Did you ever think about starting your own school—a school without bells, tracking, or “busyness”? Or maybe you’ve considered reinventing the school you’re teaching in, to make what happens there more authentic, challenging, and enjoyable for all concerned. Illinois Writing Project Directors Harvey Daniels and Steven Zemelman, with colleague Marilyn Bizar, and a remarkable group of teachers in the Chicago Public Schools, did just that in creating the Best Practice High School (BPHS). Rethinking High School: Best Practice in Teaching, Learning, and Leadership tells the story of that high-risk endeavor, from its beginnings in 1996 to its first graduation in 2000. The book also usefully frames the story of this particular school in the context of some of the best current thinking about curriculum and assessment, and about school reform along the lines of the “small schools” movement, of which Central Park East, founded by school reformer Deborah Meier, may be the best known example.

Like Meier’s schools in New York’s Harlem, BPHS is a small public school—not a charter school—in a vast city school system. BPHS does not have selective admission, and it must meet Illinois academic standards and all the curriculum requirements of the Chicago Public Schools. One of the school’s key aims is to demonstrate that progressive, student-centered approaches to teaching and learning will work not only in elite private schools but in the inner city. And they will work not only in the sense that students with diverse backgrounds and ability levels will come to like school, get engaged in their own learning, and envision bright futures for themselves, but also in that they will do well on the tests mandated by the system in which they function. And in fact, BPHS students have performed remarkably well on these tests. The school’s first graduating class ranked eighth out of seventy-five Chicago high schools on the Illinois science test and twelfth in social studies; most of the schools that scored higher have selective admission criteria.

To focus on those scores, though, would be to begin at the end. It would also mean missing the deeper promise of the achievement documented here; for the fundamental principle animating what seems best at Best Practice High School is the deeply American idea of democracy. As Meier puts it in her book, The Power of Their Ideas: Lessons for America from a Small School in Harlem, “Democracy demands that we acknowledge everyone’s inalienable capacity to be an inventor, dreamer, and theorist—to count in the larger scheme of things.” In the same tradition, the teachers at BPHS “view schools as the seedbed for democracy. They want students not just to prosper in but to sharply question and improve the world they will inherit” (125).

So how did the school’s designers enact this idealistic vision? The authors list fourteen specific design features that guided the planning process.

- small total size [440 students in grades 9 to 12]
- heterogeneous student body
- teacher decision making
- student-centered instruction featuring reading-writing workshop
- student choice during part of the weekly schedule
Books

- inclusion of special education in regular classrooms
- daily advisory [small group discussion sessions with teacher advisors]
- some form of block scheduling
- technology-rich instruction
- service learning
- parent involvement
- community partnerships
- a caring environment
- authentic assessment. (218)

One of the most impressive aspects of the story of BPHS is the smart practical thinking that goes into making these ambitious goals workable. For instance, a key strategy for giving students "voice and choice" in their own education is "negotiated curriculum": the faculty work with students to elicit sets of questions that are fundamental in their lives—questions about jobs and college, for example, or about the persistence of racism and other "isms"—and into which they would like to inquire in school. These questions then form the basis for "integrative units"—the unit on "isms" is a wonderful example (121-2)—designed by grade-level teams of teachers from all content areas.

At the start, the school's design team envisioned that all or most of the curriculum would be thematic and negotiated in this way. When the first cadre of teachers was hired and gathered, however, they quickly made it clear that students would need considerable time on algebra, physics, English, and the rest if they were to be able to apply these skills well in their multidisciplinary inquiries. So, through a process of teachers' decision making, a balance was achieved whereby integrative units of two or three weeks would be organized four times a year, with faculty working mainly inside traditional subject boundaries for the other thirty or so weeks. The compromise means that faculty get to develop habits of collaboration while also practicing their own disciplines, and students experience the usefulness of their skills in those disciplines to real world issues.

A similar balance informs the school's approach to organizing time. Again, the design team imagined going with full block scheduling: periods of 100 minutes or so allowing for the project-based teaching and learning required for integrative units. And again, BPHS teachers, in meetings with the university partners (Daniels, Bizar, and Zemelman) and the school principal (Sylvia Gibson, an administrator who believes in the empowerment of teachers) developed a compromise that has worked well to meet competing needs: a partial block system in which Mondays and Fridays are traditional seven-period days, while Tuesdays and Thursdays each offer three 100-minute blocks of time for more sustained work.

Wednesdays are different again: a full day devoted to student internships, "choice time," and teachers' planning time. The way in which these three approaches to time organization work together offers another example of savvy practical planning with, perhaps, a touch of serendipity. Each of the 440 students at BPHS is involved in a Wednesday internship—at a business, a social service agency, an arts organization, another school—in either the morning or the afternoon. (Yes, the school has a full-time internship coordinator.) These internships, which the authors call the school's "jewel in the crown," do more than connect the academic to the vocational; they help students develop responsibility, discover and apply talents, and learn about realities and options in the work world and about "what kind of education is needed to pursue these options" (172). The internships also serve to teach folks around the city what teenagers are capable of, given the right encouragement and opportunity, and so build support for the school in the community.

While the students are out of the building on Wednesdays—freshmen and sophomores in the morning; juniors and seniors in the afternoon—teachers have half a day for team planning, reviewing students' progress, and professional development. For the half-day when the students are back in school, they are offered "choice-time" activities based on teacher's interests and students' requests: chess club, yoga, yearbook, women's issues group, guys' discussion group, peer mediation training, physics lab makeup, book club, poetry writing, and so on. These encounters, together with daily "advisories," bring students and teachers together on the basis of common interests and problems and contribute greatly to the sense of the school as a caring and safe community in which everyone can be known and appreciated.

Readers of Daniels and Zemelman's previous works will recognize many of the key ideas and methods informing Rethinking High School: negotiated curriculum, integrative units, workshop teaching, community experiences, authentic assessment, etc. Best Practice: New Standards for Teaching and Learning in America's Schools (1998), which they coauthored with Arthur Hyde, proposed principles for state-of-the-art teaching in every content area, based on the academic standards for student learning developed by national professional organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. Methods that Matter: Six
Structures for Best Practice Classrooms (Daniels and Bizar 1998) articulated those principles into “six structures for best practice classrooms.” Best Practice High School is, as its rather awkward name implies, an attempt to put those ideas to the test of actual practice in a real school—a step rarely taken by university-based education scholars. Rethinking High Schools succeeds by demonstrating both the exhilaration and the enormous practical difficulty of that work.

The book is well organized, with a chapter on each of the school’s major design features. The authors know that not many of their readers are likely to follow their example and actually start a school, so they are careful to make clear in each chapter how its strategies, and the research supporting them, could be applied in an individual classroom or in small-scale collaborations within existing schools. The book is also engagingly written, with the voices of students and teachers well represented. (And for more of these voices, and faces too, there is a video, Rethinking High School: Best Practice in Action, and two websites to visit: www.rethinkinghighschool.com for the book, and www.bphs.org for the school.) There’s plenty of humor and anecdote here—about, for example, the history teacher (not at BPHS) who in a faculty meeting devoted to the possibility of block scheduling was heard to remark: “Hundred-minute periods? I don’t know if I can talk that long!” And there are also passionate statements of principle: “Grades stand between young people and their education.”

The final chapter offers a moving vignette of graduation day for the first class through the school—the majority of them now headed off to college—and concludes with the words of co-lead teacher Tom Daniels, who died before he could see his students take that walk across the stage.

We are a work in progress.
This is the hardest work we have ever done. We are in this for the long haul.

Whether or not you think you might someday take up that particular work, Rethinking High School belongs alongside books like Meier’s The Power of Their Ideas and Mike Rose’s Possible Lives: The Promise of Public Education in America—in other words, with the books that sustain our imagination of what public schools can and should do for all our students.

References


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Is That a Fact? Teaching Nonfiction Writing K-3


Reviewed by Kim Douillard.

Typically, I approach professional books written for teachers of students in kindergarten through third grade with a well-founded skepticism. These are the books with the cute pictures of children, colorful pages, and too often, a lack of content. These books seem to ignore any effort at advancing thoughtful, meaningful learning, instead focusing on pictorial outlines of teddy bears and famous Americans that children are expected to color. I resent these authors’ implied ideas that “cute” is more important than substance and that my students are not capable of rigorous academic work.

In fact, my students are cute—both in appearance and in the comments they make based on their life experience of eight years of less. They are also incredibly curious, ask insightful questions—many that I wish I had asked first—and are capable of tackling important subjects and complex ideas. Naming the nine planets in the solar system does not satisfy their curiosity about space, yet for younger students, that is often the extent of their study of the universe. Neither my students nor my colleagues need watered down approaches to teaching and learning. Is That a Fact? Teaching Nonfiction Writing K-3 by Tony Stead gives me hope. Stead actually believes that primary students can compose a variety of nonfiction texts including recipes, reports, scientific explanations, and even persuasive arguments. He begins by acknowledging the power of nonfiction with young