
WORKING HIGH SCHOOLS: WORKING TRENDS

An Interview with Lawrence Gloeckler, Executive Director, Special Education Institute

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An ideal school includes all of its students in the curriculum, instruction, and assessment—students in general education and students receiving special education services. While this, in some minds, remains a pipedream, an increasing number of elementary schools are working toward just this goal and realizing significant success in the process. On the other hand, high schools moving in this direction remain rarer things. But they do exist. The even better news is that they offer direction to other schools that want to make an inclusive approach work.

Research done by the International Center for Leadership in Education, in conjunction with the Council of Chief State School Officers, has helped to identify some of these high schools. Even more importantly, this effort has also identified a handful of central characteristics that contribute significantly to school success for all students.

While there is no magical formula, there are indicative trends. One of the first discoveries in this process was that what works, works for all. Students with and without disabilities do well in the same kinds of settings. So, what do these successful high schools look like?

1. Size Makes a Difference

First, they are small. They are small in overall size, or they have small learning communities built into their structures. Whatever approach they take to the “smaller is better” idea, they construct themselves so that somehow students personally connect to the school, identify with a small group of teachers and fellow learners, form personal relationships, and are noticed and included. They don’t get lost. Middle and later teens need this, and schools don’t appear to work as well for them without it.

2. Commitment to Excellence

Another common element has to do with a commitment to excellence. At schools where all students make significant progress, the staff is determined to ensure that the best education possible is available to every child. The more committed the staff is to this end, the more effective the school.

One primary conviction that operates as a kind of subset of this quality is the absolute belief on the part of every educator in the importance of literacy—for everyone. Basic independence is barely possible today without the ability to read. Bills, credit card statements, Web pages, the front page of the local newspaper, letters from home—all need to be read and understood.

This kind of commitment from teachers cuts both ways, however. High expectations are also placed on all students at these schools, although with one critical caveat: those expectations must be realistic, as well. This folds right back into the importance of a small, personalized school structure that allows teachers to know what is, in fact, realistic for each student.

3. The Right Start

A consistent innovation among successful high schools has to do with the way they treat their incoming ninth graders. Every high school teacher knows that students enter the ninth grade with widely varying degrees of abilities and academic experiences. Successful schools take this seriously. In these places,

ninth graders who show up able to perform ninth-grade math, for example, are immediately challenged. Those who show up behind the curve are quickly placed in enrichment classes that give them the time and the focused instruction they need to reach an appropriate level of ability as quickly as possible.

This approach is not just the special privilege of ninth graders, however. It is applied at all four grade levels. In addition to increased test scores, one visible result is particularly evident during the second semester of senior year. While seniors in many schools are planning “senior cut days” or simply biding their time, at the most successful high schools they are still being challenged and expected to learn right up until graduation—whether they are still struggling to read fluently, whether they have successfully mastered grade-level literacy skills, or whether they are facing their college-level Advanced Placement exams. There is very little senioritis—everyone is too busy learning.

4. Administrative Support

Of course, in order for teachers to sustain the high level of commitment needed to support every student at every level, they need the support of effective leadership: an administrator who is a “port in the storm” of the day-to-day drama of classrooms filled with blossoming adolescents, lesson plans and activities, parental concerns, and more. When, in the middle of this, a leader is present who is able to offer a clear direction, teachers themselves become more successful in keeping their larger goals in view. Interestingly enough, with this kind of leader in place, staff changes decrease—at administrative, instructional, and support levels. This, in turn, makes for a more stable environment for students, which also contributes to their success.

There are several qualities inherent in this kind of leader:

- a visible (though not necessarily flashy) enthusiasm and energy
- solid administrative, organizational, and communication skills
- a clear focus that remains intact, regardless of shifting political or situational winds
- the ability to use data—everything from numbers on attendance and discipline to scores reflecting literacy and mathematical achievement to percentages of students involved in extracurricular activities
- the ability to create a climate that reflects the underlying principles of respect and responsibility for—and from—all students

In the business world, it is an accepted principle that the heads of organizations must model the expressed values of the place—in the way they design the goals, treat the staff, and think about their customers. Schools are no different.

5. Use of Data

A fifth central characteristic of successful, inclusive high schools involves the collection and effective use of data to guide teachers in their decisions about what to teach and how to teach it. The reasons why the data is collected and the way it is being used are clearly articulated and actively shared with students, parents, and other stakeholders.

6. Quality Curriculum

Data, when it is used well, becomes inextricably bound with a high-quality curriculum to guide instruction, a sixth element of a successful high school. It’s not uncommon for teachers to feel more than a little paralyzed by the amount of material that most state standards represent. To examine how this

wealth of requirements could be reasonably parsed out, the International Center for Leadership in Education surveyed 21,000 people in an effort to discern what skills are most important.

Not surprisingly, one clue to how teachers in successful schools operate, as well as how their curriculum is designed, has to do with the quality of absolute practicality. In successful schools, state standards are closely examined with an eye for what students will, in fact, need after they leave high school—whether they're on track for college, the world of work, or some degree of independent living. Business connections and postsecondary partnerships regularly enrich high schools. One corollary to this pragmatism is the sense that what is learned in high school is not an end in itself. Curriculum is shaped expressly to give students what they need in the challenging world ahead of them.

7. Professional Development

How all of this happens calls forth the next feature: the importance of professional development. Any effort to keep teachers on top of their game must be seen by everyone as important. And then any professional development effort must be sustainable over time and integrated with what is happening in the classrooms. Additionally, when working to make schools inclusive, the most important areas to address when planning professional development have to do with the effective use of data, with differentiated instruction, and with behavior and the principle of respect.

8. Integrated Efforts

Professional development cannot consist of disconnected efforts that take place once every three months, introduce teachers to something new, and then leave them alone to figure out an application. Successful schools set aside days for enrichment and work to do justice to the time used, the effort and resources involved, and, most importantly, the students who may or may not see the benefit. This time must involve concerted, integrated efforts that directly support ongoing classroom activities that nurture collaboration, and that focus on creating a climate of support for all students.

Staying Current

One side note for effective instruction: teachers need to keep uppermost in their minds the fact that the world is changing, and the world of work right along with it. When we look at students and identify them as fitting best into entry-level positions after high school, we have to bear in mind the current reality: these kinds of positions require a much greater level of expertise today than they did even ten years ago. Jobs that most of us remember as being entry-level are now decreasingly available in this country; many of them are being shipped overseas.

As a result of these changes, the world of work requires our students to be more competitive and more highly skilled than ever. Particularly for students with disabilities, we need to do our utmost to help them develop the capabilities that will allow them to find jobs and stay competitive in adult life. Special education teachers need to be especially cognizant of this need, keeping abreast of workplace climates and trends and taking advantage of what general education has to offer in the way of content and skills.

Through the work of the International Center for Leadership in Education, a picture is starting to take shape of a successful, inclusive high school: students connect; expectations are high for everyone; leadership and professional development are focused and purposeful; curriculum is carefully crafted and pragmatic; and goals both big and small are informed by what is happening in the larger world. In this kind of place, everyone supports the basic purpose of the institution—preparing all young adults for whatever world they will face after twelfth grade. This promises to translate into success for all.