

CHAPTER 7

Paradigm High School

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PARADIGM HIGH SCHOOL has many of the features currently sought through restructuring: extensive personalization, a strong and distinctive ethos, an emphasis on the school as a community, and a continuing concern with the quality of work life within the school—all experienced by the students, who are expected to function as workers, and by the teachers.

These attributes are sustained by a school-within-a-school organization, increased school site autonomy, strengthened collaboration and collective responsibility among teachers, and expanded, more flexible roles for all those within the school. These organizational features—the structure, the culture, and the climate—have in turn yielded programs that truly engage students and render teachers far more effective than most.

Paradigm High perceives its primary responsibility to be helping adolescents achieve adulthood. This necessitates considerably broader aims than academic learning. It calls, first, for a developmental focus—a preoccupation with growth and change within individuals—and it obligates an interest in various dimensions of maturation, with each individual's character as well as with his or her intellect. Paradigm is an environment in which there are no anonymous youngsters.

Despite the broader concerns, formal learning does not take a back seat at Paradigm High. The development of intellectual power is an aim in all academic study, and maximal intellectual power is the ultimate criterion for what a student pursues, rather than a standard list of courses to be taken or tests to be passed.

This focus calls for program differentiation. It also demands systematic efforts to ensure that intellectual power is reflected not only in the particular learnings and understandings pursued, but also in the identity each individual is forging, in the kind of autonomy, responsibility, and human connections each is fashioning. In short, character, as well as intellect, is the concern; development, as well as the achievement of academic skills and cultural literacy.

Paradigm's teachers take cultural literacy seriously, however, and discussions about common learnings are a continuing phenomenon. Instructional decisions seek to balance the need for commonality with concern for responsiveness to particular groups of youngsters. The compromise is often, but not always, agreement at the level of concepts, with the means to convey them left open.

Paradigm staff members recognize that a good school must stand for something; it must have a mission. Thus, Paradigm teachers have not been reluctant to discuss desired traits and to enunciate a character ideal. But they are also aware that differences in themselves, reflected in the surrounding community, make a single character ideal impossible.

Rather than abandon or so compromise a model that it becomes meaningless to all, the staff have divided Paradigm into four schools-within-a-school. Each has its own personnel and students, and each pursues a distinctive vision of schooling. A number of commonalities exist among the four, of course, and some major differences.

There are approximately 250 students and 10 teachers in each of Paradigm's four schools-within-the-school. They are known as the Challenge Team, the Social Services Academy, Sequoia Institute, and Media. Teachers evolved the four themes out of their own interests and those of students. Both teachers and students choose the particular school-within-a-school with which they are affiliated. The four options are carefully investigated by students. The choice represents the culminating project of an eighth-grade social studies unit on decision making. Most youngsters remain with their chosen school-within-a-school until graduation. Those who make a wrong choice, or whose interests change, are able to shift from one program to another.

Each school-within-a-school enjoys a degree of physical separation from the rest. Paradigm is built to look like a giant "X." Each of the four line segments represents a separate school-within-a-school. At the intersection of the four are the common areas they all share: the library, the gym, the auditorium. The full student body occasionally assembles for special activities, but customarily the four schools-within-the-school operate as separate units.

The commonalities are ensured in several ways. Both the district and the state in which Paradigm High School is located support the principle of "strategic independence" for innovative schools.¹ They acknowledge that school improvement cannot be accomplished through detailed external control, and have framed their expectations accordingly. General curricular goals have been set for Paradigm, but each of its four programs retains considerable leeway in determining the particular content and activities to best serve its students. This autonomy means that each of these schools-within-a-school has an "innovative charter."² It combines the opportunity to design the best program for a particular group with the responsibility for doing so.

1. As suggested by Chester E. Finn, Jr. in "Toward Strategic Independence: Nine Commandments for Enhancing School Effectiveness," *Phi Delta Kappan*, April 1984, pp. 518-524.

2. Mary Haywood Metz, "In Education, Magnets Attract Controversy," *NEA Today*, January 1988, pp. 54-60.

Teachers meet this responsibility through continuing contact and collaboration. Every Wednesday morning, all Paradigm students participate in service learning activities outside the school, and staff members of each of the four subschools meet. The typical pattern involves two meetings each Wednesday morning. The 10 teachers of each school-within-a-school usually get together for an early breakfast to discuss matters of general concern. Then smaller groups who are team teaching, or who share other specific responsibilities, meet to work on curriculum or special assignments.

The four schools within Paradigm High are constituted along somewhat different lines because the interests and needs of those involved divide this way. For some, the prospect of particular experiences and activities draw them to the Challenge Team. Others already attracted to the human and social services attend the Social Services Academy. But its particular orientation also makes the Academy attractive to youngsters who do not yet have a sociocentric orientation (to be described in a few minutes).

Sequoia Institute is frequently the choice of those who might have been served by a traditional high school. They are academically motivated, receptive to exploring the several disciplines, and learn well from conventional methods. The fourth program is known simply as "Media," but more formally as The School of Communications Arts. It attracts youngsters who want to write, draw, or perform.

Each of the four subschools has its own distinctive organization and culture, as well as unique curricular emphasis. Staff members recognize that Paradigm's curricular specializations favor the humanities and social sciences, but the programs accord with the students' preferences. Each of the four provides a full curriculum, and students with strong interests in science of math apparently satisfy them within the Sequoia program.

Whether new programs should be added is one of the concerns of Paradigm's principal. She helped in planning the four existing schools-within-the-school and is their staunch champion. District guidelines for innovative programs call for extensive teacher involvement in their design and direction, and the particular arrangements for Paradigm were designed at the school.

The major criterion was keeping decisions as close to the classroom as possible. A teacher director for each program is elected by its staff members for a four-year term. All four teacher-directors run a student advisory group and teach one class. Beyond that, their functions pertain more to leadership than management. The goal and value agreement and the small size of each unit reduce the need for oversight. Fewer rules are necessary and fewer steps are required to make sure they are carried out. Daily operation is shifted from formal to informal structures, and the administrative contribution most needed is that of sustaining relationships and traditions.

The role of Paradigm's principal is analogous to that of a supervising principal or district official. She coordinates among the four programs, represents them to the district, and provides interactions with feeder and other schools as well as with the community. Community relations occupy a substantial amount of her time, because Paradigm depends on a number of other agencies and organizations to support its programs and the social services some students require.

The four schools-within-a-school differ in a number of their arrangements and policies, but there are some commonalities. First of all, students are not limited to the program in which they are enrolled. Many take all their work in their subschools, but several other opportunities remain open to them. They may occasionally register for a particular course in one of the other programs. Some also take one or two courses at a local college or university. One of the programs may arrange an ancillary course by someone in the community. A network cameraman, for instance, recently taught a course in television camerawork at his studio for Media students, and a professor of medicine taught a course in human anatomy at a local university for Sequoia students.

Each of the four programs offers students the opportunity to do independent study under the supervision of a knowledgeable individual. This option enables some students to do advanced work in a particular field and others to pursue different sorts of interests. Some of the independent study arrangements are internships; some primarily involve library research; some are design and construction projects. The supervisors—called mentors—include Paradigm teachers as well as local business or professional people. All Paradigm students take one independent study course; many take several.

A third common feature of all Paradigm High School programs is service learning. Each youngster is involved each year in substantial volunteer activity (averaging from three to six hours a week) that is carefully integrated with classroom work, although the four programs handle the integration somewhat differently. Thus, for the Challenge Team, service learning is an integral part of civic education and of a major global awareness project for each student. For Social Services Academy students, volunteer activities are the application and testing ground for much that they are learning about human beings, roles, and organizational operation. For many, it functions as career exploration as well. But for all Paradigm students, service learning is an opportunity to make a genuine contribution to the lives of other human beings.

A fourth common feature is a strong emphasis on the school-within-a-school as a distinctive community. Considerable self-consciousness exists about the particular kind of community each is, and students quickly become aware of the traditions and ideals associated with the program they have chosen. All Paradigm students pursue some formal study of education, but they do so in different ways and with different emphases.

In all four programs, there is examination of school as an institution and as a socio-cultural system, and of differing visions of what it is to be educated. Two things come out of this for most Paradigm students: One is an unusual sophistication about the nature of education and what they are doing in school. The second is a strong sense of affiliation with and loyalty to the program they have selected.

Yet another commonality among all four schools-within-the-school is the student advisory group.³ Here again, differences are present in the way the groups operate, but in each subschool they perform important functions. Each teacher has an advisory group, and in most cases becomes the person who knows each group member better than does any other adult in the school. At various time, advisers serve as ombudsmen and advocates, as well as mentors and confidantes for their advisees.

Paradigm staff members are aware that not every human being can respond to every other. They believe that every youngster in the school should have at least one adult with whom he or she can connect. They agree that maximizing individual development seriously obligates detailed acquaintance with each youngster's progress. Since advisory groups in all programs meet regularly, and the students remain as a group until graduation, all members come to know each other well. For many of them, the group becomes the primary point of identification within the school.

One more structural feature is found in one form or another in all four of Paradigm's schools-within-a-school. It is called "The Committee on Discombobulation," or "The Boatrockers," or "The Regenerators." The Social Services Academy calls it "The Committee for Examining Cultural Assumptions and Adapting to the Changing Scene." The function is self-scrutiny.

Each of the groups is charged with looking at the program to unearth and examine the otherwise assumed and taken-for-granted, or what seems to be missing or what is not working. On occasion, the groups function in an ombudsman role. More typically, they test the continuing validity of their program's presuppositions. This is Paradigm's way of maintaining each of the four schools-within-a-school as a self-renewing system, and to prevent the strong points of each from blinding personnel to the need for possible changes.

Social Services Academy

The Social Services Academy is carefully designed to avoid tracking students on the basis of their ability. Its focus on applied social science attracts youngsters who are prospective social workers, psychologists,

3. See J. Lloyd Trump, *A School for Everyone* (Reston, Va.: NASSP, 1977); and James W. Keefe, "Advisement—A Helping Role," *The Practitioner*, NASSP, June 1983.

lawyers, and teachers. On the other hand, Academy activities have particular appeal for youngsters who have not been much interested in school. The action orientation initially attracts them, but many eventually find the content compelling.

Academy courses include a popular offering in cultural journalism. Students interview community residents on a different socially significant theme each semester, and then issue a publication containing their carefully-honed essays. The Academy also runs a Consumer Action Service that takes the cases of people wronged by local merchants, and of citizens who claim unjust treatment by municipal institutions. The student advocates get valuable lessons in consumer protection and civic action. The service has earned the respect and appreciation of local residents. There is a course in street law that holds a strong attraction for some youngsters. They emerge with a good understanding of the guarantees of the Bill of Rights, as well as with some knowledge of civil and criminal law.

The Academy emphasizes collaborative learning through group assignments. Cooperative learning strategies lead to tutorial programs in which some Academy students serve as peer tutors to others, and prepare them to tutor younger students. There is also a unique language program in which Hispanic students instruct their Anglo classmates in Spanish and receive coaching in English in return. Academy students are sought as teacher aides in local elementary schools, and have tutored and assisted handicapped college students.

The School of Communication Arts ("Media")

Media is a popular program that draws some of its students by its content and others by its activities. Media publishes the school newspaper and a literary magazine. Its students run a weekly program at a local radio station which began as a typical teen show but has evolved into commentary on contemporary events and conditions. Other Media students assist at the local public television station, and a few have been fortunate enough to have interned there.

Media offers choices and specialization opportunities, and the chance to take on adult challenges. It is also a place where teachers strive continually to blend the theoretical and the practical. Thus, English instruction emphasizes writing for publication, and polished articles are, indeed, published. Literature, science, and social studies courses all feature the kind of analysis that helps youngsters to critique their own work, and to have something to say.

One of the major features of Media is its close ties to the community. It draws a large advisory board of professionals and managers from the communications industry. Its members address classes, and some serve as mentors. Advisory board ideas and advice have been appreciated as

much as the equipment some have donated to Media. Another form of support most advisory board members have offered is summer employment for Media students.

About 70 percent of Media graduates go on to college, many more than those planning to do so on entrance. Most of these youngsters, and the graduates who enter the work force right away, pursue careers related to the communications industry.

Sequoia Institute

Sequoia is the most traditional of Paradigm's four schools-within-a-school, but it is not simply a small conventional high school. Sequoia students tend to have an interest in intellectual matters. Staff members nurture this interest carefully, and place a premium on learner engagement with content. One means of engagement is the presentation of traditional fare in novel contexts.

A course on "Albert Einstein and the 20th Century," for example, combines advanced physics, literature, and introductory philosophy. A course in "The Civil War and Reconstruction: Black Perspectives" teaches historiography as well as literature and history. "The Mathematicians Who Built the Pyramids" combines advanced mathematics and a fascinating look at ancient history. "Ocean Ecology" combines chemistry, currents, and marine biology.

Sequoia staff take seriously the "less is more" axiom. Students take fewer classes for longer periods each day, and are pressed to think more penetratingly.⁴ Teachers recognize that different kinds of teaching are essential to different types of knowledge goals (transmitting organized knowledge, developing intellectual skills, and cultivating understanding), and they seek to ensure a balance among didactic, coaching, and Socratic approaches.⁵

Sequoia students display less need for experiential learning than students in Paradigm's other three programs, and they take particular pride in academic accomplishment. Their debate team is a consistent winner, as are their "athletes."

The Challenge Team

The Challenge Team is Paradigm's least orthodox program. Student progress is measured by demonstrating competence through a combination of classwork, travel, and independent activity both inside and outside the school.

4. As urged by TheodoreSizer in *Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984).

5. See Mortimer J. Adler, *The Paidea Proposal: An Educational Manifesto* (New York: Macmillan, 1982).

Students choose the Team for a variety of reasons. Many are attracted by the extent to which programs are individualized. Some appear to have been academically stifled in other schools. For almost all, the Team is an initial cultural shock as they acclimate to the transfer of responsibility from teacher to student. Challenge Team classes represent resources and opportunities, as do teachers, libraries and agencies, community members, trips, and other kinds of experiences.

The Challenge program requires competence in 49 academic, personal, consumer, civic, and career skills. Classes and activities present opportunities for acquiring and demonstrating competencies. When students have acquired them, they are eligible to propose extended "Passage" projects combining these skills. Passages of six different types must be completed—experiences involving adventure, career exploration, creativity, global awareness, logical inquiry, and practical skills.

The global awareness Passage, for example, involves a two or three-year sequence of carefully coordinated activity. Each youngster must select a world problem, study its occurrence at national and local levels, and then attempt to do something about it locally. Thus, a student might select world hunger as a Global Awareness problem, pursue it in classes and assignment options, undertake independent study to learn how the problem is handled in this country and in at least one other country, and then do volunteer work at a local soup kitchen or in an agency that aids the homeless.

The Challenge Team is a demanding, innovative program that responds well to the needs of young people who are impatient with the more passive role of the traditional student.

Paradigm Perspectives

These four distinctive programs at Paradigm High are possible because the school is located in a state that exempts schools from curricular and other mandates for purposes of innovation. Its program is sufficiently successful that it is being continued as a state education department approved demonstration project.

It has not been saddled with the batteries of standardized tests that have blocked reform in other schools. Nevertheless, its district does expect to see evidence of accomplishment across a broad spectrum. As part of its "innovative charter," each school-within-a-school is invited to assemble its own portfolio of evidence for annual public discussion with the board of education.

All four programs currently use a combination of normed tests and documentation of their achievements. Because the four sets of evidence are not identical, comparisons among the four programs are not easily drawn. Many Paradigm constituents view this as a distinct advantage.

particularly since all the portfolios contain sufficient material about progress and accomplishment.

Some important assumptions are shared by all Paradigm programs. First, all see the teacher as the school's primary educational resource and the critical element in school improvement. Second, teacher-student relationships are considered of central importance, and this value is applied to both student and teacher assignments, load, and scheduling. Third, all four programs have expanded the roles of teachers and students as the school's central players. Both students and teachers have broader responsibilities than in the comprehensive high school.

Fourth, none of the programs takes student motivation for granted; all believe it can be cultivated. Through content, organization, presentation, and activities, all four programs seek to maintain student engagement. Finally, each program has a deliberate strategy for building student self-esteem and a sense of efficacy. This is considered to be of instrumental importance to student accomplishment.

Paradigm High is fictional and it is not without its problems—but they are problems refreshingly different from those with which we are familiar. Both the formal procedures and the informal traditions described here make the problems available to collective examination and solution. Some may find Paradigm's schools-within-a-school fanciful, but it seems worth noting that few of the features described are fictional. Almost all are in operation in at least one school or program known to the author.

The features have been assembled from a lengthy list of schools that includes: Metro High School, Chicago; Jefferson County Open High School, Evergreen, Colo.; Syosset High School, Syosset, N.Y.; Shoreham-Wading River Middle School, Shoreham, N.Y.; Media Academy, Oakland, Calif.; Village School, Great Neck, N.Y.; Central Park East Secondary School and Community School District 4, N.Y.; Metropolitan Learning Center, Portland, Oreg.; St. Paul Open School, St. Paul, Minn.; Metro High School, St. Louis, Mo.; and Central High School, Dubuque, Iowa.

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