

Reshaping High School: An Education for the Information Age

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Like other good schools, Lick-Wilmerding High School (California) constantly searches for ways to better serve its students. In that spirit, we undertook an exhilarating, yet challenging, three-year process we came to refer to as “Reshaping High School.” The purpose of this initiative was to develop new ways of thinking about how best to meet the emergent needs of 21st century students. Through considering the “ideal Lick-Wilmerding of 2010,” our faculty and administration gravitated especially to the goal of offering learning that lasts, thus providing our students with “tools for a lifetime.”

Understandably, there were many at the outset who wondered, sometimes vociferously, why we would want to mess with current success. Given our school’s popularity, with seven eighth graders annually vying for each freshman spot, and the notable success rate of our graduates, it would have been easy to rest on our laurels. While, in the end, some of the results of our Reshaping High School deliberations invoke the early 20th century progressive education movement, our process was organic rather than ideological. The “trigger” for us was our growing concern about the health of today’s students.

In recent years, we have become acutely aware of the destructive impact that today’s high-pressure, high-stakes, externally driven culture can have on college-bound high school students. Too often, they feel they are hyperventilating on an academic treadmill that promises ultimate reward but delivers little short-

term inspiration or satisfaction. In extreme cases, this can lead to psychological burnout at an early age, cynicism about the learning enterprise itself, debilitating health problems, and/or unhealthy life patterns.

Our local concerns were echoed by William Fitzsimmons, Harvard’s dean of admissions, and his colleagues. In a white paper, “Time Out or Burn Out for the Next Generation,” issued in the fall of 2004, they drew attention to the pattern of ill health among entering college freshmen. Accepting little culpability for this problem on behalf of the postsecondary world, the authors offered only a meager solution—that students consider taking the summer off before entering college. Similarly, the 2005 annual conference of the Head Mistresses of the East, whose theme was “The First Year of College,” found deans and presidents of Princeton, Middlebury, Dartmouth, Bowdoin and Amherst wringing their hands over this dilemma, including the observation that more than 15 percent of their entering freshmen reported being on anti-depressants.

It was our growing awareness of this problem—coupled with our desire to apply more of what researchers and educators now understand about adolescent development brain theory, and divergent learning styles—that led us to this journey toward “reshaping” our high school.

We began by thinking broadly and deeply about the needs of our students,

taking into account how different, and differently prepared, young people are today in comparison to the past. We were also, of course, mindful of how different their adult world is going to be from the world that older generations once anticipated. To get the ball rolling in the fall of 2003, I asked our faculty, based on their understanding of what students most need in the present, and will need in the future, to write about their vision of what the ideal school would look like. The responses conveyed lofty, hopeful and passionate inspirations and, both implicitly and explicitly, a palpable call for change.

In a world where children, like adults, are bombarded by media messages of all kinds, it is obvious that today's high school students suffer no lack of access to information. This reminds me of psychologist James Coleman's enduring observation that, when universal schooling commenced in the U.S. over a century ago, students were generally "experience-rich and information-poor." Conversely, many of today's young people can accurately be described as "information-rich and experience-poor." This reality makes it imperative that today's teachers continue to evolve along the continuum from the industrial-era disseminator of knowledge to the modern-era learning broker, facilitator and coach.

This does not mean that our teachers cease being inspiring sources of knowledge. But it does mean that they must get better and better at understanding and observing how, and how well, our students are learning and connecting with the world. This means putting students, individually and

collectively, directly at the center of the teaching/learning relationship.

Vision 2010 Program Design

Over the course of the 2003-2005 academic years, we developed a plan to sharpen our vision and to imagine how it could be made a reality. We identified a number of high-priority educational elements that we wanted to add, to do more of or to do differently. We searched for and/or created models that could be incorporated into our reshaped high school. And we designed corresponding programmatic, pedagogical, schedule and calendar alterations for the fall of 2006. While there are a great many more dimensions of our enhanced program than I can reasonably include here, the essential elements follow.

As Lick-Wilmerding's programmatic and pedagogical approaches evolve in the school's new era, eight particular literacies are intended to infuse, connect and animate students' learning.

• **Mind/Body**

The mind/body connection is at the heart of a fresh approach to teaching health and balance. We piloted a new course for freshmen entitled *Health, Wellness, Fitness* in 2005-2006, and it is now required of all ninth graders. In it, students learn elements of yoga, Pilates, martial arts, strength training, movement and rock climbing, as well as how to make wise choices regarding their personal health and their relationships. The course's goals include, but extend beyond, enabling students to healthily and successfully navigate their high school and college years—that is, to help students develop daily practices and patterns that will become integral to their

lives for the long term. It also led to nutritional modifications in our food service program.

• **Learning Styles**

This literacy relates to students' understanding of, and appreciation for, varying learning styles. The umbrella focus is on meta-cognition: learning how they learn. It is intended to enable students to know how to play to their strengths and shore up, or compensate for, their challenges in various learning situations, both within and outside of formal classrooms. Beyond teaching students to make discerning choices about optimal learning venues and to maximize their learning opportunities, this emphasis is also designed to deepen their appreciation for how other people learn and make sense of the world. It is our intention that this appreciation of, and attention to, differing learning styles will become pervasive throughout Lick-Wilmerding classrooms. Partly to this end, we've established longer class periods to allow teachers to expand their pedagogical palettes.

• **Collaborative Learning**

Collaborative learning was already well established at the school, having been introduced most explicitly and systematically by our mathematics department over two decades ago. Thus, we are well aware of the advantages of students teaching and learning from one another rather than simply relying on teacher-directed activities. And, as the work world has shifted dramatically toward teamwork models—and we realize how little happens, either personally or professionally, with people working in isolation—it is clear that collaborative skills are essential to adult success. We also know that these skills

do not always come naturally; they need to be taught and reinforced through experience, as well as through direct instruction. This is also made possible by our move to longer class blocks and the correlative employment of a wide range of teaching methods.

• **Community Engagement**

We recognize the potential of the broader community to offer an expansive learning laboratory for students. In this regard, the concept of “service learning” conveys a vision that encompasses both the traditional notion of service and that of academic engagement. When Spanish language students translate children's books into Spanish, when science students teach lessons at a local middle school or when history students engage in a community-based oral history project, everyone wins and learning occurs at deep and memorable levels.

Another pilot initiative during 2005-2006 was the creation of our Student Center for Civic Engagement and Leadership. The SCCEL occupies a comfortable room midway down the upper hallway of our main classroom building, thus locating it at the literal center of our school. Its purpose is to organize and promote programs related to student leadership, justice/equity initiatives and service. It is a physical embodiment of our new motto, “working together to make things work” and promises to be a productive incubator and nexus for years to come.

• **Contemporary Media**

This fifth new strand relates to media literacy. Among other things, it spawned a seminal freshman course entitled *Contemporary Media in Art*, designed

and taught by teachers whose backgrounds are in fine arts, design and technology. This course introduces students to elements of theory and practice that shape and animate modern-day public communications and discourse. While the umbrella goal is to help students better interpret their world and become well informed, discerning citizens, the course's primary vehicle is direct experience with many of the tools employed by those who design and produce contemporary media. We believe that students' understanding of how various media are fashioned and manipulated will prepare them not only to better interpret, but also to more fully participate in, their world.

• **Leadership/Citizenship/Multicultural Literacy and Action**

Lick-Wilmerding's overarching goal is for its graduates to become positive, contributing adults who work hard to improve the world. In this spirit, we take seriously our obligation to ensure that their impact will be guided by a sense of justice, equity and commitment to community. Toward this end, here are abundant opportunities for on-campus and off-campus engagement throughout a student's tenure at Lick. Such opportunities to translate theory into practice occur most often in humanities, science and world language classes, as well as through SCEL initiatives, the Jellis Block (see below) and customary student leadership roles.

• **Stewardship**

Like the element of design, the notion of stewardship is a unifying force in the Lick-Wilmerding experience. By "stewardship," we mean giving thoughtful, deliberate and careful attention to one's self, one's environment, one's community and

one's world. A lens through which we consider virtually everything that is taught and learned at our school, stewardship is intended as both a vehicle and a goal. Our hope is that students will graduate imbued with stewardship as a natural way of being—an essential component of their capacity—and with a commitment to make the world a better place.

• **Ethics**

As students move more fully from the level of concrete to abstract thinking by the second half of high school, issues and topics are even more deeply and fruitfully examined through the lens of ethics. As researchers Pearl and Samuel Oliner persuasively demonstrate, immersion in ethical dilemmas also correlates with altruistic behavior. While this dimension is, in many ways, inseparable from leadership and stewardship, we intend to keep a special spotlight trained through the prism of ethics to ensure that students develop habits of mind and ways of being that will contribute to ennobling the human experiment.

From Theory to Reality

After settling on these core literacies, what programmatic, pedagogical, schedule and calendar alterations did we make? To explain, I first need to give a brief overview of what we had been doing at Lick-Wilmerding.

Unlike most high schools, Lick-Wilmerding has, for many years, labored under a nine-block, rather than the customary seven-block, schedule. This is because, in addition to a full slate of college preparatory academic, visual arts and performing arts offerings, students are also required to take a number of

shop courses (wood, metal, glass, electronics, jewelry)—hence our motto, “Education for the Head, Heart and Hands.” While our old model employed a six-day rotation schedule in order to fit everything in, we were still living with 55-minute classes, which were highly unsatisfactory for many of our disciplines. The end result has been that students and teachers alike have felt that their lives at Lick were spinning too quickly. It was, therefore, abundantly clear that we would have to reduce the number of teaching blocks in order to have fewer and longer blocks on any given day.

Before delving into the schedule model, however, I will describe several of the substantive programmatic changes that the ultimate schedule would be designed to serve.

The Evolution and Confluence of Visual and Performing Arts

While it was painful to slightly reduce the number of visual arts courses we offer and to eliminate the longstanding and popular *Drafting and Design* course previously required of all freshmen, we believe that the new ninth grade course, *Contemporary Media in Art*, is so attuned to today’s students and world that these sacrifices were merited. Hence, we created and implemented this seminal freshman course (see description above). At the same time, consistent with our desire to begin to blur artificial barriers among the arts, the former Performing Arts Department and the Art, Design and Technology Department have been merged into the Visual and Performing Arts Department. In addition, the new Performing and Publications (P²) Block provides a special period for several performing

arts offerings, thus avoiding competition with academic subjects. Further, neighborhood instrumental music programs, in particular a new partnership with the Golden Gate Philharmonic and a jazz combo class taught by a local jazz great, are also being offered at the end of the school day.

Applied Technology to Become Yearlong

Our ninth grade introductory technical arts course, *Applied Technology (AT)*, immersing students in several shops (wood, metal, fabrication, glass, electronics), expanded from one semester to a full year. In this yearlong format, *AT* now incorporates many more elements of design, directly connecting design and production.

Junior Project

The longstanding Independent Senior Technical Arts Project was redesigned so that students now complete it at the end of junior year (see the Jellis Block below). The emphasis has shifted from individual creations to group projects that serve the larger community. In addition to the advantage of being able to work full-time on their projects for a two-week period, students benefit from the opportunity to create portfolios to accompany college applications.

Health, Wellness, Fitness (HWF) Program

As noted, our physical education program has been re-envisioned to include practices drawn from yoga, Pilates, martial arts, movement, rock climbing and strength training. It also incorporates issues related to personal health and interpersonal relationships. Ninth graders are required to participate in a full year of HWF. In addition, we

offer an array of HWF mini-courses throughout the day that attract many students' voluntary participation.

Expansion of the Student Center for Civic Engagement and Leadership (SCCEL)

The SCCEL, opened in the fall of 2005, serves as both a physical space and the philosophical center of the school's overlapping commitments to justice, equity and multicultural awareness, as well as to service and development of leadership skills. The SCCEL is a precursor to the future creation of the Lick-Wilmerding Center for Civic Engagement. This center will encompass the SCCEL, in addition to the school's external public purpose initiatives and a commitment to encourage and support other private schools in developing robust public purpose programs.

New Schedule and Calendar

In order to serve this wide range of goals related to offering students durable and enduring learning and to providing them with skills, knowledge, habits of mind and ways of being that will last a lifetime, it became clear that we would need to substantially reshape our schedule and calendar. The resulting Tiger Block Plan (see below) is a reflection of our determination to put the needs of our students at the center of our enterprise. Thus, we intend that the needs of our kids will define our teaching objectives, that these teaching objectives will, in turn, expand the array of teaching methods and that this array of teaching methods inform the design of the Tiger Block Plan schedule, rather than the other way around.

Salient Aspects of the Tiger Block Plan

In addition to considerably slowing the pace of life for students and teachers, the longer class periods both allow and compel teachers to expand their pedagogical approaches. They also offer new opportunities for project-based, experience-based and service-based learning (especially given that each is regularly contiguous to the 60-minute lunch periods), as well as greater incentive for integration of technology as a teaching/learning tool. In contrast to Lick-Wilmerding's history of half-hour, breathless lunches, the longer club/lunch block is especially designed as a stress reliever and as a time for students and faculty to relax and connect. Another element, the P² (Performances and Publications) Block is a specially designed "ninth block" that accommodates several performing arts classes, as well as journalism and yearbook, within the academic day, but without competition from academic subjects. For students not participating in a P² class, this time slot provides opportunities to meet with teachers, to take "drop-in" HWF classes, to enjoy one-time "mini-classes" on teachers' passions, to work in open shops, studios or the library. Another appealing aspect of the rotating schedule, and 3:00 p.m. end-of-day, is that it minimizes athletes' absence from any given class on "away" game days (practices do not begin until 3:15 p.m.).

The Jellis Block

The Jellis Block (named for Jellis Wilmerding, the 1900 benefactor of the Wilmerding School of Industrial Arts) is designed as a two-week culmination of the school year. It features real-world applications of skills and knowledge.

During this two-week immersion, students will engage in hands-on application of what they know, generally in off-campus settings. Jellis Block projects culminate in public presentations or exhibitions.

At this writing, the first Jellis Block (May 29 – June 12, 2007) anticipates ninth graders living in the outdoors and doing environmental reclamation; sophomores being engaged in carefully selected service learning projects (under the rubric of “the global community at home”); juniors working in groups on community-based projects that call for direct application of their technical, visual or performing arts skills; and seniors choosing from an extensive menu of internship and action research options.

Early Returns Are In

Since launching our reshaped high school in the fall of 2006, the “early returns” have been very promising. Students and teachers alike applaud the calming effect the long-block schedule has brought, given that there are only four class periods each day—and, therefore, much less running from one class to the next. They also agree that the long club/lunch period contributes to a sense of balance within the day (and they praise the healthy, often organic, fare provided by our cafeteria). In addition, both students and faculty note the positive aspects derived from the predictability of “odd” and “even” days, allowing them to better plan and budget their out-of-class time. Every student I have spoken with notes the significant benefit of having to attend to homework in, at most, four disciplines on any given evening. Also, while the initial Reshaping High School design

threatened to compromise the performing arts program, the public comment period led to the creation of the P² Block as a way of removing a number of the performing arts and publications from competition with core academic offerings. I am delighted to report that we currently have more students involved in these activities than ever.

One originally unanticipated by-product of the Reshaping High School initiative was that it became a catalyst for reducing the teaching load for academic departments from five sections to four. Besides making the faculty’s teaching lives more optimal, this change also means that teachers are even more available during the school day to meet one-on-one with students and to pursue collaborative planning with colleagues. This load reduction also led to hiring our largest ever “new class” of teachers, 11 (18 percent of the full faculty) in total. This experienced cohort of teachers was drawn to Lick, in large part, by the tenets defining Reshaping High School. Given their level of previous classroom experience and their understanding of, and commitment to, our emergent innovations, we have found this new class’s arrival to be enormously positive and energizing.

Another unanticipated consequence of our new model is that it has breathed new life into our faculty development program. In particular, two 2005-2006 faculty committees, “Core Literacies” and “Faculty Evaluation and Support,” produced inspired ideas about how to proceed in their respective areas. Among other things, the Reshaping High School initiative has also further clarified and refined the work of department chairs in

their dual roles of department advocates and vital members of the school's leadership team.

This week, along with other considerations, has also led us to rethink our faculty meeting structure—moving to a repeating cycle of three distinctly different types of gatherings. One, designed and run by faculty departments, focuses on practical issues related to teaching and learning. Another devotes initial time to administrative issues and then morphs into an open forum in order “to see what’s up” during this time of transition. The third is facilitated by a multicultural consultant, who is helping us to navigate the next chapter in our school’s justice/equity/inclusivity journey. Specifically, we are focusing on power, privilege, connection and compassion—viewing issues related to personal difference through the lens of majority privilege/power and issues

related to national difference through the lens of developed nation privilege/power.

There are more moving parts to our Reshaping High School enterprise than can be adequately captured here. So I close by returning to the heart of the matter. The goals of our “reshaped high school” relate directly to the desire to have our students’ education be uplifting, empowering, durable and enduring. While no school can imbue its students with all of the skills and knowledge they need for a lifetime, we can provide them with a generously proportioned, life-navigating toolbox that they can carry with them for years after they leave our care.

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