



Education

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Julia Steiny: North Providence gets to know its high schooler

01:00 AM EDT on Sunday, September 26, 2010



After years of working to humanize their school, administrators and teachers at North Providence High School are peacock proud. Principal Joseph Goho says, beaming with satisfaction, “Our kids say they are known by several adults here!”

The kids I talked to agree. Sarah, a senior who hopes to become a pediatric nurse, enthused, “It’s cool how a lot of the teachers are really social with you.” Other kids nodded.

Both the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) and the New England Association of Schools and Colleges have crowed as well. A RIDE report says, “NPHS is a school where every child is important.”

Now, you would hope that every school treats kids as affectionately welcomed individuals. But America’s big public secondary schools can be notoriously impersonal places, where kids feel like a number and a bother. No wonder. In traditional, “factory-model” schools, each teacher often has 125 students, 5 classes of 25, with no time or opportunity to get to know kids personally. In reports on why kids drop out of school, dropouts say they felt no connection to school — not to any adult, never mind the academics.

In the test-pressure-cookers that have become our schools, efforts to personalize education are again taking a back seat nationally. However, copious research shows that to improve the nationally anemic graduation rate — a mere 68 percent — schools absolutely must become more humane places to be. Sadly, the official term “personalization” does not itself evoke friendly, warm relationships. Still, personalization is the crucial, if insufficient, foundation for academic achievement. It still astounds me that so many people — both educators and the public — buck this fact, as though kids can leave their feelings and lives at the schoolhouse door and think only about academics. In a perfect world, maybe, but in reality?

For years, Rhode Island’s secondary-school regulations have mandated personalization. The staff at NPHS began

its work on personalization by investigating the most common strategy used by schools, advisory programs. Advisories give a teacher and a small group of students time to talk during the week, so every child is known by at least one adult. Advisories hold all adults responsible for being there for their students and greatly warm up a school's culture, when they work.

But when the staff went out to observe other schools' programs, Goho says, "what we found was unimpressive. Too much was insubstantial. We didn't want personalization-on-paper. The mandate was no problem; it's what we wanted anyway. But we felt it was important to build a culture of personalization, with structures that would outlast all of us. But we needed to define it in a way that would work for us."

They created an elaborate 10-layer system no column could describe fully. Comprehensive Guidance is its foundation, since the new counseling standards focus more on the relationships and functioning of all the people in the school and less on traditional one-on-one counseling for students who come asking for it. With adults, students create their own Personal Education Plan, designed to get the kid's head in her future, in life beyond high school. Beginning in the ninth grade, these plans also prepare students to craft an essential question they can investigate as seniors, with a mentor from outside the school. The high school's award-winning senior project program meets the requirements of Rhode Island's innovative diploma system.

So, personalization at NPHS is complicated.

A unique feature is that NPHS students take a "skills" class twice a week to stay on top of the state's graduation requirements, which are themselves hefty and complex. They include passing all courses and statewide tests, a senior project and a graduation portfolio.

Sarah, the aspiring pediatric nurse, said, "I was really scared the graduation stuff would be stressful. But they break it down for you. It's pretty easy."

Skills classes have curricula geared to each high-school year. Freshmen learn how to cope with the culture shock of high school, and they work on beefing up their literacy. Tenth grade works on math; eleventh on business and technology, until finally seniors spend their time preparing for successful graduation. But skills classes also could function as the beginnings of a formal advisory program, something the school might still build.

Melissa Caffrey is the social-studies department chair and one of three coordinators of the graduation requirements. She says, "I'm most proud of our monthly meetings," which include assistant principals, all graduation coordinators, guidance counselors, skills teachers and others. "We have a huge printout of all the kids. Together we figure out who is missing a letter of recommendation; who is not yet proficient and where. Together we decide on interventions, formal and informal," meaning everything from who might need to take a remedial class to who seems obviously low lately. NPHS has 1,100 students to keep on track.

As a result, the school's math and English scores have been trending upward, and the school got a big bump in writing scores. North Providence has the highest graduation rate among the urban-ring districts, and has improved its college-bound rate from 69 percent to 82 percent in five years. And all this took place as its subsidized-lunch (low-income) population soared from 18 percent to 36 percent in a mere three years.

So, it's a complicated system, but it's working.

Julia Steiny, a former member of the Providence School Board, consults on schools and government initiatives, such as Information Works!, Rhode Island's school-accountability project. She can be reached at

9/28/2010

Julia Steiny: North Providence gets to know...

juliasteiny@gmail.com, or c/o EdWatch, The Providence Journal, 75 Fountain St., Providence, RI 02902.