



# MINNESOTA SPONSOR ASSISTANCE NETWORK

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## Restructuring Our High Schools for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Creating 'Grade 11-13' Schools

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### Introduction

Since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, numerous initiatives have been undertaken to improve the education system. Two characteristics of these reforms are that most are focused on elementary schools and most do not result in changes in the structure of the institution. While the need for elementary/secondary reform was evident, emphasis on change in postsecondary institutions, especially at the initial two years, has been less apparent. There has been a growing discussion on the issue of "high school reform." Because the high school has multiple roles, this paper suggests that the subject of high school reform is incomplete unless that discussion also includes realignment with postsecondary institutions.

*The world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century requires citizens to have skills requiring an education beyond high school for most careers. High schools and post-secondary institutions will need to rethink some age-old practices in order to best address the needs of those they serve.*

The institution called "high school" has been in existence for centuries. It has traditionally been a four-year course of study with an emphasis on the study of mathematics, languages, literature, science, social sciences and a variety of other subjects. The subject areas were basically a liberal arts education although select schools had special foci in areas such as agriculture or the arts. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many school districts created junior high schools that were frequently grades 7 to 9 and senior high schools, which were grades 10 to 12 although there were various different grade organizations within these grade constructs.

Why are high schools either three years or four years in duration? Why do they stop at grade 12 regardless of whether they are three years or four years in length? Why are they not two years or five years? Does it matter? These are questions that have multiple answers but it is questionable as to whether the rationale relates to student learning results or planning for student's futures. In the world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, how students access learning opportunities and how institutions provide them need to change.

While the above questions raise issues for discussion, there are several questions that are more meaningful and more important such as:

1. *What is the purpose of high school?*
2. *What is the significance of acquiring a diploma from a high school?*
3. *Must one complete high school before attending post secondary school?*
4. *Can parts of high school and post secondary school actually be combined thereby impacting the mission of both?*

In the discussion of "school reform," these key questions are rarely addressed in a substantive way. They should be if in fact significant reform is to occur or even to make the decision that reform is not needed...which is an unlikely conclusion. Although learning is indeed a life-long process, how to best deliver the initial preparation including high school and post-secondary is at a critical juncture.

### Purpose and Significance of High School

What is the purpose of high school? In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, high school was actually considered as a terminal degree. With a high school diploma, one could obtain a reasonably

good job and support a family. In some occupations, not even a high school diploma was needed to accomplish that objective. In rural parts of the country, it was not uncommon prior to 1950 to have students, especially those living on family farms, to have eighth grade as their terminal degree. Because of minimum wage job laws, some stayed in school until they were 16 and then left to join the world of work and were able to do so successfully.

With the advent of the GI Bill following World War II, coupled with a changing national and world economy, a high school diploma began to lose its prominence as a terminal degree. Various sectors in the United States were recognizing that the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century would need fewer unskilled workers and a more skilled and professional workforce.

However, the entrance to college was only possible if one possessed a high school diploma. The high school diploma was significant no longer because of its “terminal degree status” but rather because of the doors that it opened to colleges and universities. Today, a high school diploma is needed to enter military service, to access most colleges and universities and for most employment opportunities that pay more than minimum wage or perhaps slightly above. Without a high school diploma, employment opportunities are restricted to fast food and similar minimum wage jobs.

Therefore, the “purpose” of a high school diploma in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was to demonstrate that a person had completed a program of study which prepared them for most areas of employment and that the person was considered “educated.” However, the “purpose” of a high school diploma in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century changed significantly from the first half. It now became more of a visa for entry into post-secondary institutions.

### **The myth of Grade 12 as a Pre-requisite for college**

Until the 1980's, unless a person was one of the few child geniuses, it was unheard of to start college before one graduated from high school. In 1986, the Minnesota Legislature enacted the Post Secondary Enrollment Options Act (PSEO) which enabled high school juniors and seniors to access college courses.

*For the first time on a large scale, the myth that one could only be successful in grade 13 if they had completed grade 12 was not only questioned but was actually destroyed.*

Since the introduction of PSEO, over 100,000 Minnesota students have participated both in high school and in post secondary at the same time. Prior to PSEO, high schools and colleges, especially vocational educational programs, had developed “curriculum articulation agreements” whereby the scope and sequence of both “high school” and “vocational training institutes” were sequenced so that the student was prepared in high school for the course work required at the post secondary institution. However, while this model was both efficient for the institutions and to a degree, advantageous for the student, post secondary credit was not granted for work completed in the high school courses regardless of its rigor.

*What Minnesota's Post Secondary Enrollment Options Act did has changed the 150 year old structure of a high school.*

It is not uncommon to hear high school students, their parents and their teachers suggest that much of the senior year is not useful because the students have met their high school graduation requirements and know where they plan to attend college. Students suggest that they are “bored” and want to move on. In fact, many are attending post secondary programs either on a full or part time basis through PSEO.

Therein lies the question.

*Through PSEO, students are accessing post-secondary programs. They have been the research laboratories that documented that grades 11—13 can indeed be meshed.*

*Should not the institutions themselves be combining so that students can complete a two-year post-secondary program by the end of grade 13?*

While the cost of post secondary education in Minnesota is reasonably priced for many, especially at our two-year institutions, albeit this cost has increased substantially the past several years, being able to provide a two-year college degree at no cost to the student and no added cost to the state

would certainly be a desirable public policy objective.

While having students attain a two-year degree or certificate under PSEO is now possible; it is a rare occurrence.

*Institution innovation would likely expand the number of students actually earning a two-year degree/certificate especially those least able to access such an opportunity under the current model.*

The key question is, "How can this be accomplished?" The Minneapolis and St. Paul Public Schools as well as other districts with mega high schools are currently restructuring. Each high school is creating Small Learning Communities (SLC) each with their own focus. Students will choose the SLC they wish to attend. Transferring from SLC to other SLC's is anticipated as students gain insight and additional learning.

*Now is the logical time to make significant system change at our high schools and our post-secondary systems as well*

### **Grade 11-13 Program Design**

High schools and post-secondary institutions need to create a system whereby student learning is not looked at in terms of "High School" or "Post-secondary" but rather as "learning necessary to meet the requirements of a degree or certificate." They then need to restructure the learning experiences so those requirements are efficiently accomplished. For many students, this means the merging of grade 12 and 13 so that the "degree/certificate objective" can be accomplished in a grade 11—13 school. In certain situations, the "middle college" concept does this. However, that concept has not been implemented in Minnesota.

At the present time, almost all high schools offer courses such as calculus or at least pre-calculus, advanced composition, the fourth year of a language, advanced placement or IB, etc. These same courses are offered at the post-secondary institution. Students take these courses both at the high school and again at the post-secondary institution as a part of the "general education requirements." State aid is paid twice. Under the Grade 11-13 model, this duplication would be eliminated. For some of these courses, a college in

the schools program would be initiated where a college professor is paired with a qualified high school teacher with an advanced degree that meets the college requirements. The high school teacher would teach the college syllabus under the direction of the college instructor. The examinations would be prepared by the college instructor and the "college in the school" instructor. For some classes, the college instructor might come to the high school or teach the class through two-way interactive television or a computer based class. For other courses, the student would go to the post-secondary institution.

*The greatest challenge to creating the Grade 11-13 system does not rest with the students. Rather, it rests with the willingness of the two systems to rise to the challenge.*

This model certainly is not for all students just like some current high school designs do not meet the needs of all students. But clearly it would serve some students well. They would be able to continue their participation in extra-curricular activities and the safety of the high school campus and be completing significant parts of their post-secondary requirements as well.

### **The Role of the Employer Sector**

For certain grade 11-13 schools, the employment sector has a key role. Depending on the design of the program, needed equipment, hands on experience and mentoring can best be provided by this sector. For example, engineering firms can provide mentoring and practical application experiences. Following the attainment of a two-year degree, these firms can employ these persons and provide them financial assistance to continue their education. In other areas, students will be employed directly from the grade 11-13 school into well paying jobs.

### **Financing the Grade 11-13 school**

At the present time, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students generate K-12 revenue. The amount differs depending on the characteristics of the students. For the 2002-03 school year, the average Minneapolis high school student will generate approximately \$9,500 in general education revenue, compensatory revenue, desegregation revenue and excess levy referendum. This amount is higher if the student has a disability or is non-

English speaking. Students attending a public post-secondary institution also generate state “post-secondary education aid.”

Depending on the course design, the student would generate secondary aid for grade 11 because most of the courses would be more high school standards oriented. For grade 12, the student would earn both secondary revenue as well as post-secondary aid because some of the courses would be post-secondary. At grade 13, the student would earn post-secondary aid because most of the competencies would be at the post-secondary level.

Using both the state revenue paid to both institutions, the high school/post secondary consortium would need to plan their budgets for the grade 11-13 program which would enable the student to complete a minimum of one year of post-secondary work and in most cases, two years. Students would not be restricted from acquiring objectives at “their grade only.” Students in grade 11 could be working on grade 12 objectives and students in grade 12 could be taking grade 13 objectives and vice-versa.

The institutions would have a cooperative arrangement that specified both the revenue and expenditures of the grade 11-13 school. While no additional state aid would be paid, students would not pay tuition for two-year programs except perhaps for some of the high cost equipment based programs.

### **Management of the Grade 11-13 school**

The “Grade 11-13 School” does not require new buildings or additional teachers. It could require only that a cooperative agreement be developed between the two systems that would guide how the program would operate, be financed and be managed.

Some sort of cooperative council would be appointed to manage the contract between the two systems, design and manage the learning program and provide oversight. The employment sector partners would be included on this management council.

### **Conclusion**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a high school diploma will continue to be a terminal degree for a small number

of students. For the vast majority of students, it is no longer even a necessary objective. That is not to say that students will not “graduate from high school.”

Our society values that event as a “passage to adulthood.” In practical terms however, it may well be more of a ritual than a necessary event.

*The new objective of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is that students have post-secondary certifications or degrees as their minimum credentials.*

In order to accomplish this, education systems must change so that they are supportive of students attaining the new goal. We cannot continue to follow the 20<sup>th</sup> century education model to accomplish 21<sup>st</sup> century objectives. The purpose of this paper is intended to move that discussion forward.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Robert Wedl is an associate with Education/Evolving which is a joint effort with the Center for Policy Studies and Hamline University. Wedl is a former Minnesota Commissioner of Education and senior administrator in the Minneapolis Public Schools. This paper is an amended version on one originally prepared in September 1998. Comments regarding this paper should be made to: robert\_wedl@yahoo.com