A New Model for Our Schools: Expeditionary Learning

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I teach at Casco Bay High School for Expeditionary Learning in Portland, Maine—one of the new models of comprehensive school reform. Rather than being purveyors of education, we see ourselves as managers of instruction, but also collaborators and partners in the learning process. One of the phrases that we often use at our school is that there are no passengers, only crew—and that means everyone. Stewardship and becoming global citizens are at the core of what we’re doing at Casco Bay.

The Casco Bay Philosophy

The school is very new, having opened in the fall of 2005, and I’m in my second year of teaching there. Our founding class is graduating in June 2009. These are the kids who decided that they would take a chance and come to a new place. We’re a public high school, one of three that students in Portland can choose. The others are Portland High School—the oldest high school in Maine—and Deering High School. We are still very small, with only 225 students. Out of those students, 30 percent qualify for free or reduced lunch, about 25 percent are special education, and about 30 percent are English language learners (ELL). Because Portland is an official refugee-relocation site, its ELL population is very global, and so we have students from all over the world—including Sudan and Somalia. We’re part of the Expeditionary Learning network, which now includes about 150 high schools across the country. Expeditionary learning is project-based and experiential, engaging students by involving them in research to explore a single topic. We’re doing some pretty amazing stuff there. Our twelfth graders, who represent our district demographically, scored above average for both the state and the district in every area on state tests and the SATs, and scored in the top 10 percent in the state in reading and writing. This is very significant because our students are rarely given tests; instead, we set problems in front of them, and

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they attempt to figure them out. We never did any test prep with them, and so we weren’t sure how they would do; needless to say, we were pleasantly surprised. So how did we get them there? We talk about the three Rs—Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships.

**Rigor.** Casco Bay has a very rigorous standards-based program. If a student doesn’t meet the standards for a course, he or she will not get credit for it. And in my humanities/social studies course, there are twenty-two standards.

**Relevance.** Everything that we do must be relevant to the students. At any point one of my students should be able to say to me, “Oh I know exactly why we’re doing this and why it matters.” There is nothing that we do that doesn’t have some sort of real outcome. We’re not just playing; we’re actually doing something that will have a real impact when we’re through.

**Relationships.** This is probably the most important thing. We were originally funded by the Gates Foundation as part of its Small Schools Initiative, and because we’re so small, we know each and every student quite well. We have advisory groups—or “crews”—that support students’ academic and character development on a daily basis, serving as a kind of family for students while they’re in school. We know what’s going on with them. We have students who are homeless, who are living in generational poverty. At other schools, these are the kids who wouldn’t be showing up, who would be dropping out, but they’re here.

**Curriculum**

Our curriculum is based on long-term, in-depth studies of relevant topics that involve community fieldwork and have global implications. Right now my tenth-grade students are working toward the culmination of an expedition that they’ve been engaged in for the last two months. We have been looking at millennium development goals, and the problem they are trying to fix is poverty. The U.N. set forth a program to try to end global poverty by the year 2015. The students looked at the eight different goals, decided which ones they thought were the most important for them to try and fix, raised money, set up a foundation, and are now writing grants. They’re currently doing research on other problems, for which we’ve brought in a number of speakers: community members from the Democratic Republic of Congo; experts who have worked with the Peace Corps; experts from the Carter Center, who are spearheading international Guinea worm disease eradication programs. And we heard from these people and decided that these are problems we want to fix. So now these students will have to get up in front of experts and present their proposals, explaining how we would like to spend the money we raised—
which organization working in the developing world we should help, and how exactly we should do it. When these students walk into my classroom every day, they know what the goal is.

Working Collaboratively on All Levels

We are constantly working in collaboration—partly out of necessity, as we’re such a small staff, but also because we love what we’re doing and are dedicated to the school’s mission. If we didn’t work together, there’s no way we’d be able to do what we do. Besides collaborating among ourselves, almost everything we do is vetted by students and parents. Before school starts, we have a daylong program during which we explain to students what we’re thinking of doing that year, what the expeditions will be, and they gave us great feedback this year. The juniors were to be working on how chemistry will save the world, and they provided a lot of feedback on what they thought would and wouldn’t be good fieldwork as well as which experts they wanted to hear from.

We work in heterogeneously grouped classes. I have a student in one of my classes who reads at a third-grade level and who, because she was a refugee, did not enter a classroom until she was twelve. She is, however, one of our highest-level thinkers and contributes enormously to the class. In that same class, working in groups alongside her, are students who in any other high school would probably be put in AP classes. But at Casco Bay we all work together, and the collaboration and compassion that I see in these groups is unbelievable and inspiring. We all work with a standards-based curriculum, so everything we’re doing, everything we’ve developed, is aligned to state standards. Our small school can’t afford to buy textbooks, but due to generous grants, students have been given a laptop for the year, which they can use as they would for anything else. The students who are graduating this year were the first ones to be given laptops under the program started by former governor King, and laptops and wireless technology are inherent to what we’re doing and ubiquitous in our day-to-day learning. Students don’t even think twice about having these things as a resource, and they are extremely savvy, having been using the technology since they were in seventh grade. So I get to present students with these projects, let them go, and watch what happens.

I made a very deliberate decision to become a teacher, and I left my teacher education program very well versed in both theory and best practices. I was enthusiastic and couldn’t wait to work in an inclusive, differentiated classroom with an inquiry-based model, where assessment is at the heart of the learning practice, and I was excited to collaborate with colleagues. I knew that I did not know it all and could really benefit from their experience. Because I had
been working in the field of technology before, I was intrigued by the prospect of using it in the classroom. So there I was, fresh out of school and energized about doing all of these things, but in every classroom I walked into, I saw a model in action that I hadn’t expected: teaching in isolation. As a relatively innovative person, I tried to do the kinds of things I wanted to do within the model, but I didn’t know how to navigate. And so after my third year I had decided to leave teaching. I wasn’t interested in continuing to fight a model that I believed wasn’t going to work for students or for myself as a professional. Luckily I walked over to Casco Bay High School and asked if there were any openings, and there were, and it changed my life. I’m probably the most engaged and the happiest I’ve ever been—and I know my students feel the same way. Some of the students who have chosen to come to Casco Bay are giving up a part of the typical high school experience in that we don’t have sports teams—they’d have to go to either of the other high schools for that—but they’re making that sacrifice and coming to our school because they know they want to make a difference.

Creating Global Citizens

One of the reasons we get away with having so few teachers at Casco Bay is that our students start taking college classes at local universities during their junior year. In addition to students earning college credit this way, we also offer a few AP courses, though they’re not really an emphasis in our model. What’s interesting about all this is that while we’re doing all these things to both prepare our students for college and ensure that they get in, it’s hard to convince them that they need to go right now because after all their experience speaking in front of the city council and the state legislature and various other groups, they want to start working—for NGOs, for city government, and so on. Because of the expeditionary learning approach, our students are becoming global citizens very early. So though it’s a bit of a problem to navigate, it’s a nice problem to have.

As for the leadership of the school, we all see ourselves as partners. The culture in our school—student, parent, teacher, and that set forth by our principal—is all about collaborating and making it work. And so I feel very lucky that I’m able to take part in that and to have reengaged with those idealistic goals that got me interested in teaching in the first place: to help people change the world by giving them the tools—and the encouragement—to fix its problems.