

HIGH SCHOOL MEETS THE Real WORLD

Jim McCollum and Steve Tucker

Preparing students for college and career begins in ninth grade, involves families, and continues through senior year.

Students use project-based assessments to explore who they are and where they want to go and to develop an evidence-based plan for life after high school.

A senior year extended learning opportunity puts the plan into action.



ew would argue that education in the United States is constantly changing. New curricula, standards, assessments, privatization, and ever-changing accounting systems come at schools so quickly that it is impossible to assess the effectiveness of what was required with previous programming. Many new initiatives do not address basic levels of learning. Can students use their literacy, numeracy, and other essential skills to effectively access and build knowledge and skills at ever-more-complex levels? At the end of

12th grade, when the credits are all accounted for, can schools honestly say that each student who receives a diploma is college and career ready?

Those are the questions that the staff members at Laconia (NH) High School are seeking to answer in everything that we do. Schools are measured by their graduation rates, but we have chosen to support our students by asking ourselves three questions and building our daily practice around the answers:

- What do we want students to know?
- Why is it important to the students that they know this?
- What are the best practices that will ensure that they acquire that knowledge and can apply it in a way that increases their college and career readiness?

Personalizing Instruction

Laconia is located in the Lakes Region of New Hampshire. Approximately 600 students attend the high school, down from about 750 students just five years ago. More than 50% of our families are identified as low socioeconomic status at the high school,



In a world that is constantly changing, there is no one subject or set of subjects that will serve you for the foreseeable future, let alone for the rest of your life. The most important skill to acquire now is learning how to learn.

—JOHN NAISBITT

Laconia High School

LACONIA, NH

GRADES:

9–12

ENROLLMENT:

604

COMMUNITY:

Suburban

DEMOGRAPHICS:

93.5% White, 2.4% Asian, 2.3% Hispanic, 1.8% other; 51% free and reduced-price lunch

ADMINISTRATIVE TEAM:

1 principal, 1 assistant principal, 1 director of student services, 1 athletic director/dean of students, 1 career technical center director, 1 academic coordinator for teaching and learning



which offer a high level of individualization because each student selects and designs what and how he or she will study. The structure of the ELOs ensures that students meet the appropriate literacy and numeracy requirements. ELOs offer opportunities for students to develop relationships with mentors, building their social skills. The majority of the ELOs also require students to interact with community agencies and businesses, which requires them to develop their essential and organizational skills as well.

To complete an ELO, a student must write a thesis paper and present and defend it in front of a panel; the presentation must include data and incorporate the use of digital tools. It took several years to develop that process. ELOs are popular among the students and good preparation for them as they pursue their college and career aspirations. Because of our great success in using ELOs to personalize learning, the Center for Secondary School Redesign (CSSR) asked us to participate in the New England Network for Personalization and Performance. This network includes a number of innovative schools, and because of innovations like the ELOs, the network received funding through the extremely competitive Investing in Innovation (i3) program.

Meaningful Learning

Taking what we learned from the process of researching, refining, and engaging students in the use of ELOs, we looked for ways expand their benefits for all students. The answer came in the form of performance-based assessments (PBAs).

A PBA is a learning opportunity that follows instruction, involves a task, allows for student voice and choice, has multiple steps, and is scored with a rubric. To ensure that our students are college and career ready and so that they can explore future goals and options, we have implemented PBAs that students complete during each year of high school. The PBAs clearly connect student voice and choice and students' personal aspirations to our instruction and our four-year design. Our education program makes students' performance choices, aspirations, and data transparent to them and their parents as they work to develop their academic skills.

We want our students to excel in numeracy and literacy at such a level that they are able to fulfill their college and career goals. If our students cannot read and write *well* or use math to solve real and complex problems, they will not be prepared to meet the demands that will be placed upon them during postsecondary education or by the workforce. This preparation should be guaranteed by completing high school, but according to a recent College Board study, students who require remediation courses in college are

and the rate is as high as 70% in some of the local elementary schools. The special education population makes up close to 20% of our student body.

The economic downturn closed many local factories and businesses and significantly disrupted many families. Our local police department would say that we have elevated levels of domestic violence and substance abuse, but a powerful network of people, agencies, and action groups constantly work to improve the community, and a youth sports program engages young people from an early age through high school. In other words, the local community is a wonderful place with caring people and problems that are common in many areas in the country.

About seven years ago, administrators and staff members at the high school began looking at ways to support and engage students more effectively. We began researching learning formats that would increase individualization and relevance and also support the development of relationships that would positively affect students and their college and career aspirations. Through that process, we happened upon extended learning opportunities (ELOs),

significantly less likely to graduate from college (Wiley, Wyatt, & Camara, 2011). Having a diploma clearly does *not* ensure that a student can avoid remediation courses when they enter a postsecondary school and does not ensure that students are adequately prepared for life after high school.

How It Works

FRESHMAN YEAR

During their freshman year, students complete two performance-based assessments. For the first one, students are required to analyze a character of their choice from one of the books in the Laconia canon, a selection of 32 books that all students are required to read during their course of studies. The task requires students to connect that character's actions, thoughts, and motivations to the choices the students may have made in their own lives and assess the results of those choices. Students must support their claims with evidence within the text and provide counterclaims with arguments about why their claims are or are not valid. The goals of this task support the reading and informational writing targets found in the Common Core State Standards and give the students the opportunity to honestly assess themselves as individuals.

That assignment is kept in a portfolio to refer to for future conversations with teachers and guidance counselors. As part of the writing process, teachers challenge students to explain and defend how certain traits and behaviors will serve them as they pursue college and careers. Students also participate in Career Cruising and in discussions about their personal future aspirations that are facilitated by guidance counselors and staff members from our career technical center. This interest and aptitude survey and inventory is used in our district to help students identify career fields that suit their interests, abilities, and passions.

In their freshman Algebra classes, students research in-state and out-of-state postsecondary educational opportunities and engage in statistical analysis to justify a choice that is right for them at the time. Students build various graphs that are based on cost of living, tuition, and demographics to enhance their understanding of data and linear functions. Students must interpret and organize all the data into an informational research paper that includes all elements of the process. In a culminating activity, each student presents his or her postsecondary path formally and defends the logistics of the plan under questioning from staff members and students. Technology integration is also required in this summative assessment.

SOPHOMORE YEAR

During their sophomore year, students engage in a long-term project that focuses on the essential question, What

is right for me? The work they did in their ninth-grade year in English and math is integrated into a PBA they complete in their citizenship and economics class. One of the goals of this PBA is to remove the mystery from the process of finding a job and becoming a self-sufficient adult.

During a four- to five-week period, students review their past and current goals and aspirations, look at their learning performance data from multiple measures, and expand upon the research process of postsecondary programs that interest them and are consistent with the choices they have made. They select and research careers that are in fields that interest them. Then, they research the job market, the nature of the area they would prefer to live in, and the costs of accessing local resources (e.g., housing and transportation). With that information, they build a plan for living in the location of their choice.

Our experience in rolling out this PBA last year was positive. Students recognize the authenticity of the task and its connection to their educational and life choices. Parents also commented that it changed how their children viewed their educational opportunities and the importance of the choices that they make in school. Teachers became more aware of their students' aspirations and were able to support them more specifically. We are seeing this PBA serve students well as they look at their futures realistically, using information they trust because they created it.

SOPHOMORE-JUNIOR TRANSITION

At the transition between sophomore and junior years, the guidance counselors lead a meeting with each student and his or her parents known as the "junior review," during which the student reviews his or her performance to date. The discussions include a review of the student's transcript; PBAs; and all assessments, including PSATs. The student's goals, strengths, and weaknesses are reviewed in light of his or her performance during the first two years of high school. All discussion is focused on the student's movement toward (or away from)

During their sophomore year, students engage in a long-term project that focuses on the essential question, What is right for me?

This capstone project requires students to focus on how their experiences and choices have led them to where they are now. The essential question students will answer for this final PBA is, Where am I going now?

the goals that he or she has set. Postsecondary information (e.g., about colleges, technical programs, military, or apprenticeships) and resources that relate to the student's goals are also discussed.

The parent meeting is designed to be a process of personal and communal reflection and accountability that is based on the student's performance. It sets the tone and clarifies a pathway for the student's final two years of school. Again, the focus is on ensuring that the student understands that the choices he or she makes will drive the opportunities that will be available after graduation. The junior review is a check-in for all parties and helps ensure that each students' performance is consistent with his or her future aspirations.

JUNIOR YEAR

All juniors take an interdisciplinary American studies course that integrates American history and literature. The essential question of the course is, What is "an American"? Each student must complete a PBA that includes writing 10–12 essays that are based on their understanding of the literary and historical content they learn in class. In the essays, students visit and revisit the essential question from a variety of perspectives and periods throughout history. This process increases students' capacity to see multiple viewpoints. The culminating activity is a formal presentation in front of a panel where the students demonstrate that they have synthesized their understanding of what it means to be an American on the basis of their educational experiences in the American studies course.

The purpose for this PBA is to push students to discover who they are and what they want to become. Students' interaction with others, locally and throughout the world, is an important part of the social awareness that they must develop to understand who they are in the broader scope of their national experience.

SENIOR YEAR

We are moving toward having all students complete a senior project during their final

year at Laconia. We piloted a program this year that may be extended to all students. This capstone project requires students to focus on how their experiences and choices have led them to where they are now. The essential question students will answer for this final PBA is, Where am I going now?

The capstone project will attempt to confirm that the school has done all it can to prepare a student for college or a career and that every student who walks across the stage to receive a diploma has a specific, documented plan for life after high school. This independent, project-based assessment requires students to plan their next steps in life and understand the requirements of their chosen careers. Each student selects a mentor and gets accepted into a postsecondary program, sets up an apprenticeship, joins the military, or finds a job that is aligned with the goals he or she has set.

Conclusion

Laconia is committed to the daily message of college and career readiness through the pursuit of academic excellence. This commitment is conveyed in school and out of school, in classrooms and in our halls, and in our public presentations and in the quiet one-on-one communication with our school community. It is represented by the pride we take in presenting a parent with a syllabus. It is evident in our standards and behavioral expectations. The success of that message can be seen in a 58% increase in Honors/Project Running Start courses, dual enrollment programs, and AP courses as well as in the 72% increase in the number of students selecting these courses. It can also be seen in a 39% reduction in truancies in the 2012–13 school year and continued reduction thus far this year. When we invest in students' aspirations; when we challenge them to connect their learning to their goals through relevant experiences, data, and performance; and when we clearly communicate the message to all constituents, good things do happen! **PL**

REFERENCE

- Wiley, A., Wyatt, J., & Camara, W. J. (2011). The development of a multidimensional college readiness index. Retrieved from the College Board website: <http://research.collegeboard.org/sites/default/files/publications/2012/7/researchreport-2010-3-development-multidimensional-college-readiness-index.pdf>

Jim McCollum (jmccollum@laconiaschools.org) is the principal of Laconia (NH) High School.

Steve Tucker (stucker@laconiaschools.org) is the academic coordinator of Laconia (NH) High School.