



CENTER FOR EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION CEI

Guiding Principles for High School Reform *“The Way Forward”*

The Center for Educational Innovation was initiated by the Illinois Education Association in 1995 as a means to support IEA locals and their districts and schools in the work of school improvement in order to affect excellence and equity in Illinois public education.

A growing numbers of leaders and members are actively seeking ways in which their union can assist them in addressing the challenges within public education to improve teaching and learning for all children. The work of IEA has been greatly influenced by W. Patrick Dolan a national consultant working with unions and school districts across the country to achieve improved conditions for teaching and learning in high schools. The following principles were developed by Dolan and are intended to guide the work for high schools.

It has been a good many years since Ted Sizer and others dismantled the “supermarket” high school model with its six-plus, 50 minute classes, thousands of anonymous students, discrete, un-integrated cognitive pieces, and special education and “academic departments” as the major professional dividers for children and adults. The thousands of pieces of legislation, countless pages of contract language, and central office structure all still hold the aging model together across the country, and the last few years of attempts to modify it still seem to only tickle at the edges.

When it did work, it presupposed students with strong, healthy support systems outside of the school that counteracted the anonymity, with other adult relationships, community linkages, support for learning and authority in many shapes and structures, and, in short, relationships with all sorts of churches, neighborhoods, clubs, extended families that held the student in overlapping human “touches.” The faculty and school relied on these more that it knew to provide the support and back-up authority. It worked despite itself in some senses.

Much of that support has gone. The society and its children have changed. And the high school is forced to provide a good deal of the community, the knowledge of individual students, their circumstances and background—the human web. It is not a great model to do both, and meanwhile the world and its requirements have moved considerably—upwards in terms of skills and requirements to more schooling and broader knowledge. The data is very clear from test scores to behavior, we are missing more and more children, and the model of cognitive silos, ringing bells and constantly moving children, provides less and less purchase on their attention, interest, person, or effort. What to do, or at least in what direction to proceed?

Our work in high schools in Illinois over the last year or two have led us to the following guiding principles; although each school has its own identity and history, its unique staff and student population, its own next steps in the journey:

1. Collaborative Culture

It is important to build at the district and school level a culture of work together among faculty and administration and parents. There needs to be a strong “we” extant in all the adults that care about the work of education for and with these students. The community, the parents, the teachers’ union and the administration must consciously build this **collaborative culture** knowing that the hard work of rethinking the work would require trust in one another and the ability to address and solve hard issues quickly and well. It would also require involvement of all major actors with respect and active voice in profound changes.

2. Knowledge Integration

Any and all work in redesign has to look at principles of cohesion and **knowledge integration**. It is no longer acceptable to operate classroom to classroom and school site to school site with little or no view to the deep integration of our efforts in terms of sequence of knowledge, integration of learning and teaching approaches so that learners have access to the best thought about the flow and cohesion of their intellectual work. This is also true of the central office and the way in which it integrates its management and communication strategies and tactics.

3. Active Involvement of the Learner

Whatever the approach to any age group and any knowledge base, pedagogies of **active involvement** of the learner in the material and the learning activity are essential. The faculty and staff needs to be engaged in the exploration of research that demonstrates best practice in this area, and pursues professional development for all to promote this engagement.

4. Higher Intellectual Goals

It is critical to move the bar **higher in terms of intellectual stretch, rigor and relevance** and curricular material. This may require additional training in cognitive disciplines over a professional lifetime, as do all professions that are increasing their knowledge base and delivery. To improve pedagogy without a strategy to improve the intellectual demands of the material is only half a strategy. This should be seen as a deliberated attempt to “dumb down” material, curricula, or the challenge of learning.

5. Student Advocacy

Every process and structure advanced in schools should be designed to provide **advocacy** and support for all students, personally, morally and intellectually. It is crucial to look for new ways to build smaller structures, find time and good conversation for students with caring adults so each and every child knows beyond a doubt that his or her hard work and responsibility is supported by a caring adult community.

6. Time for Quality Professional Reflection

To accomplish this type of constant improvement it must be recognized that a flat-out, isolated work environment for adults with little or no time to reflect together on best practice, evaluate data, or individual students will not lead to the above goals. Every effort must be made to find collaborative time for **quality professional reflection** to drive this improvement.

7. Communication

Finally, communication lines embedded in and embued with trust must be developed, so that all the constituents are listened to as they are challenged and continue to learn.

Communication is more than some exchange of information. The story of the students in your high school challenged by a dedicated staff, supported by parents and community needs to be shared. Schools in the future will be different. They will be guided by the above principles, talked about openly as the learning occurs. They will, by necessity, be harder, more interesting, more reflective and more human communities.