Schools for Talent Development:
A Practical Plan for Total School Improvement

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If leaders of educational reform can agree on only one thing, it is that remedial models for school improvement have failed. Attempts to push up achievement test scores from the bottom through highly prescriptive mastery learning models have frustrated low-achieving students and dragged down the performance of average and high-achieving youngsters. An alternative to the "drill-and-kill" approach is an enrichment-based model that uses high end learning strategies and accelerated content to improve the performance of all students.

The Schoolwide Enrichment Model, developed by the Center for Talent Development at the University of Connecticut, is a detailed blueprint for total school improvement. Flexible enough to allow each school to form its own program based on local resources, student populations, school leadership dynamics, faculty strengths, and creativity, this research-supported model is based on highly successful practices that had their origins in special programs for gifted and talented students. Its major goal is to promote challenging and enjoyable high-end learning across the full range of school types, levels, and demographic differences.

Multiple Purposes

The Schoolwide Enrichment Model is not intended to replace or minimize existing services to high-achieving students. Rather, its purpose is to integrate services into a-rising-tide-lifts-all-ships approach school improvement and expand the role of enrichment specialists by infusing specific practices of high-end learning into the total school program. The Schoolwide Enrichment Model provides educators with the means to:

- Develop the talent of young people in assessing strengths; providing enrichment opportunities, resources, and services; and using a flexible approach to curriculum differentiation and the use of school time.
- Improve the academic performance of all students and to blend standard curriculum activities with meaningful enrichment learning.
- Promote continuous reflective, professionals' growth that allows faculty mementos to emerge as leaders in curriculum, staff development, program planning, etc.
- Create a learning community honors ethnic gender and cultural diversity and promotes respect democratic principles in the preservation of the earth resources.
- Implement a school culture that includes decisions making opportunities for students, parents, teachers, and administrators.

Service Options

The Schoolwide Enrichment Model consists of three interacting dimensions. Two dimensions, called the organizational components and the service delivery components, are brought to bear on a third dimension, which represents various school structures such as the regular curriculum, a variety of enrichment situations, and a continuum of services.

These services range from enrichment in the regular classroom to special projects, internship opportunities, and various grouping arrangements based on common interests and strength areas. The organizational components are resources used to support program development such as staff training materials, procedures for staff teaming and interaction, and vehicles for promoting parent and community involvement. These components are cross referenced with the following three service delivery components, which form the centerpiece of the model.

- **The Total Talent Portfolio**

The Total Talent Portfolio is a vehicle for systematically gathering, recording, and using information about student strengths in three categories—abilities, interests, and learning style preferences. Best-case samples of students' work, as well as information resulting from interest and learning styles assessment scales, are reviewed, and analyzed cooperatively by students and teachers to make decisions about curriculum modifications and enrichment opportunities.

The process involves helping students develop skills for evaluating portfolio items according to their own set of internal criteria and developing procedures for examining portfolio items on the basis of external criteria. Students should achieve autonomy and ownership of the portfolio by assuming major responsibility in selecting items to be included, maintaining, and regularly updating the portfolio. Although the teacher should serve as a guide in the process (especially with younger students), the ultimate goal is to create autonomy in students.

- **Curriculum Modification Techniques**

The second service delivery component of the Schoolwide Enrichment Model consists of techniques designed to: (1) assess each student's mastery level of regular curricular material; (2) adjust the pace and level of required material to accommodate variations in learning; and (3) provide enrichment and acceleration alternatives for students who easily can master regular material at a more rapid pace.

The first curriculum modification procedure is carried out for individuals and small groups of students working at approximately the same level through a process called curriculum compacting.

This three-step process includes defining the goals and outcomes of a unit of study, documenting which students have mastered most or all learning outcomes (or who are capable of mastery at an accelerated pace), and providing replacement activities pursued during the time gained by compacting the regular curriculum. These options include content acceleration, self-selected individual or group research projects, peer teaching, and a variety of out of class or non-school activities.

Research on compacting has shown that this process can easily be implemented by teachers at all levels and that students using this process benefit academically. A second

procedure for making adjustments in the regular curriculum is to examine textbooks and workbooks to determine which parts can be "surgically" removed because they are excessive. Based on the belief that "less is better," this process also includes replacement activities in the form of direct teaching of thinking skills.

- **Enrichment Learning and Teaching**

Enrichment learning and teaching involve strategies that primrose learning by both teachers and student. In a sense, this framework takes and opposite approach to traditional didactic teaching. Four principles define this concept:
- Each learner is unique. Therefore, all learning experiences must take into account the abilities, interests, and learning styles of the individual.
- Learning is more effective when students enjoy what they are doing. Therefore, learning experiences should be designed and assessed with a concern for enjoyment.
- Learning is more meaningful and enjoyable when content and process focus on a real problem. Teachers should consider the relevance of the problem, as well as authentic strategies for addressing it.
- Enrichment learning and teaching focus on enhancing knowledge and acquiring thinking skills. Applications of knowledge and skills must supplement formal instruction.

Cluster Approach

Although enrichment learning and teaching can be used in all school structures (e.g., regular curriculum, special groupings, internships, etc.), we have found that creating a special place in the schedule is the best way for every student to participate in this different approach to learning. This special place is called an enrichment cluster. Our experience has shown that implementing these clusters provides immediate visibility to the school improvement process and enthusiasm by students, teachers, and parents.

Enrichment clusters are nongraded groups of students who share common interests and who come together during designated time blocks, usually one-half day per week.

One golden rule exists for enrichment clusters: Everything students do in the cluster is directed toward producing a product or delivering a service for a real-world audience. This forces the issue of learning only relevant content and using only authentic processes within the context of student-selected product or service development activities.

All teachers (including music, art, physical education, etc.) are involved in facilitating the clusters. Numerous schools using this vehicle also have involved parents and other community resource persons. Adult involvement in any cluster should be based on the same type of interest assessment used for students.

Like extracurricular activities and programs such as 4-H and Junior Achievement, the clusters meet at designated times and operate on the assumption that students and facilitators want to be there. The clusters place a premium in the development of higher order thinking skills and the creative and productive application of these skills to real-world situations. Common goals make cooperation a necessity, and divisions of labor within the clusters allow for differentiated levels of expertise and involvement, varying levels of challenge, and opportunities for different types of leadership to emerge among students.

This environment is highly supportive of individual differences and therefore promotes the development of self-concept, self-efficacy, and positive feelings that result from being a member of a goal-oriented team period to put it in another way: every child is special if we create conditions in which that child can be a specialist within a specialized group.

Enrichment clusters revolve around major disciplines interdisciplinary themes or cross disciplinary topics. A theatrical slash television production group, for example, might include actors, writer's technical specialists, and costume designers

Guiding Questions

Clearly the clusters deal with how to knowledge, thinking skills, and enter personal relations that apply in the real world. Students work is directly toward producing a product or a service. Instead of lesson plans, three key questions guide learning:

- What do people with experience in this area for example filmmaking do?
- What knowledge, materials, and resources are needed to space Authentically do activities in this area?
- In what ways can we use the product or service to affect the intended audience? How and with who should students communicate the results of their work?

Student enter a cluster based on interests and other information from the total talent portfolio. Students who develop a high degree of expertise in a particular area are sometimes asked to serve as an assistant or facilitator of their own cluster.

A Critical Need

Why should schools focus on talent development?

Leon Lederman, the Nobel Prize winning physicist, recently said start "Once Upon a time, Americans sheltered and Einstein, went to the moon and gave the world the laser, driving electronic computer, nylons, television, and the cure for polio. Today we are in the process, albeit unwittingly, abandoning this leadership role period."

Every school in classroom in the country has young people in it who are capable of continuing this remarkable tradition. But the tradition will not survive without a national desire to invest in developing the talent potentials of *all* young people.

Every school has students who process the highest potential for an advanced level learning, creative problem solving, and the motivation to pursue rigorous and rewarding work. As United Negro College puts it, "A mind is a terrible thing to waste." It's time to recognize that we have been wasting far too many good ones.

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