

Want Passion? Re-Think the School Day

By [Stu Silberman](#) on November 25, 2013 10:23 AM | [5 Comments](#)

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We all know school can bore students to death. OK, not actual death, but something that looks and feels much like it to a kid. Bill Ferriter reminds us in his blog, [Being Responsible for Teaching the Bored](#), that students who follow their passions, learn. Yet, how can teachers carve out time in the school day to guide students through the thoughtful, and sometimes arduous task of finding those passions, much less to pursue them? The Common Core State Standards encourage the depth and discipline needed, but they must be supported by a restructured school day set up to infuse passion into our students.

In our adult work, we don't do English or Science or Social Studies or Math. We use all of these (and many other dynamic elements) to create, to lead, to build, to manage, to sell, to understand our task and produce products that meet a need. Some of us even love our work - passionately. Do our young people deserve any less? What better model to prepare them to love their work in the future?

I first saw this approach when I was 15, which would make it 1981, when I visited [The Urban School of San Francisco](#). My first impression? These teenagers looked like the kids my parents told me to avoid. Long hair. Lots of leather. Cigarettes. At my school, these kids cut class and hung out in the parking lot. Yet, at Urban, these kids adored school.

At Urban, instead of English, kids took "Utopian Societies" or "Dialects and Culture." In the two-hour block I spent with my friend, I discovered more about language and history than I had in a year in my own high school classes. Teachers and students learned together in a collaborative environment where students took responsibility for their learning - and they took that responsibility very seriously.

We cannot restructure our way to many of the variables at The Urban School. The staff's accepting attitude and the administration's creative and effective approach to discipline, certainly created the environment that allowed for other academic gains. But what became a permanent part of my memory and later, my educational philosophy, was the school's organization.

Our high school in Frankfort, KY, has begun movement in this direction by adopting a [Senior Project](#) that asks kids to begin freshman year uncovering interests and learning research skills, and culminating senior year with a project, paper, presentation and community outreach program. It is a solid start. But we can do better. We can devise new models like the public magnet [Brown-Barge Middle School](#) in Escambia County, Florida, which organizes staff into "streams" that teach students in thematically organized groups focused on engaging kids in work toward authentic simulations. Since the restructuring, Brown-Barge Middle has earned "A" level status for more than ten years in a row - the only middle school in the district to achieve this honor. Also, the number of 6th grade applicants doubles the available spots.

One BBMS eighth grader says:

The reason why our subjects are combined is to make it easier to learn at school, so easy that students might not realize we're learning. Instead of learning by subjects, we learn by streams, which is basically learning big topics at a time. At the same time we're learning all of the school traditional subjects. We have big topics which are broken into many lessons which is good for each subject.

Teacher Lalla Pierce currently teaches in the *Ancient Worlds* stream, which is described like this: From earliest civilizations, recurring motifs have inspired great art, literature, drama, science, math and music. By making connections with the past, we begin to understand the universality of creative expression.

Mrs. Pierce says:

I love teaching at Brown-Barge Middle School because seeing students participating in simulations where they are fully engaged in the learning process is incredibly rewarding. Whether building a model of an outer-space colony or putting on a musical performance written by the students themselves, the process is fun and exciting! I am always learning, never bored.

To create and cultivate this environment, the school has provided:

- Streams built around teachers with a variety of certifications.
- Teachers in each stream with a common planning time to collaborate around the stream.
- Flexible scheduling within each stream to accommodate a project when it requires extended time with a teacher.
- Teachers of Record who keep track of the work and maintain records for a group of students, who can see the bigger picture evolve and provide support.
- Collaboration between teachers and students in the development of new streams that meet the interests of the students. (Most requested? History and culture of music, leading to a final performance.)

- Evaluative reports that take the place of "in progress grades".
- Math every morning.

When teachers at Brown-Barge are asked what they teach, they say "Students!"

A new structure like this one that starts with real-life, project-based learning that flows in a natural, progressive stream is a shift that doesn't require substantial funding, just ingenuity, persistence, and passion. And, given the education professionals I know, there is no shortage of that.

The **Common Core State Standards** present us with a blueprint for the natural integration of subjects at every grade level. It challenges us to reimagine how we organize our traditional schools. Student agency and depth of study can add the passion needed to make our students soar. The CCSS emphasize critical thinking and 21st Century skills and give us a strong foundation; now, let's redesign our schools to make them worthy to stand on it.

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