

*Solution to Obstacle***1**

I Long to Return to the Good Old Days

Luke was one of the first to arrive in the classroom, as usual. Head down, backpack slung over both shoulders, he headed for his back corner of the room.

“Good morning, Luke!” I called out.

“Mmng,” came the mumbled response, directed more to the floor than to me.

Poor Luke. It was obvious that school was not his “thing.” Or at least general biology was not his thing. Punctual, yes, but he was a definite nonparticipant. While a part of me felt sad for him, he was not an easy child to bond with. He rarely spoke, did not participate, and slept through as much of the class as he could get away with.

While I headed toward the back of the room to visit with him that day, fully intent on trying to improve his performance in my class, the room started to fill quickly. Funny thing about a classroom: you can go from zero to forty in the space of 2½ minutes! So my excursion to see Luke was intercepted by another, more personable, character, Charlie.

“Hey, Ms. Nunley!” came the sunny shout from Charlie. “How ya doin’?”

“Hi, Charlie. I’m great. Good to see you.”

More students arrived. “Well, good morning Lia.” “Good morning Katy.” And so started another day of third period general biology.

I was working on several student-centered classroom designs that year and using my classroom as a lab to develop what would become Layered Curriculum (Chapter 3), and my classroom was my laboratory that year. I began the class with a brief lecture to introduce a new unit concept.

Luke made a three-minute attempt to stay awake during my introductory lecture.

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As soon as I finished my short lecture, I started my standard once-around-the-room quick tour to make sure everyone was working on something before I started my one-on-one assessment. I stopped at Luke's desk to wake him up and suggest a simple seatwork assignment he might like to work on today.

I stopped at Luke's desk again on my second tour to wake him up and visit for a few minutes about types of assignments he likes in other classes, thinking he might give me some insight into how to tailor assignments to his learning style. He was not a fountain of information.

I meant to stop by Luke's desk a third time because I could see he was still not engaged, but we ran out of time, and the other 38 students claimed a share of my attention as well.

"One of these days," I said to myself, "I'm going to get back there and spend some serious time with Luke. There must be something he likes to do. He must have a favorite subject, hobby, or area of interest."

That was the day I decided that Luke would be the perfect subject for a shadowing assignment I was required to do for a course I was taking. The course was in adolescent psychology, and we were asked to pick an adolescent we knew and, incognito, follow the student throughout a typical day, making behavioral observations. I would choose Luke. That would give me an opportunity to see where his strengths really were. What classes did he like? Surely he was excelling somewhere, perhaps in English class or music. I was sure there was a teacher somewhere who had a great relationship with Luke. How did he interact with friends? What teachers did he hit it off with? Perhaps I could pick up some ideas I could use to work better with Luke.

I arranged for a personal day off, secured a substitute for my classes, and got permission from all of Luke's teachers to track him through a school day.

What I discovered the day I shadowed Luke changed my view of high school teaching. It turned out Luke didn't shine anywhere. There was no class where he excelled. No teacher had a good relationship with Luke. Luke had no real friends. He moved from class to class, interacting with very few students. He sat alone at lunch. He sat in the back corner in most classrooms and kept his head down as much as he could get away with. Some teachers made attempts, as I had, to engage him. But the attempts were rather superficial, as mine had been. After all, there were 35 or so other students in the room, all needing the teacher's attention. The general belief among his teachers was that he wasn't doing well in their particular class, but they were sure, as I was, that he must be doing well somewhere else. He had to be. After all, he had perfect attendance. Luke came every day.

The truth was that no one touched Luke. He was a lost boy in a system that hides behind the security of diffusion of responsibility—the idea that there are so many people involved in a situation that we are responsible for only a tiny piece of the whole that we share.

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We all know a lot of Lukes, the student we don't reach. We have at least one or two every year. We avoid guilt with the assumption that he or she is doing well elsewhere or that "someone" is reaching the child. The problem is that the large institutional high school system makes it easy for us to make these assumptions.

Add to that assumption our large, sometimes overwhelming class loads, a tradition of textbook-driven instructional methods, a shortage of opportunities to interact with colleagues to discuss particular students and coordinate efforts, and the ever increasing pressure to cover volumes of state curricula. It is little wonder that we lose many of our students at the secondary level. We lose them physically, emotionally, and socially.

Most of us know that the answer lies in some type of individualized program of instruction, but we are overwhelmed at the prospect of tailoring instruction for between 120 and 240 students. The good news is that differentiated instruction doesn't have to be hard or overwhelming. There are many things teachers can do at the high school level to help individualize instruction, thereby making school more successful for everyone—even Luke.

A DESCRIPTION OF THE ISSUE

Those of us who work in America's high schools know the resistance we feel when it comes to differentiation. There is some unspoken hope that if we drag our feet long enough, the topic will just go away. There is a belief that somehow we shouldn't have to differentiate. If the students would just shape up and try harder, they could learn through our traditional methods. We hear the conversations in the faculty room, in the hallways, and in our teacher inservices. We blame the situation on the current environment of busy parents raising undisciplined children and a school system which has taken away our authority out of increasing fear of litigation. We silently long for the good old days of school as they exist in our mental model, shaped by our own personal school days, the media, and literature.

Differentiation and *Differentiated Instruction* have been slowly creeping into the everyday vocabulary of America's classroom teachers since the early 1980s, when the National Commission on Excellence in Education released its findings on the state of our country's education system. The report, *A Nation at Risk*, furnished proof of what many classroom teachers already suspected: America's schools were not educating most of America's children.

There was public outcry over the findings in the report. While the truth was that America had never educated most of its children, the results quickly became a political agenda, and America had a change of heart. Suddenly it became important to this nation that we be successful in our attempt to educate our masses. Along with that cry for change came the mistaken belief that this was a new problem.

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It came to be strongly believed that we used to educate people successfully back in the “good old days” and that what we needed to do was return to the basics of previous eras. Unfortunately that push for “back-to-the-basics” failed to bring the anticipated successful results.

Educators started to see that the basics and traditional instruction were successful, not because they were necessarily excellent ideas, but mostly because the students attending schools during that era had been hand-picked to be there. For those chosen students, we then set up a system that would cover a lot of material in a short time, and those students who could learn that way were allowed to attend. Those who could not learn that way went elsewhere.

Jack Canfield and Frank Siccone, in the preface to their book *101 Ways to Develop Student Self-Esteem and Responsibility* (1993), described a thought shared by many writers and educators:

Our schools are in crisis. It is a crisis that has existed for decades and that persists in spite of governmental commissions, blue-ribbon panels, back-to-basics programs, alternative schools, and other attempts at reform. The problem is deeper than declining test scores, low teacher morale, student violence, drugs, and apathy. These are merely symptoms of the real issue, which is a moral one: our schools have lost their sense of mission. It is no longer clear to the educators, to the government, nor to the general public exactly what we want or need our schools to do. (p. ix)

Continuing today, educators and our educational organizations feel that our high schools have lost some sense of mission. Even a recent article by the National Association of Secondary School Principals describes the need for systemic reform in a similar way:

To be fully committed to high school reform, we must systemically reculture and improve the high school. The historical structure and purpose of the U.S. high school are no longer adequate to serve the needs of all of the nation’s youth and provide them with the skills necessary to compete in the global marketplace of the 21st century. Significant improvement is needed, but such improvement can only be attained through a substantial change in the structure and culture of the high school. (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2005)

This sentiment, that somehow schools have lost sight of their mission, that test scores and student participation, motivation, and success were much higher back in the “good old days” when schools knew exactly what they were doing and had a defined and clear mission, is pervasive in education.

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And yet this pervasive belief, while popular, is a false one. Let us take a brief look at the struggle for purpose in the history of the American high school. You may find the historical journey rather humorous. What we will find is that the arguments we hear in our faculty rooms today are the same as those voiced 200 years ago.

Schools, particularly high schools and the high school education system itself, have been struggling with their purpose and mission since the dawn of our high school system over two centuries ago.

While high school has become a reality for the masses just in our lifetime, the notion of the American high school is quite old. In fact the high school goes back to the year 1779. It was Thomas Jefferson who started our high school system that year by opening 20 secondary schools in the state of Virginia. These first high schools were not open to just anyone, of course. Only boys who could demonstrate extreme ability on a rigorous test and were considered bright in the primary grades were allowed to attend. The school lasted two years, and sometimes two or three more years were added for students considered really gifted and bright. The curriculum in these early high schools was limited to reading and studying the classics, English grammar, geography, and arithmetic.

And what was the purpose and mission of these early high schools? Simply to take the best of the best and allow them to work one-on-one with university-trained mentors to become lifelong scholars. Period. These early secondary schools were terminal programs. They did not feed the university system.

So for a brief period, it appeared that high schools had a guiding purpose—to make a few lifelong scholars who could hand down well-thought-out philosophies to help govern our nation. However, that purpose fit only two out of every 1,000 students, as that was the admission rate. Imagine what you could do today if you took your school of 1,500 students and chose the top three kids to stay. Everyone else would go home so that you could work one-on-one with this select group for the next three or four years!

This high school system grew slowly. It wasn't until 60 years later, in 1840, that a few high schools were bold enough to start admitting girls. By the mid-1800s, the public began to see a better use for tax-supported high schools, and the 150-year debate began. The goal of lifelong scholar began to be questioned. The discussion shifted to the issue of purpose, and there was mumbling that perhaps high schools should have a more practical mission.

The Industrial Revolution had increased the number of management jobs, and the cities and mill towns of New England suddenly needed trained young people to assume those positions. The existing high schools, with their high standards and clear scholarly mission, did not want to soil themselves with technical classes designed to train factory managers. So around factory towns sprang up new high schools with a new mission: To

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provide practical training and skills for the benefit of the community businesses and business leaders.

Both the existing and the new schools were called high schools and were tax supported, so we can understand why the public slowly forced the two institutions to merge: cost savings. But there was strong opposition to the mergers and a definite philosophical division within the high schools as to what their purpose was. The key debate was whether high schools should provide training for local businesses or educate students for the sheer value of scholarship and a classical education. (Does that argument sound familiar?)

The high school floundered with this mixed mission for the next hundred years. Despite the additional curriculum, high schools still served a very small percentage of the population. Through the 1800s very few people ever attended high school—less than 0.03 percent of the population, in fact. Schools in rural areas remained primarily scholarly, with a curriculum that focused on classic Greek and Latin. The urban, mill town high schools sought to teach a curriculum that prepared students to work in the factories. Around the turn of the twentieth century, we see a new mission added as many high schools began to see themselves as teacher preparation institutions. All of these high schools, even as late as 1900, were fairly isolated to the Midwest and New England states. The south did not have high schools until the twentieth century.

The high schools were publicly funded. Since everyone paid for them, a recurring debate raged in the early 1900s: Was the high school worth the cost? Who was benefiting from this publicly funded institution? There was little or no uniformity or purpose. No common goal. No common mission.

So over 100 years ago taxpayers were asking for some accountability from their high schools. There was outcry that they had no common mission or had lost sight of it. The debate has never ended, and the mission and purpose have become even more muddled in the twentieth century.

Although today many see the high school's main purpose as preparation for college, it wasn't until American high schools were 150 years old that colleges and universities began to see them as something that might benefit higher education. In the 1920s universities began to see high schools as possible feeder schools, in other words, a college-prep program. Accreditation programs were set up for high schools, and campaigns started.

As universities entered the mix in the 1920s, the American high school experienced its most drastic change. For the first time ever, the public began to see high school as an option for anyone. For many reasons, not the least of which was that increased high school attendance could reduce the number of people looking for work, enrollment doubled in a decade.

The timing was most unfortunate as school finances were at their worst. High school budgets were stretched. Programs and positions were cut. Curriculum was redesigned to leave the less expensive programs in place and remove the more costly ones. There was significant outcry from the media that high school was too big a burden. The public was upset at

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having to pay for something that benefited only a minority. One thing the public was clear on: standards were needed.

High schools were frantically trying to appease the public, raise admission standards, and redesign curriculums to somehow please both universities and local businesses. (Does this sound familiar?) Again the high school was without a well-defined purpose.

As far back as the mid-1920s, educators were writing about the need for a clear purpose for American high schools. In 1926, Henry Morrison wrote *The Practice of Teaching in the Secondary School*, one of the early books for high school teachers. In the first chapter, he described the struggle for purpose and a single vision for American high schools:

About 1900 . . . ordinary folks in ever-increasing numbers began to plan to send their children to college. The easy-going ways which had answered for a century would no longer serve. The history of educational administration since 1890 is to a large extent a story of endless efforts to make the elementary school, the high school, and the college pull together for a common educational purpose. (p. 4)

The original purpose of the current three-tiered education system (from 1920):

- Primary School: for students to learn to read and write.
- Secondary School: for students who can THINK while reading and writing.
- Colleges and Universities: for students who can THINK independently while reading and writing.

This teaching book written 80 years ago goes on to explain quite simply the focus, goal, and purpose of public schools as they were believed to be in the 1920s. It was generally accepted that the purpose of primary school was to teach basic reading and writing skills. Then, once students had mastered reading and writing to the point that they could actually *think* while reading and writing but still needed guidance, they would move to secondary schools. If you could think while reading and writing and do so in an independent way, you were ready for college. And that became the mission of the original three-tiered American school system.

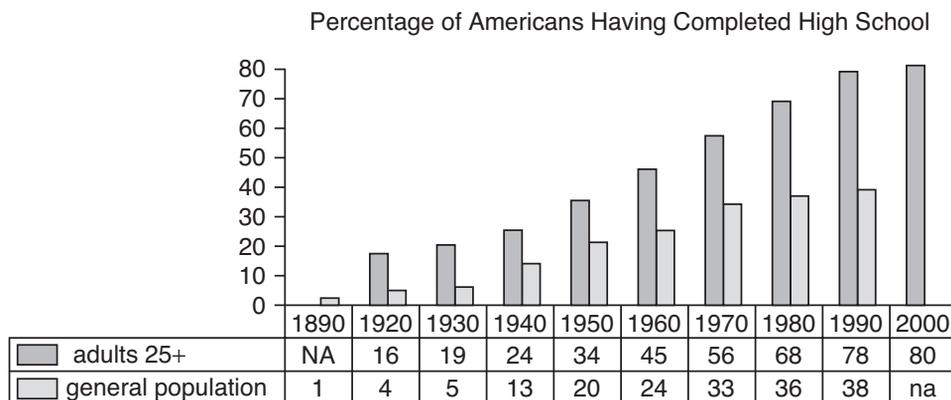
By the 1930s, enrollment numbers had grown so much that now a whopping 4 percent of the U.S. population had attended high school. This growth generated a new problem: increasing diversity. Once general enrollment in high school started to reach about 5 percent of the public, high school

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educators became vocal about establishing a central focus and purpose for high school. Some students were there for technical training and some to go on to college, but some were not quite ready for college when they finished high school. Teachers lamented that they could not possibly deal with this confusion of purpose and diversity of student skill levels.

The education system began to seek solutions for this multipurpose institution by making the system more complex. Perhaps the answer would lie in adding more tiers to the system. For students finishing high school unprepared for college, they would create an intermediate step. And so the junior college was born.

Figure 1.1 Growth in High School Completion Rates Through the Twentieth Century



Although high schools actually began in the 1820s as simple schools designed to be terminal institutions, they were open to only a select group of boys who excelled on rigorous exams. Those high schools were intended not to prepare the boys for college but to serve as stand-alone programs. This idea of high school continued even as late as 1890, when only 0.03 percent of the population ever attended a high school. But the twentieth century saw changes in the way the public viewed high school, and attendance rates grew rapidly. As early as 1920, the philosophy of the high school shifted. Universities started to take an interest in them as preparatory institutions and organized accrediting associations to standardize a college prep curriculum for the nation's high schools. The public began to see high schools as something that most people should attend, and by 1930 attendance had grown to 4 percent of the U.S. population. From that time, high school became more and more common, and by 1940 73 percent of teens (ages 14 through 17) were enrolled in high school, and 13 percent of the general population had graduated from high school. By 1970 94 percent of teens attended high school, and 33 percent of the general population had a high school diploma. In 1990, 38 percent of the nation had graduated from high school.

Note: Data from U.S. Census Bureau and U.S. Department of Education.

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But the high school teachers were frustrated with the large spread of the skill levels of entering students. They needed an intermediate step between primary school and high school to give students with deficient skills an opportunity to catch up. And so the junior high was born. It was honestly thought that the junior high school could fix any major flaws or deficits in basic skills of students leaving primary school so that all students would now enter high school equally prepared. (I hope you are at least chuckling by now.) The most amazing part of this story is that all this outcry, frustration, and repair effort started when only 5 percent of the general population attended high school!

SOLUTION STRATEGIES

We Must Start to See That the Good Old Days Are Now

The problems we face in the philosophy of the high school are not new. There were no “good old days” of uniformity, effectiveness, and clear mission. High schools have been arguing over their mission for more than 200 years. Lest you think those “happy days” came later, perhaps when you were attending high school, let us look at what was written in the latter half of the twentieth century about funding, public support, and a united focus of vision.

In the early 1970s, educators were still lamenting the decline of public schools. Harry Good and James Teller in 1973 wrote as follows:

In the decades since [our last edition in 1956] schools have been subjected to a two-pronged attack: first they were blamed for low academic standards, lack of rigor, and too little and the wrong kind of science and mathematics; then they were accused of ignoring the emotional and social needs of the child at the expense of his intellectual development. (p. v)

The following decade brought the same song, different verse.

It is hard to know who the secondary schools are serving well. Dropout rates are high . . . with an even higher proportion of blacks and hispanics [*sic*] abandoning public schooling before graduating. College Entrance Examination Board scores have shown a steady decline . . . and college faculty lament the weak, sometimes nonexistent, academic tool skills of entering classes. There is the ever-present complaint of the lack of correspondence between the demands of high school and those of the post-school world. . . . Study panels and commissions report that secondary education generally fails to build skills for the transition from school the working world. (Wilcox, 1982, p. 1)

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And in the last decade of the twentieth century, educators still sang the battle cry:

American education is in deep trouble. Most reform movements are engaged in a fruitless search for magic-bullet solutions to education's problems . . . the nation's students are caught in an education system that is sliding from mediocrity to outright failure. (Pauley, 1991, p. 197)

And so we see there never were days of old when success was found in all high schools, with all students. The rumors that there was once a time when teachers felt that the majority of their students came well prepared and ready to learn, when one teaching method fit the needs of every learner in the room, are just that—rumors.

There was never a time when the high school was not caught between the needs of the university, the needs of business, and the needs of the community. The battle has been raging for 200 years. The problems and struggles haven't changed.

The public outcry for standards and changes also continues, and perhaps has even increased. Typically, the suggested solutions from the public and political arena are things like longer school days, or more school days, or more time spent on the basic skills. But the essential question, rarely answered, is what would students do with more? More time to be unengaged? More time to be off task, more time to not fit in the classroom? More time for what?

How has this public pressure and criticism continued for so long? Probably because the community outside the school often does not see that the components and makeup of the classroom have changed while teaching methods have remained the same. The public cry is frequently to solve the problem by increasing the amount of time spent with traditional teaching methods. Initiatives by the public ask for longer school days, longer school years, more instructional time, less time on nonacademic disciplines—the “what we need here is a bigger hammer” syndrome. We push harder and harder with familiar solutions while the fundamental problems persist or even worsen. We don't need a bigger hammer. We need a different hammer. Instruction needs to be differentiated within the classroom to address the increased diversity.

What has changed, and changed dramatically, is the percentage of Americans who come through our doors. Diversity in the high school classroom isn't new; it's just grown, and grown on a scale never before seen in any nation. Very few industrialized nations make it a goal to educate their masses. We are in fact called on to do what's never been done before—get 99 percent of America's children through a one-track high school system so that they emerge prepared for a wide variety of post-high school endeavors and do it in such a fashion that our success can be measured quantitatively.

Are we up to the challenge? Absolutely!