



Education

Julia Steiny: Hope High might have a leg up on standardization

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What's up with the all the controversy roiling around Hope High?

Recently, more than 200 students walked out of school, at an hour determined by the leaders of their protest group, which included Brown University students. They first marched down to the Providence School Department in a loud, youthful furor, and then over to City Hall to roust the mayor. Neither the superintendent nor the mayor were available.

Hope students had already addressed the school board several times, as did some 20 teachers at one meeting. Their school is special, they passionately pleaded. Do not cram it into one cookie-cutter plan for all the Providence high schools.

School officials explained their reasoning, but otherwise seemed unyielding.

The Providence school system has long languished on the state's academic watch list. For that reason, officials have chosen an aggressive strategy to improve the district's dismal student achievement with an "aligned" curriculum that's uniform across all schools. To picture what this means, think of academics as discrete bricks of information and skill. Each brick needs to be stacked in a specific sequence, securely, in order to create a foundation strong enough to support yet more learning. This strict alignment makes it possible to create tests that warn teachers when the kids don't get it, and to identify specific holes in a newcomer's foundation.

These days, educators agree on the need for an aligned curriculum. You have to build achievement skill by skill.

But no one agrees on which schedule is best for this. The Providence School Department, along with consultants and the teachers working with them, decided to design its curriculum for 53-minute classes, taught in a six-period day in all schools.

The friction between Hope and the School Department is about the district's decision to ditch Hope's beloved

“block schedule” of 90-minute classes.

Frankly, I’m not a fan of top-down standardization. But for the short run, to get an academic skeleton built that will help all the schools stand up straight, the officials’ reasons for the highly controlled six-period day were compelling. I’ll devote next week’s column to them.

But for now you should know that 4 of the other 10 Providence high schools are also losing their block scheduling — not that the public has heard any outcry from them.

Only Hope has objected strenuously. And for good reason. In fact, Hope is special. Its odd, dramatic recent history produced, among other things, a uniquely bonded community at a huge, 1,100-student comprehensive high school.

For too long, “Hopeless High” was a dismal icon of urban educational failure. But effective as of fall 2005, then-Commissioner Peter McWalters’ “Hope Order” reorganized the way the school operated, breaking it into three “smaller learning communities.” Only half the faculty were invited to return. All teachers signed an agreement that they would participate in certain practices.

Among those practices was the agreement to lead an advisory, which is to say, each teacher would create personal relationships with a group of 12-15 students. Advisories were new back then, and strongly resisted, so overnight the “Hope Order” assembled a whole school of teachers who believed in advisory and could hit the ground running.

The school implemented many other innovations, with far more mixed results. But the advisories were a smashing success. No other large comprehensive high school in the state had successfully created little school families that look out for each other. In interviews, students affectionately gushed about their advisors and deeply appreciated the sense of belonging they felt with their group. New students among the city’s highly mobile population felt so welcomed by their school family, many said they were motivated to succeed in school, sometimes for the first time.

National conferences repeatedly invited Hope faculty to demonstrate how to use their “Individual Learning Plans,” which anchored the advisory’s purposeful conversations about each student’s academic, social, personal and career goals. Hope was considered a national model for “personalizing” anonymous, big-school education.

In 2008, a mere three years later, the fires in the bathrooms had stopped, as had the daily fights. Students walked calmly through the halls, chatting happily, arms laden with books. Reading scores nearly tripled in all three of Hope’s new learning communities.

I believe that these advisories, more than other issues, are at the root of Hope’s fight with the School Department. Having your community threatened is big-time serious business.

But Hope’s sad 4-percent proficiency in math is emblematic of what’s still deeply problematic there and at most Providence schools. The new curriculum is essential to jump-starting academics. Under the new plan, all high schools will have 40-minute advisories, six-period days, and the same amount of common planning time. After all, Hope is part of a larger system of schools, and for now, uniformity is at least fair. Hope’s strong community should give them a leg up on improving academics.

Even so, if Providence is going to impose a standardized schedule, why choose the traditional 53-minute,

Carnegie-unit schedule associated with factory-model schools? I put the question to school officials and expected to hate their answers. I did not. In next week's column, see if you do. Maybe Hope does need to get with the program.

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