

How to save Oregon public high schools

by Sarah Thompson

Often during the thirty years I spent as a public high school teacher, business owners would complain to me that the graduates from our school that they employed could not write a clear description of their services OR explain a billing error in writing OR contact a client impressively in writing. I agreed with these business people. Our Oregon high school graduates needed then, and need now to be given a better environment in which to master essential skills. On numerous occasions during tenure as an instructor, I suggested to our administrators that the difficulties we were then, and still are, facing in the public schools, especially the high schools, could easily be solved. Generally, the reaction to my suggestion, one that I am now sharing with you, the readers of this publication, was a smile and a, "Good day to you, Mrs. Thompson." The solution to our educational problems has always been hiding in plain sight. It is Student-First Accreditation. Student-First Accreditation is practical, economical and effective. The Federal Government has approved Student-First Accreditation for funding. However, it is the State itself that has been laboring under the impression that the top-down, centrally controlled programs we maintain in our public schools are the only formats that make sense. Oregonians have been trying to find a way to reform the public schools seemingly forever, and have failed, in my opinion, only because all the suggestions for reform are simply add-ons applied within the same school structure, that rest on the same foundation, a foundation that was adopted in the early 20th century as a result of the work of John Dewey, William Harris and others. They designed the top-down, military model we still use in all Oregon public high schools, a model that requires students to respond to bells, whistles, klaxons, being grouped by age, and required to stand in lines and sit in neat rows. Most parents and educators in Oregon are not aware that there is a much better way to organize a school, and that better way is the result of adopting Student-First Accreditation as our standard. Usually, when I mention accreditation method, people unfamiliar with the process (which sometimes includes school board members) are puzzled. Why would a different accreditation method make a difference? In the top-down system we have used for many, many decades in Oregon, teachers are required to walk into classrooms with prepared syllabi, and deliver their subjects according to the dictates of a central authority. Variations from the syllabi are truly frowned upon, irrespective of what principals and superintendents might say regarding the goals of preplanning. The individual student's learning style, aptitudes, skill levels, emotional preparedness, and interests are typically unknown to a teacher, and, if known, addressing them is virtually impossible when the focus of a school is on management, standard method and content. As a result, ALL public school students are disengaged to some extent, and, therefore, underachieve to some degree. For example, our State's public high school valedictorians place 20th in the world in general knowledge, science and mathematics when compared to the best students of other first world countries. (Of course, some Oregon public high school students compare well with students in other places in America, but that's just being good when compared to a generally poor showing.) When we apply one method and canned materials to students as if they were all the same, even our best will not achieve what they could if they were studying in a Student-First Accredited atmosphere. Currently, all Oregon education tax dollars continue to be poured into attempting to "massage" the status quo. In the "massage" category, we can put every single school reform proposal suggested in our State during the past fifty years. Programs such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), and 3R are add-ons and will never, in my opinion, improve results because our students have grown way beyond such systems psychologically. (Since 1995, America's test scores in science have actually dropped, this after spending another eighty billion dollars each of the last six years to follow the requirements specified by NCLB.) Said differently, we cannot take a group of young people who have been rightly sold the American message that their individuality is important, place them in a school where they must jump to the sound of repetitive auditory cues, march in lines, and sit in rows, and expect a competitive first world result. School reform proposals in Oregon are offered by just about everyone, and everyone feels qualified to do so. It is no wonder that the Legislature and the Governor are confused. It is a bit like everyone feeling that they sound like Frank Sinatra or Rosemary Clooney in the shower. The reforms being recommended are just as good as the shower singers. What we really need though are the real Frank and Rosemary, who sounded great both in and out of their showers. As it is, everyone is blamed for the poor performance of our public schools: politicians, parents, teachers, administrators, school boards, even the bus drivers. No one, as I've explained, really looks at the school structure, the foundation. Everyone wants a better

product using a system that is a poor match for the psychological position of Oregon students. I am not aware of one experienced teacher who wouldn't have given a limb to teach in a school like those described by Student-First Accreditation advocates. I am confident that once elected school boards in Oregon know how Student-First Accreditation works, and how smooth transitions are possible, there will be an educational revolution in the State of Oregon. Suddenly, our students will become a lot smarter. Sarah Thompson
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