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Learning As Understanding: A Foundation for Change in Adolescent Literacy

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During the winter, our staff was asked to make a presentation to the State Board of Education on the status of high schools in Michigan. As I was preparing my part of the presentation by talking to my colleagues in Michigan high schools, rereading the work of Ted Sizer, the founder and chair of the Coalition of Essential Schools, and reviewing some current research, I was once again reminded of the inseparability of learning and literacy.

I began my talk by discussing the evolution of the current model of teaching and learning, how research by cognitive psychologists, learning theorists, and educators during the last twenty-plus years has challenged our long-held notions about how people learn. Previously, for more than a century, a behaviorist philosophy of learning dominated in all subject areas. This model dissected learning into discrete facts and skills, which were often transmitted to the high school learner via lecture and recitation.

A transformation from this transmission model to a transactional or constructivist model of teaching and learning has taken place in many secondary classrooms in this

country. Its roots firmly grounded in the work of John Dewey and other researchers of the early twentieth century, this philosophy emphasizes information processing, critical and creative reasoning, locating and organizing information, and investigating and solving *real* problems. In other words, teachers know that it is no longer sufficient to simply “know” mathematical facts; learners must be able to “understand” the concepts behind them and be able to apply them to unique problems and situations in the real world.

Increasingly rigorous and changing societal and workplace demands of our current information age support these changes as they call for learning processes that support inquiry, self-reflection, problem-solving, communication, and collaboration. In essence, the nature of knowledge has changed, and the nature of learning is viewed differently now; therefore, curriculum, instruction, and, certainly, secondary literacy practices must be adapted to align with recent advancements.

As secondary classroom teachers and reading specialists, we must work to nurture and sustain learning as understanding in our buildings and districts. The following six

quality indicators that we have assembled may be a starting point to help all of us consider our roles as leaders in redesigning secondary schools as places where the primary purpose is, according toSizer, to help *all* students learn to use their minds well.

1. A Balance of Depth and Breadth.

The curriculum addresses limited content but develops the content sufficiently to foster understanding. The content may be organized in thematic units; based on local, state, or national curriculum standard; and focused on a limited set of powerful ideas, key understandings, and principles. The central concepts of the discipline and the idea connections within and between disciplines are emphasized, and important learning conversations among students and teachers are commonplace.

2. Purposeful Application of Knowledge. Learners engaged in authentic, minds-on learning integrate new and deep understandings with their knowledge of basic skills, rules, and procedures in real-world contexts. They have knowledge and control of their own thinking and learning (metacognition). They complete tasks that conform to the many purposes for which adults learn in real life. Such activities involve thinking, reading, writing, and “performing,” as historians do in using primary documents for investigations, or scientists and mathematicians do as they research and solve real problems. Classroom assessment requires the students to actually *demonstrate* their understanding of concepts, problems, and issues similar to ones they have encountered or are likely to encounter in life beyond the classroom. The audience for the demonstration extends beyond the teacher, the classroom, or the school.

3. Meaningful and Consistent Evaluation. Grading can be valuable to teachers in determining the strengths and limitations of students’ understanding, providing a shared language for discussing teaching and learn-

ing, and guiding improvements in student performance over time. Unfortunately, current practices in classroom grading, such as the use of overall letter grades or percentage scores, often do not communicate effectively about student performance. Symbols are meaningless unless they represent levels of achievement of building, district, or state curriculum goals. Only when district K-12 staff, building faculties, subject area departments, or, in the beginning, simply all teachers of the same subject, come together to articulate their expectations (“What does a B in my class mean?”) examine student work, agree on grading criteria, and set common performance standards (“How good is good enough?”) will grades provide honest and helpful feedback to students, teachers, parents, and the public.

4. High Expectations for *All* Students.

The challenging transition from middle school to large impersonal high schools often has tragic results for students who struggle in literacy and academics. Well-intentioned adults frequently set lower standards for struggling adolescents, a solution that serves only to perpetuate failure and limit lifetime opportunities. Rigorous academic standards must be met by all students, though not at the same time. Through participation in intensive intervention programs tailored to their needs, students can develop the literacy skills and abilities to learn challenging content. In addition, all classroom teachers should be able to coach students in the application of literacy, learning, study, and thinking strategies specific to their content areas.

5. Continuous Professional Growth.

High quality professional development opportunities provided by the district and sought as a matter of professional integrity by each teacher and administrator in the building are essential to ensuring success for all students. Improved achievement of all students occurs when professional development is incorporated into other aspects of school change, e.g., the school improvement process, and aligned

with the curricular, instructional, and assessment goals of the school building and district. Meaningful professional development is systemic, school-based, and intellectually rigorous, an important shift away from traditional event-centered approaches to professional learning. Improving teacher capabilities demands altering conditions, including time and opportunities to attempt new practices, resources, technical support, and sustained follow-through. Effective professional development uses a variety of approaches to attaining the goals of improving instruction and student success while it provides educators with understanding of the theory supporting the knowledge, skills, and strategies being learned.

6. Sustained and Steady Administrative Leadership. Educational changes will be sustained only when there is strong building leadership to provide implementation pressure and support. In its position statement, the Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals asserts that "the principal

promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared by the school community"

So ... where are we?

T.S. Eliot observed, "Between the idea and the reality falls the shadow."

In Michigan, our state literacy committees are beginning to use these attributes of exemplary schools to begin to assess the quality of all our schools and teacher education programs, and to guide our reform efforts in adolescent literacy. The valuable benefits of teaching literacy and learning strategies in all content area classrooms cannot be underestimated, yet we have to be equally mindful of our leadership roles in helping our districts and states reinvent middle schools and high schools as places where students learn to use their minds well and where real learning *is* understanding and extends well beyond recitation of facts.