

The Dream

The learning and teaching environment you aspire to and the common ground you discovered in conversations with colleagues about their dreams.

The dream that I plan to try and bring to fruition is not originally my own. The late Aaron Commerson conceived it last year and was testing the waters with the HTH staff before he passed away. As such, it has become known as the Commerson Plan.

Essentially, it eliminates grade levels and brings problem-based learning into sharper focus by presenting students with a catalogue of available projects on offer by pairs of teachers. Students would have to take the requisite number of credits of each discipline to graduate, and would need to take this into consideration when choosing from the available projects on offer. Advisors would help students track and meet graduation requirements during their four years of high school.

In this model, students would be grouped by interest in the project and work in mixed grade environments to complete their projects.

The Challenges

College Considerations

UC acceptance of courses

One of the logistical issues is submitting our courses for multi-grade level credit acceptance by the UC system. I have spoken to Chris White, our college advisor twice now, and set up a meeting with Wendy McDonald to work out the details regarding whether our courses are currently only approved for specific grades or if teachers within one classroom can offer different courses (through differentiated instruction) to different grade levels.

English requirements

Colleges prefer to see four years of English credits spread out over four years. Under an unregulated Commerson Plan students could conceivably get their four years of English done in their freshman and sophomore year. To avoid the problems this would cause during the college application process students would be required to select one English project per year to acquire their four years of English credit. To help students acquire the required credits, teachers would need to work in cross disciplinary teams more often than not. Occasionally a Spanish/Media, History/Media mix or Spanish/History mix may be able to be offered if all science teachers are already paired off with other humanities related subjects. In this way, most students would cover all required credits for graduation and meet the HTH requirements as well.

Student Perspectives

Avoiding grade self selection

To ensure a representative sample of students from each grade, projects would have an equal division of spaces open for each grade. For example a project may have 12 slots for 9th grade, 12 for 10th grade and so on, for a total of 48 students to be shared between two teachers.

Maintaining ethnically diverse classrooms

Due to the challenge posed by having all students getting their first choice of project, students would have to select their top three or four projects from the twelve offered and would be placed according to those choices. This would allow for some balance to be created by the administration, while still preserving student choice.

Mathematics

In alignment with the current focus on restructuring mathematics at HTH, five periods of math would be taught throughout the day to cover all students at their appropriate level. Algebra, Geometry, Algebra II and Calculus would be required for all students over their four years of high school. This format has the advantage that advanced students could move ahead through the math courses at a quicker pace, potentially moving onto more advanced math programs outside of HTH by their senior year.

Teacher Concerns

The process may become a popularity contest among teachers!

This is an interesting fear, but one that is ultimately not focused on creating equitable, engaging and student centered learning environments and therefore detracts from the ultimate goal. Using a system that allows students to select their top three choices may help alleviate these fears and refocusing the conversation around the potential of having a class full of students who are eager to work on your project

My current teaching partner and I have a great system; I don't want to work with anyone else!

Due to static grades, teaching partnerships have the potential to become stagnant, which can potentially harm the projects developed and ultimately the learning environment for the students. Of course, this doesn't apply to all partnerships all the time, but occasionally apathy or resistance to change can set in and create blinders against potentially great project ideas arising from melding passions with coworkers that have previously worked with other grade levels. Under the Commerson Plan, teachers would be free to design a forum where different project ideas could be discussed and partnerships formed each year. (I can totally see this happening at the local after school watering hole: "Pitch Fest at the Fish!")

The Plan

First steps

The first step was to determine if it was feasible with scheduling. Thanks to some index cards it turns out it is possible with our current staff. There would be twelve interdisciplinary teaching teams offering projects each semester and a separate math department that offered high school math options.

An additional step I took was to ask my class about what their thoughts were about the idea. The response was overwhelmingly positive. However, students shared the same concerns as I did about maintaining diversity in the classrooms and preventing students from selecting projects based on what their friends chose.

Second steps

Having addressed that it is actually physically possible and that students would be open to the idea, the next step is to address some of the teacher concerns. Not everyone embraces change, however, everyone likes to socialize and talk about their passions. To overcome the resistance teachers may have about working with people other than their current partner, our small group has decided to use an upcoming staff day to get teachers talking about their dream projects with someone from another grade. By couching the activity as a brainstorming event to kindle project ideas from fresh sources we hope to set the stage for discussions about working with mixed grades and other partners.

If this goes well, and logistics for college entrance can be worked out, the next step will be to propose the changes to the staff. I think the most workable rollout of the plan would be over the course of two years. In the first year 11th and 12th grade would be blended and offer project choices, followed in year two by a full elimination of grade levels.

The time frame for this proposal is to have it before the staff by June 2012 for possible implementation in Fall 2013.

Additional Research and Possible Models

The following two schools have pedagogies very similar to our own and have developed unique systems to allow for student choice. Identifying bright spots in their curriculum design may help us move forward with our proposed changes.

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