
A Meaningful High School Diploma

Creating a meaningful high school diploma will expose students to the full range of adult options, which will enable them to shape their high school education in a way that connects to their current interests and stimulates the growth of new ones.

BY SHEPHERD SIEGEL

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Awar is being waged over what knowledge is most important and who is best qualified to teach it to students in grades 6 through 12.

The board of education in my state of Washington chose “meaningful” as the one word to describe its mission in re-examining graduation requirements and high school diplomas. What more could we hope to give students than the ability to create meaning in their lives? When we ask whether a public education should prepare graduates to survive and thrive in the world as we know it, or whether it should prepare graduates to invent and create a world greater than what we can even imagine, the answer must be a resounding *Yes* to both.

Abandoning either responsibility would be a critical failure to educate. Giving meaningfulness primacy in graduation requirements and diplomas implies the intellectual power, imagination, and compassion to build a better world, as well as the skills and knowledge to earn a living wage and participate in our economy and in both our local and our global communities. The construct of meaningfulness must be both practical and ideal.

Enter the graduation requirements debate. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation’s authoritative study, *The Silent Epidemic* (Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morrison 2006), confirms that nearly a third of U.S. high school students do not graduate. Thus, we must transform high school into something that fully engages all youth. Merely tinkering with the current structure will only perpetuate the inequities, antiquities, and failings built into it. Wrong and outdated notions of what constitutes an appropriate high school education persist. We cannot serve all students best and set the stage for creating tomorrow’s world by relying on a 200-year-old “core” that was intended to educate only those being groomed for power and influence.

Over the past decade, the standards and high-stakes testing movement has had a chokehold on content, dismissing alternative views and affecting budget-poor high schools by eliminating electives, arts, career and technical education, and other approaches to learning. The “tail” of narrow standards has wagged the “dog” of secondary education, doing some good, but more damage.

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RETURN TO THE ROOTS

We need to reconnect secondary education to some of the roots of what a meaningful education is, roots that have been lost in the shuffle.

Thus I propose a system that can hold most of what we now offer in high schools but is flexible enough to accommodate a variety of student experiences and the waves of a changing world. This structure has four worlds of knowledge, each with its own convincing argument.

PREBACCALAUREATE

The first argument is that the four-year college degree, or baccalaureate, is the benchmark for the success of a high school education, and all high school education should be geared toward preparing students to pursue a baccalaureate degree in either a humanities/liberal arts or a math/science/engineering focus. No matter what career young adults ultimately choose, liberal arts prebaccalaureate studies prepare them best. High schools are and should be judged by how many of their students get admitted into “good” colleges. Courses here would include humanities/liberal arts or math, science, and engineering.

CAREER + TECHNICAL

No form of education is more engaging to students and more important to the U.S. economy than career + technical education. Career + technical education connects with the greatest range of learning styles, and it connects students to the greatest range of career possibilities. There is no more powerful tool for dropout prevention. Career + technical education is the original and logical place for contextual, project-based, and community-based learning. Learning through your hands plays a crucial role in developing the mind (Wilson 1999). We already

produce many humanities-based college graduates, but we are lacking college graduates with science and technical degrees and industry-certified graduates of technical and vocational schools. Nations that outstrip our science and math achievement scores do so because they value a technical education. Areas of study here include agriculture and environmental science; arts, communications, and media; business, marketing, and information technology; health and human services; and science, engineering, and industry.

CITIZENSHIP IN A DEMOCRACY

The American experience and the wisdom of John Dewey have taught us that public education's most important task is the preservation of our democracy and its ability to teach students its principles. Public education must be the "foundation of our freedom, the guarantee of our future, and the source of our enlightenment" (Hutchins, in Goodlad 1984). Education's main job is to inspire citizens to be actively engaged in the public sphere and in their communities. Courses here would include social studies, civics, athletics, service learning, physical education, health, nutrition, independent living, and financial literacy.

FOLK TRADITION + CREATIVE

Before we are students, citizens, employees, or Americans, we are humans, deeply moved by our power to imagine. We are creative. We are playful. We like to laugh. We like the moment of inspiration. And we live in families and in cultures. Without them and the creative urge, no one would paint, play music, help others, or, indeed, do just about anything worth doing, including plowing a field or curing a disease. Public education can help students discover the spark of creativity, connect to folk traditions that distinguish humanity, and tap the creative wells of our traditions. Courses here would include the arts and also cultural and community activities that help students answer the question, "What is the spark of humanity?"

NAVIGATING HIGH SCHOOL

We must find a way for all students to steer their own course through high school, thus preparing them to steer their own course through life. And we must do that without abdicating either the requirement that all students meet high standards or our common responsibility to be guides, mentors, and counselors.

Organizing coursework within these four worlds of knowledge gives students a tool to do that. During 8th grade, students would prepare their first version of a high school plan. Teachers and counselors would in-

roduce students to the four worlds of knowledge and the courses included in each. Students would identify courses in which they are studying, learning, and experiencing each of these four worlds for no less than 15% of their course load, and no more than 35%.

This approach could get very messy, but it also could elevate the conversation around what activities and studies can and should engage students during high school.

Providing a good introduction to the full range of postsecondary educational options would be part of the preparation. At some point early in their high school years, students would also meet graduates of college as well as those who took apprenticeships, industry certification, graduate school, and even some of the more bohemian approaches to adult life.

In Washington, several districts have adopted the Navigation 101 approach to student guidance and counseling (www.k12.wa.us/navigation101). In Navigation 101, students take a class that addresses planning skills, career exploration, portfolio development, and the like. They lead annual, personalized conferences with their families and a mentor-teacher in which they explain their past performance and construct their plans. If graduation requirements felt less like some crowded and arbitrary dictum from the state, school district, or high school and more like a tool in the hands of the student, then such counseling approaches could realize their potential to reduce dropouts, improve performance, engage students, and guide them toward adult lives based on a clearly realized identity.

ROAD-TESTING THE MODEL

What would it look like, from the student's perspective, to live in this reworked world of graduation requirements, to begin to grow into and inhabit multiple worlds of knowledge? This approach would work well with all students, including those who have no idea what they want to do after high school. Students with intellectual or emotional disabilities would be able to craft a pathway equal in dignity and aspiration to the one traversed by AP students. "Alternative" students with highly independent ideas would be able to make this work for them. Students otherwise on their way out the door would find a "hook"

in this process that would make it easier and more appealing to stay in school.

We are fairly clear on what constitutes the baccalaureate world. Career + technical education also has a clearly defined system of state approval and links to industry standards. But the overall concepts of citizenship and folk tradition + creative are less well defined. In a best-case scenario, this introduction will encourage students to think deeply about their high school education and to present a rationale for the courses they choose. In a worst-case scenario, the concept will be corrupted by less inspired kids just trying to get by, or by overly concerned parents who care less about three of the areas and want to finagle a maximum of course work into their favored one.

Let's look at several examples of dilemmas that will want resolution: An art history course could count as a citizenship or a folk tradition + creative course. Financial literacy could be taught as a career + technical course but also as a citizenship course. A pre-engineering course could be taught in the baccalaureate area but count as career + technical, and vice versa. An applied math course could be taught in the career + technical education area but would count toward the baccalaureate graduation requirement. Some music and drama students would want their experiences in those programs to count as their career + technical education. A woodworking class taught by a master cabinetmaker could just as easily fulfill the idea of a folk tradition + creative class as it could career + technical education.

The main thing is to build a culture of learning in which students (and their families) understand the value of all four worlds. This approach could get very messy, but it also could elevate the conversation around

what activities and studies can and should engage students during high school. Certainly, it could be overwhelming for some 14-year-olds. And some students will benefit from a more structured approach. Schools can respond to that by recommending "packages" of courses for students to choose from, and thus simplify the process for those still learning to grasp it.

One purpose here is to eliminate tracking. When students are sorted without consultation and based on perceived or measured ability, that is tracking. When students are empowered and can use their own free will to choose a pathway and a concentration of studies based on their interests and guided by broad but credible structures of knowledge, that is the opposite of tracking. Because we are asking students to begin "flexing" the decision-making "muscle" earlier in life — learning to make and live with a decision — the process of changing their minds, which is probable and which this system allows, is less traumatic and more easily accommodated.

Consider Thien. She has her heart set on attending one of the premier universities. She will be able to focus a high percentage of her time in the baccalaureate area, probably 35%, but also take classes in the citizenship, folk tradition + creative, and career + technical areas that will be well-received by the admissions offices and will prepare her for meaningful college study.

Or Ahmed. Ahmed loves to tinker with things, ride trails in the woods on his mountain bike, and spend time absorbed in his comic books. He should be able to fashion a meaningful set of courses that blend art with pre-engineering and graphic arts. He manages to keep school interesting for himself and stay involved by being able to set the tone of his studies. His concentra-

tion in the folk tradition + creative and career + technical worlds is what engages him, but he will still need to flesh it out with studies in citizenship and baccalaureate to get his meaningful diploma. And this array of courses will keep many, many doors open for him.

To Angelina, nothing matters more than the fight for social justice. She'll look long and hard at courses offered in the citizenship world of her high school and also take full advantage of the baccalaureate offerings, opting for the maximum in those two areas. She still will fill out her knowledge of work and careers and connect to her own culture as she plans her schedule. Her commitment to social justice may grow from

compassion for working people, and she could pursue that dream through work based on skills learned in career + technical education courses. By the time she is a junior, if she changes her mind and decides that the social issue that attracts her the most is saving the environment, she will be able to develop her expertise through science courses in the baccalaureate world. She'll also pursue a service learning project that is relevant to the mix of classes she decides to take.

Merely tinkering with the current structure will only perpetuate the inequities, antiquities, and failings built into it.

Julian is a musician, and he's pretty good. He'll want to focus on courses in the folk tradition + creative area. But to ensure that he gets to work in the music (or film, or TV, or web-based) industry, he'll also take career + technical education courses in sound recording, TV/video production, web design, and the like. And the content of his work will be grounded in a deeper understanding of the human condition gained through his baccalaureate and citizenship courses.

Amiri has only recently arrived in the United States, at the age of 17. Though very bright, he needs time to learn English, and his family is anxious for him to begin earning to help support them. Fortunately, there are high-quality career + technical courses in which he can run with his high kinesthetic intelligence at a pace faster than his language acquisition, and he can enter adult life as a highly paid automotive technician, following the great immigrant traditions of our nation. He'll take the kind of citizenship classes that will hasten his understanding of the U.S. system and the rights and responsibilities of his family. And he will get grounding in the baccalaureate area that will keep the doors of higher education open to him as he and his family gain stability in this new land.

Bill has moderate retardation. He'll want the heaviest possible concentrations in career + technical education, so that he can focus on his career and attain the most marketable and sophisticated skills possible. He will also take many courses in the citizenship area. As someone with an intellectual disability, he not only must master the consumer skills of financial literacy and independent living (including health and nutrition), but he also must be very familiar with his rights

as a citizen in a democracy, reducing his vulnerability to exploitation or crime. Fortunately, all of his classes are loaded with math, science, reading, and writing, so he will have the advantage of maximizing those skills in context, even if he takes 35% citizenship and 35% career + technical education.

Syedea loves to work outdoors. She's seen all the amazing construction going up, and she wants to be a part of it. By combining strong baccalaureate science classes with career + technical education pre-engineering and pre-apprenticeship courses, she'll carve out the mobility to pursue anything from the trades to engineering, from architecture to physics.

Finally, from the schools' perspective, they will need to make sure that they offer the highest quality courses in all four worlds of knowledge; they cannot allow any of them to be second class.

When schools adopt this approach and begin turning out the most motivated, engaged, and intellectually interesting high school graduates, the four-year universities will adapt their admissions requirements to attract these students. In other words, the K-12 system will prepare students for all walks of life. Otherwise, four-year baccalaureate institutions — from which only 25% of our high school students graduate — will continue to dictate the high school curriculum, and postsecondary destinations that need other preparations — employers, community colleges, technical schools, the artists' world, the world of public service and community involvement — will be forced to make do. By creating a meaningful high school diploma, students will be exposed to the full range of adult options and will be able to shape their high school education in a way that connects to their current interests and stimulates the growth of new ones. Fully connecting all students to these four worlds of knowledge will equip them to build one incredible world that is our shared future. **K**

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