patience for anything." Another alleged that she witnessed a guidance counselor tell her son, "You might just as well quit school." The parent's perception was that the statement was intended to urge her son to drop out. Another mother complained, "It wasn't cool to ask for help. Teachers should know to offer help in a quiet way." Yet another mother offered, "Public school teachers don't care as much as parochial teachers do."

The families agreed that guidance offered by the school did not benefit, and sometimes hurt, their children. They saw the guidance counselors as the implementers of the "Space Takers" contracts. These contracts were a creation of the school's administration. The contracts were aimed at any student over age sixteen who was not attending at least 75 percent of classes and who had a history of failing several subjects or who was considered a troublemaker. One of the conditions of

these contracts was that if a student missed more than ten days of school in a quarter, he or she would be dismissed from school. One mother stridently complained about the contract, saying, “The contract takes control away from the parents. It tells the student if you don’t go you’ll get thrown out. It rewards the kids [who are dismissed] because they don’t want to be there anyway.”

During this time, I was acting as an educational surrogate parent for a number of adolescents who had special education needs and who were wards of the state. Many of these youths were in alternative educational settings. All had Individualized Education Plans. In many cases these IEPs worked extremely well in engaging the student in his or her own education, allowing them to have a strong role in establishing personalized learning goals and evidence of the achievement of those goals. The IEP could also provide a variety of methods for measuring progress toward goals. In short, the IEP planning and monitoring could become a positive tool for improving engagement and learning for students, if parents and caring adults were included. However, in schools where the meetings were more like contract negotiations between a special education administrator and parent or guardian without including all the adults that had contact with the student, there was less likelihood of success. If an IEP process could succeed in linking learning to an individual’s goals, why not develop IEPs with all students, using their parents and teachers as guides and mentors for the special journey each must take to assume control over their own lives—and improve life in their communities?

AIMING REFORM AT PERSONALIZED LEARNING

Beginning in the spring of 1996, I began to see positive interest developing in personalized learning. At its annual meeting, the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) published *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution*, which had been developed with support from the Carnegie Foundation for Teaching. In it, NASSP, which up until that time had been considered the staunchest promoter of the status quo, publicly acknowledged that our high schools needed to make radical changes in order to succeed with all

students. *Breaking Ranks* delivered the message that “the high school of the 21st Century must be much more student-centered and above all much more personalized in programs, services and intellectual rigor.”

In this book, we highlight current initiatives that aim to personalize learning for each high school student. The first section focuses on Personalized Learning Plans that tie learning to the talents and aspirations of each person. The second section focuses on classroom teaching that allows individuals to gain knowledge while pursuing their own interests. The third section describes high school designs that engage students in democratic processes. The fourth describes systemic changes that must accompany and support personalized learning for all students. The book is organized to provide a different entry point for people who are beginning to imagine high school learning based on personal engagement working at any level of school organization. Our writers are practitioners with practical interest in moving high schools toward personalization. Each of us is writing about what we have learned from experience and examined through research. A completely personalized high school may not yet exist, but its potential exists in the stories and thoughts you will encounter here.

I believe that the ideas described in these chapters would certainly have improved the high school experience for each of my very different children. If Tom had participated in some learning experiences outside the school walls, such as the internships at Montpelier High School, he might very well have developed a love of learning that he would be able to carry with him throughout his adult life. Perhaps Gina would have been better prepared for her college experience if she had had the opportunity to complete a yearlong senior project requiring substantial amounts of research, writing, and performance exhibitions, as is required at Souhegan High School in Amherst, New Hampshire. I suspect that Mauricio would have learned much more and been much better prepared for higher education if he had attended a high school like East Side High in Manhattan, where student work is the subject of study. Personal profiles and performance graduation requirements would not have allowed him to graduate without the skills necessary to be successful in college. I am convinced that if Mick had been allowed to pursue study in his own interest, as is done at the Met school in Providence, Rhode Island, he would have become more engaged in

learning in many areas. Thus, he would not only have graduated with his class; he would know and be able to do much more than he currently does, with added self-confidence gained from hands-on experience. Lisa, who is civic-minded and caring toward others, would certainly have benefited from attending a high school with a strong emphasis on service at the heart of learning. A program such as Side by Side (highlighted in Chapter 7) would have made Lisa's high school experience much more enjoyable and meaningful for her. And, if Erick had the connection to an adult advisor and a personalized learning plan in the school such as exists at Montpelier or Mount Abraham Union High Schools, he would not have been alienated as he was, running from the school at every opportunity.

High school reform has had a disappointing history in American education because most reform initiatives overlook a defining attribute of young adult learners—their drive to establish an independent identity in their community. To date, the effort to change high schools has consisted largely of setting standards for all high school students, an approach that seeks uniformity of achievement among high school graduates—clearly a worthwhile goal. However, standards-based reform can be implemented in ways that prove unsuccessful because they fail to address a major condition of adolescence and young adulthood: burgeoning individuality, often manifested as rebellious determination not to be treated as members of any category as youths are striving for independence and responsibility.

The standards movement has already shown how imposing a single set of expectations on young adults may modestly improve test scores but fail to engage their minds. Throughout the high school years, students are growing increasingly determined to explore their uniqueness and assert an independent pathway into adult life. Young adults are driven to create and express a personal role in the adult world around them. Facing adult challenges in a highly complex society, high school students respond actively to learning opportunities in high school when they can assume increasing responsibility for plotting their own course. Changing high schools so every student meets common standards while designing and pursuing a unique pathway toward adult roles is the purpose of personalized learning—and this book.

Ruth Simmons, the newly named president of Brown University, has

described her own experience with emotions that Pat and I were feeling at Honors Night in 1995. Phyllis Wheatley High School, where she had graduated, is no longer the place she remembers from her youth. When she visits Wheatley now, she senses a sadness there, a lack of excitement:

A school ought to be a magical place where you are queen or king, and where what you get to do is to focus on your intellect, and on what you can accomplish as a human being, and you come to understand what your life can be. That's what school should be for children. Not a place where you go to study for a standardized test. Not a place where you go where you hear every day about the problems that you are. Not a place where you go where people tell you that you are under-performing. Not a place where you go where people tell you that you are part of some pathology.

That's not what a school is supposed to be. School is supposed to be full of hope, and it's a place where you go to find out how magical your mind is and how terrific it will be when you develop your mind to its full potential. (*Washington Post*, March 21, 2001)

Personalized Learning: Preparing High School Students to Create Their Futures presents a rationale and best methods for adapting the high school experience to fit the talents and inclinations of students who grow increasingly more unique as they approach their graduation. Written by seasoned educators who have developed, studied, and practiced ways to institute “personalized learning” in the often impersonal machinery of the comprehensive high school, this book constitutes a general guide to reform-oriented educators throughout the United States. Personalized Learning Plans, community-based learning, project-based teaching, standards-based portfolios, and transcripts certifying high performance constitute a comprehensive reform strategy for high school learning that permits individual students to develop and demonstrate their unique talents and interests. Data-informed school development strategies that celebrate the growth of individual performance are proving to be powerful methods for engaging a high school faculty in reforming its own practice. This book presents personalized learning as the proper focus for high school reform, grounded in the concrete experience of writer-educators who have been working at all levels of high school organization throughout the country.