Thinking Outside the Box: The Post-modern High School

I am disenchanted by the contemporary high school, and I believe we can do better. For too many students, our large urban schools are vast, spiritless, unhappy places. Some are bored, some feel like outsiders, some feel intimidated, and most feel disconnected from the real world. Too many fall through the cracks and drop out.

I dream of a post-modern high school based on three components: innovative, alternative structures, close-knit, caring communities, and relevant new curricula – where social justice and equity permeate all aspects of the school.

Alternative school structures

All of the following alternative structures could be introduced without additional funding and would help make secondary school a successful experience for more students.

The 24 Hour High School. Why do we package schools into day schools, night schools, and summer schools? Why couldn't high schools operate like universities, offering courses all year, during the day or at night, on campus or online? These options would allow students to combine work and school and to pursue their education at their own pace, in their own time.

The Four-year, Grade 11-14 high school/ college diploma program, located on a community college campus. Many students would be far more successful in the community college setting than the current regimented high school system. Similar to the CÉGÈP option in Quebec, students could complete their last two years of secondary school during the first two years of community college and then go on to a diploma program.

The Six-year Grade 9-14, Co-op/apprenticeship/internship program. A full day of school disconnects many students from the reality of the real world for too long. By taking longer to obtain a diploma, they could incorporate more real life experience into their formal education.

Grade 7 and 8 Co-op/apprenticeship/internship program. Teachers have identified many students as 'at-risk' by Grades 7 and 8. For many of these students, an early introduction to co-op programs would help develop a positive self-image and improve their selfconfidence and chances for success.

Apprenticeships/internships/mentorships. Apprenticeships and innovative forms of hands-on learning would permeate all of the above, and they would be much more available and start earlier than they do now.

Last summer, I met a young framer for a local construction company. I asked if he had received his training through a community college apprenticeship program. He explained that he learned on the job after he left school at 15. Why can't we get young people like this man into formal apprenticeships earlier?

Years ago, I met two young women who were managing the high-tech sound and lighting system in a CBC studio. CBC had recruited them in Britain – after they had completed a BBC internship program – because there were no trained people in Canada. Why were we going to the UK to recruit young people who could just as easily have been trained here?

Internships are uncommon in our schools, but the opportunities are endless, from fine art galleries and sports venues, to law offices and research labs. We need to think outside the box.

Core Family Groups

I see one common element in each of the formats suggested above: a core family or home grouping who stay together over extended periods of time, with a core of group counsellors and therapists working with students as life counsellors, sharing and discussing everything from sex education and current events, to budgeting and family life, to course selection and career planning.

Many of us remember the sense of community we felt as our 9B or 9E class moved through Grade 9, then into 10B or 10E, and on into Grades 11 and 12. While we gained much in moving to the credit system, we lost that sense of belonging.

The groups I envision would fluctuate in size from perhaps eight to 60. In addition to creating community, they would attempt to build confidence, share concerns, bolster flagging spirits, and even permit peer brow beating. Occasionally, larger groups could promote democratic activities, or provide opportunities for celebrations, guest speakers, or special ceremonies suited to the goals of the program.

To validate their importance, these group sessions would be for credit.

Post-modern Curriculum

Our current high school subjects are not written in stone. We need new conceptions of knowledge, new ways of knowing. Jerome Bruner writes that argument and story are "two modes of cognitive functioning, two modes of thought, each providing distinctive ways of ordering experience, of constructing reality."[1] Our current curriculum is structured almost exclusively around the first of these modes, argument.

In the recent Massey Lectures Series, Alberto Manguel asks, "How do the stories we tell help us perceive ourselves and others? …Is it possible for stories to change us and the world we live in?"[2] In my dream, the role of story emerges in innovative ways. For example, by using Bill Bryson's book *A Short History of Nearly Everything*,[3] teachers can learn to use a narrative mode to teach science units, resulting in more engaged and excited students… and more of them.

Whatever alternative modes of knowing emerge, my post-modern curriculum would be interdisciplinary – theme and issue-based as opposed to subject-oriented, with critical thinking, problem solving and creativity at the core of every course. It would also reflect our multicultural heritage and incorporate taboo subjects, like racism.

Richard Rorty, the contemporary philosopher, said, "It is not so important to find the absolute truth of anything as it is to keep the conversation going." I share these thoughts in the hope that they will keep the conversation going about alternative ways to meet the needs of our students.▌

JERRY DIAKIW is a former superintendent of schools with the York Region Board of Education. He currently teaches at York University in the Faculty of Education.

Notes

1 Jerome Bruner. *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge Mass. University Press, 1986).

2 As quoted in Nathan Whitlock, "Massey Lectures," *The Toronto Star*, 28 October 2007, ID5. 2007.

3 Bill Bryson. *A Short History of Nearly Everything* (Anchor Canada , 2004).