

A 21st-century Model for Education

Every Pennsylvania high school student should graduate with the skills to be successful in the modern world. I expect we would all agree on that. But what would this actually look like, and how would it be different from what many, if not most, of our schools are doing now?

Fortunately, this wheel doesn't need to be invented. Some years ago, I heard a conference speaker discuss the simple way his organization addressed the issue: they asked business leaders and university administrators, "what important skills do your first-year employees/students lack when they show up at your door?" Here is the collective response: the ability to think critically, communicate clearly, collaborate with others, and be creative problem-solvers (what the Partnership for 21st-Century Skills calls the '4 Cs').

So why isn't every school doing this intentionally and consistently? These concepts aren't new to educators. One problem is that much of the public – and probably most of our policy-makers – is stuck with a mental vision of education based on when *they* went to school, often decades ago. (You know, with the desks all in neat rows.) As a result, we continue to implement so-called education 'reforms' – such as the PSSAs and the high school Keystone exams – that might have made sense *in the middle of the last century* when the United States was still an industrial economy.

Let's begin with the obvious. For example, you can't understand American history without knowing some facts; the basic chronology of events, for example. So it is still important to learn a certain amount of 'stuff'. But you really don't need to memorize the date of the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act (which I did, in 3rd grade!) or the names of the fifty state capitols.

1. If you really need to know, you can look it up on your phone; no trip to the library required.
2. To the extent that the 'memorize and regurgitate' model still exists (and it does - it's called "teaching to the test") it consumes time and energy that could be spent on something more important.
3. It truly misses the point! History, for example, isn't really about 'what' happened, the true value is in understanding *why* it happened.
4. This is the surest way to make any subject boring. (A truly indefensible disservice to our students.)
And perhaps most importantly:
5. That system was *designed* to sort students into winners and losers, something we can no longer afford to do.

I think it's fair to say that model no longer works. But as obsolete as it is now, this 'sorting' model actually worked pretty well as late as the 1970s. If you were fortunate enough to attend a middle-class suburban high school - where it was expected that you would go to college - there's a good chance that you went on to have a successful professional career. But even if you didn't go to college (and the vast majority of students of that era didn't) all you needed in order to have a middle-class life forty years ago was the ability to read, write, do some basic arithmetic, *and follow instructions*. And our educational system was pretty good at that.

There is another aspect of this obsolete model that we ought to consider. Are you curious about how it came to be that every student is required to pass a 'Keystone' exam in Biology in order to graduate high school? Why Biology? Why not a broad understanding of scientific principles (which might actually be useful)? Well, a group of elite university presidents collectively decided that in order to gain admission to college, a student must first complete a minimum number of 'Carnegie' credits, including three in the sciences: Biology, Chemistry and Physics. And thus we have the Biology Keystone exam! – as well as the basic structure of nearly every high school curriculum in the country.

But did I mention that this decision was made in 1906? In 1906, America was still largely an *agrarian* society; relatively few students graduated from high school, and only the sons of the elite went to college. And so, a

one-size-fits-all system built on memorization; that doesn't ask students 'what's important to them?'; that doesn't even ask 'what does every student really need to know?' perpetuates itself.

One thing on which policy-makers do seem to agree is the value of career and technical education for those students who are not 'college-bound'. In other words, let's allow students to spend the four years of high school focused on developing the skills and expertise that they see as useful and important to their future. But why aren't we encouraging every student to do that? Instead of spending tens of thousands of dollars of your parents' money 'figuring out who you are and what you want to do' – which *was* the model when I went to college, when you could still afford to do that – why not help students begin to find a sense of direction and purpose *while they are still in high school?*

So what's the way forward? First, let's stop doing the obsolete and counter-productive, beginning with the time, effort and expense that we waste on standardized testing. Then let's be deliberate about doing what we need to do, and build the development of critical-thinking into everything that happens in school. Let's make sure that our students know how to communicate beyond reading, and writing the five-paragraph essay: every student should know how to speak in public and engage an audience. (The arts will be more important than ever.) Every student should have opportunities to collaborate with others on projects that are meaningful to them – and be able to relate to, and work with, people with experiences different from their own. (Because that's the world they'll be living in.) Every student should come to school thinking, "what problem do I want to solve today?" Or, perhaps, "what do I want to create?" And, "what do I need to learn in order to do that?"

Perhaps most importantly, we should be equipping our students with the skills to be an effective and engaged citizens. (Fortunately, it's the same set of skills!)

In order to do this, we will have to work to create and maintain school environments that are not just physically, but also emotionally safe, where making mistakes is just part of learning; where students feel connected to their teachers and to each other, and where everyone feels respected and has a sense of ownership in 'their' school.

This might not be the school that you or I attended, but it's the school our students need.

David Hutchinson is in his 14th year as a member of the State College Area School Board, and is the Vice-President of the Pennsylvania School Boards Association.