

## **A Call For Suburban School Reform**

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Many suburban schools operate within a climate that lacks dynamicism. Scholars like Nehring (1999) and Sizer (1984) have described suburban schools in their studies, calling them "uninteresting places" where there is a "paralysis of imagination." This lack of excitement and vibrant creativity can act as barriers to a child's development as an excited learner who is intrinsically motivated to continue his discovery of new ideas throughout life.

A stagnant environment can lead to the diminishing of a student's intrinsic interest in learning. When he returned to his hometown, David Ruenzel identified this problem in his alma mater. Ruenzel was discouraged to find that the many children at Whitefish Bay High, were not thinking critically, creatively, or independently (Ruenzel, 1994).

Olson (1992) described a school in suburban Minnesota that looked to reform its program because "the school [with its fine reputation] didn't really provide students with the education they needed for the world that awaits them." Olson identified the school as being "typical," a place where standardized test scores were illustrative of the schools apparent "success," yet it was also a place where students were not interested in learning.

The editors of U.S. News & World Report recognized the need for a suburban school to be vibrant and dynamic. In 1996 the publication's list of "Outstanding American High Schools" excluded a number of suburban schools because it included in its ranking a "value added" statistical model that identified schools that included the ability of the institution to inject excitement and creativity into its program. The publishers of the magazine recognized the fact that coming up with a list of America's "best" schools according to SAT scores and the like would not reveal much about the quality of the schools.

It is recognized that suburban schools should move beyond the status quo level they can so comfortably rest upon. The damaging effect uninteresting and uncreative suburban schools can have on children must be acknowledged. Some studies have already worked to prove the ineffectiveness of suburban schools. West (1992) reports, in a longitudinal study of student achievement in science and mathematics in both urban and non-urban schools, that enrollment in a suburban school system does not, in itself, appear to be a good indicator of future career success. Though their academic abilities may be reflected positively via objective assessments, suburban children need to mature as excited learners who can think and act creatively and independently if they are to be successful beyond their public school years.

At Whitefish Bay, teacher Mary Ellen Ladogiannis complained that children are not taught to be creative or independent at her suburban school. In a place where complacency has overrun the intensity and passion of the early 1970's, children are "totally apathetic to what's going on in school" and "lack energy" when sifting through the halls and attending classes. Listening to such commentary about his old stomping grounds, Ruenzel (1994) makes the conclusion that this lack of energy and enthusiasm has led students to lose interest in learning and in exploring new ideas.

The keys to fueling excitement, renewing passion, and fostering creative thinking are to create a "small school atmosphere" in what may be a large suburban school, to empower teachers to act as decision-makers for the overall school program, and to keep teachers current with the latest progressive and exciting trends in education.

The creation of a small school environment will lead to greater "connectedness" among students, parents, teachers, and the administration. Connectedness is recognized as a means of promoting the social and emotional growth of students (Maeroff, 1998).

Through connectedness, a suburban school (one dedicated to promoting a small school atmosphere) will foster a child's trust of adults in that school. Children will feel comfortable approaching their teachers and principals with questions that concern their learning interests (Kohn, 1996). Such a relationship may encourage children to take learning risks they would not attempt in an isolated and detached environment.

A small school environment will also lead to a greater sense of collegiality and community. Schools will thrive as exciting places to learn when everyone involved is sharing ideas as a team (Nehring 1999). Sizer (1984) makes the case for close and communicative relationships through his depiction of a fictional teacher's isolation from the rest of the faculty. The author paints an ugly picture of a large, "fragmented" school as a place where teachers are discouraged and feel defeated. It is a place where collegiality is nonexistent and where there is little or no sense of connectedness. Horace is a man stuck in a place of drudgery where routine has dictated his schedule and where a monotonous agenda of paper grading, classroom management, and administrative duties have taken over his passion for teaching. Though he is a dedicated teacher, Sizer maintains, Horace is a demoralized educator.

An atmosphere of "smallness" can be created, even in large schools that serve many students in a vast network of classrooms and offices. The progressive middle school "philosophy" of education encourages the creation of "houses," or, "teams."

Some high schools have taken to creating mini "academies" that include special interest curricula. These schools usually partition space within the building in order to accommodate the new "sub-school" within the school. Tice (1996) explains that this has been among the most popular restructuring effort in large schools that have sought to create a smaller school atmosphere. Often times the schools divide the building into several wings or sectors.

It was the "smallness" of the school in which he worked as well as the fact that he was a key player in the school's decision-making that led Nehring to leave the principalship for a teaching position (Nehring, 1999). He explains that he wanted to be involved in a school that would allow him to teach in a communal environment in which he autonomously instructs his students and is an influential player in the decision making process at his school. The Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School offered him such a place to thrive and he has been teaching there happily for over a year. It has become a place where "kids...and their teachers...thrive" (Nehring, 1999).

People want to feel that what they do has meaning and impact. They want to feel proud when their efforts are recognized and when they see that they have changed the status of things. When a school's graduation rate rises or its discipline problems decline in number, teachers want to be able to say to themselves that they had something to do with it. The only way for these individuals to feel that they have truly affected the educational program of a school is to make them stakeholders in the decisions-making process. When schools receive accolades or student achievement rises as a direct result of certain key decisions made by teachers to change the program, these same teachers will feel that they have moved a "mountain," their school. As Nehring (1999) has observed, it is exciting to know that one can make a difference not only in a child's life but in the life of an entire school.

To empower teachers means to shift from the bureaucratic model of leadership to the collegial model of leadership. Since the bureaucratic model has been the traditional mode of leadership, it is very difficult to move to a more collegial model. Mistrust is the biggest challenge schools will face (Barth, 1990). Principals must be prepared to give up a lot of the very important decisions that they have felt comfortable making on their own. They have to be confident in their own abilities if they are going to let teachers make those decisions. Teachers have to be willing to want to make important decisions.

A suburban school can become a thriving, living place when teachers are given the time and opportunity to learn about new ideas. In his letter to Orestes Brownson, Thoreau pointed out the importance of vesting the teacher with the freedom to learn as his students learn, "We [teachers] should seek to be fellow students with the pupil, and should learn of, as well as with him, if we are to be most helpful to him" (Bickman, 1999). There is a thrill that comes with learning something new when shared by teacher and student alike and this can transform a school from a lackluster place to a vibrant and dynamic learning institution.

It is the nature of teachers to work towards enlightenment (Nelson, et al., 1993). Individuals who commit themselves to teaching others no doubt have in them some love for learning. There are easy ways in which to rekindle the fire for discovery that teachers already bring to the table. Sharing the latest and most progressive trends in education with teachers is one step towards allowing teachers to be "fellow students." Circulating

articles from education journals and prompting teachers for their reaction to various educational issues can also spurn renewed enthusiasm for learning.

The whole process of discovering something new can be enjoyed by the entire faculty when these same teachers begin communicating their own reactions and their own ideas that they build from the new ones being introduced. A lackluster school will become an exciting and vibrant place to be when a "small school atmosphere" is established that fosters communication and cooperation among teachers. When these teachers are kept abreast of the latest trends in education they will rediscover their passion for learning. When they are empowered to implement some of those ideas by making important school-wide decisions they will feel that they have impacted the life of the everyone around them, including fellow teachers, students, and parents and administrators.

When these three reform measures become the defining characteristics of a school, there will be a renewed passion and it will become a wonderfully spirited place to be. Reforming the stagnated culture of a suburban school will not be an easy task. Because it is easy for educators to "accept [their] system" it is difficult to produce change (Sizer, 1984). Those suburban schools that traditionally perform well on standardized tests and that are ranked high on the list of "best schools" are the organizations that will not readily buck the traditional system that is already in place.

Sommerfeld (1994) acknowledges this problem in the suburban school in her study of both urban and suburban schools. The author reports that the problem of producing change in suburban schools is primarily due to the community's reluctance to change anything that would "hurt [their] children's chance of getting into college." This is a powerful barrier to producing any change, especially the reform needed to reenergize a school with dynamicism and vibrancy.