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Structural and Curricular Design: What Changes When an Essential School Commits to Exhibitions

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If equitable achievement is our goal, we must have authentic assessments that are reflective of our community's expectations and meaningful to our students and to us. Such assessments require a systemic commitment from which we start with our school's mission and plan backwards to support and rethink curriculum, structures, support systems, tools, and day-to-day decisions. We need to be prepared to consider multiple perspectives and to create new approaches. We must commit to reflect on our processes and progresses, react, and reflect again.

In 1999, I joined Leadership High School (LHS) as its instructional leader. At this time, in its third year, LHS was beginning to prepare for its first senior class the following year. Like the two CES schools at which I previously worked, and like so many other CES schools I had visited, LHS wanted its graduates to demonstrate mastery of specified skills and knowledge beyond standardized tests, course requirements and GPAs through the authentic assessment methods of exhibitions and portfolios.

Influenced by my past experiences, I wanted our use of authentic assessments to be transformative for both students and the school, but feared that without a strong vision, we would reproduce what I had seen and experienced elsewhere: eager families, anxious advisors, and underprepared students. I envisioned exhibition days marked by confusion, emotional outbursts and last minute decisions made to try not to punish students unfairly for a program that was not fully designed.

The LHS staff planned to have seniors present their portfolios at the end of their senior year. Our seniors-to-be didn't know what was expected and therefore had not yet begun to prepare for this event. Students would use the junior year to plan, and teachers would provide specific instruction and support during senior year. As the planning unfolded, the portfolio project developed into a broad (more is less) catchall of ideas and, predictably, unconnected pieces of student work, rather than a deep, focused and clear assessment of well-established and supported expectations in which connections would be made explicitly and directly. Our school community—educators, students and families—needed to discuss why we valued and therefore required authentic assessments.

I challenged some of our status quo thinking—in particular, why LHS held its graduation requirement exhibitions in the final weeks of a senior's time with us. It seemed unfair and unreasonable to hold such a high-stakes assessment, often with little formal scaffolding, at a time when there is limited opportunity for students to revisit if warranted and that truly should be geared toward a well-deserved graduation celebration.

As a result, we made one major structural redesign before moving forward. We split our authentic assessment graduation requirement into two parts:

1. The Graduation Portfolio Defense: a live defense of a portfolio, already completed to standard and assessed by the Advisor. This assessment takes place in the first weeks of the second semester and seniors MUST pass it in order to graduate. If a student does not pass this assessment, there are three opportunities for students to retry.
2. The Senior Exhibition: a presentation of a senior's researched response to the Essential Question (EQ) "How will I best lead?" By this date in mid-May, we should be able to assume that our seniors will have the skills and knowledge to demonstrate their ability to serve their communities as citizens.

Our exhibitions-driven planning backwards process led to the development of grade-level developmental Essential Questions (EQs) designed to serve as a focus for entire grade levels. Together with our SWOs, these EQs served as the major entry points to developing a set of expectations for our authentic assessments. The EQs are:

- Freshmen: What Skills Do I Need to Lead My Life?
- Sophomores: How Do I Lead in My Family?
- Juniors: How Can I Lead in My Community?
- Seniors: How Will I Best Lead?

Even though the expectation is to provide numerous and varied opportunities for students to engage in and practice authentic assessments, Advisory—with its emphasis on personalization—became the primary place for instruction, coaching and support toward the skills needed for our authentic assessments.

Some of the strategic structures and scaffolding:

- **Rubrics:** Because we were designing authentic assessments, we realized that we had to start communicating our expectations on day one of the freshman year. We designed a rubric that was progressive, identifying not only the standards of work needed to pass their senior year exhibitions, but also the expected benchmarks of a student developing towards these standards across the years. These rubrics are used throughout their four years for any portfolio/exhibition work they do. Additionally, this rubric model has become the standard for other continuums within a course of study including the four years of Advisory.
- **Portfolios:** Students begin to build their Graduation Portfolios in their freshman year. Each year, Advisors progressively introduce a few new components and provide opportunities and support to revise and further develop previous work. By the time they are seniors, students spend most of their time finalizing their work and refining their defense of the SWOs.
- **Exhibitions:** Students must do exhibitions each year. Presentation and preparation expectations are scaffolded: younger students present in teams or use fewer research methods. Here's how exhibitions work at the various grade levels:
 - Freshmen collaborate to present to small groups of next year's incoming freshmen. Topics include school culture, academic expectations, activities, etc.
 - Sophomores research and consider current "family" needs and collaborate to develop responsive "Family Projects," such as a fair to promote job opportunities. Students self-identify their families; past sophomores organized job and health outreach fairs.
 - Juniors develop and initiate projects to address local community issues or needs identified through research. Juniors have developed tutorial programs and have advocated for local environmental and transportation causes.
 - Seniors research, make plans, take actions, and present their next and independent steps towards their future leadership roles. It is here that they answer their EQ, "How will I best lead?" Seniors have focused on leadership roles within the colleges they will attend or the fields they will work in, such as immigrant advocacy.
- **Essential Questions:** Students practice developing and sharing answers to their grade level EQs each year. By the time of their Senior Exhibitions, they are well practiced, understanding both the meaning and purpose behind EQs.
- **Professional Development:** This work requires support for the staff as well as the students. LHS commits tremendous time and resources to professional development for advisors and teachers to develop, execute and refine a program in which authentic assessment is valued and prioritized. This includes planning days focused on authentic assessment, developing the

regular practice of looking at adult and student work, and communication and calibration across grade levels.

- **Scaffold...Scaffold...Scaffold:** LHS's designs and decisions consistently consider how to scaffold our students to success. One example is in the design of the exhibition schedule. During these days, classes are suspended and seniors present not to their own Advisory but rather to underclass Advisories. The underclass students themselves present to partner Advisories. All students assess the exhibitions that others present to them. Starting in the students' ninth grade year, the mixture of modeling and critical thinking of Portfolio Defenses and Graduation Exhibitions leads to continuous development of understanding that benefits all students' own exhibitions throughout their LHS careers.

An authentic exhibition is public. Still, bringing the public into our assessments is a difficult task; public demonstrations of mastery may not fully capture the complete context of our school. It's our job, therefore, to share the expectations being assessed and understand the meaning behind such standards. As our exhibitions became more public, our experiences surfaced the need to support participating community members, who are often parents, funders, and neighbors. We now provide them with instruction and scaffolding in order to empower them and their voices in this work. Some of this work includes:
- **Introductory Letter and Overview:** The intention of this letter is to share the vision and purpose of our authentic assessment system and to invite community members to participate either by being present and helping to celebrate our students or by being trained to assess those exhibitions they witness.
- **Training:** Those community members who wish to partake in the assessment of our seniors attend a 45-60 minute in-service outlining our school mission and vision, the specific work students and teachers have done to get to the point of these exhibitions, and the logistics of the actual day. This is guided by a PowerPoint presentation to ensure a common message.
- **Rubric Anchoring:** As the rubric is the key student assessment tool, our entire staff and community evaluators partake in a rubric anchoring activity. During this 60-90 minute in-service, a senior presents her or his actual exhibition after which a facilitator guides the group to a common assessment "score" in order to increase consistency of assessments across exhibitions and evaluators. This activity is repeated early on exhibition days for community evaluators who cannot attend earlier trainings.

At the end of the year, the LHS leadership team engages in a formal Data Based Inquiry Cycle using the data collected from these rubrics to identify the gaps and needs of our students and to determine a professional development focus and EQ for the following year. Previous foci have led to efforts improving scaffolding for our Critical Thinking SWO and better supporting our ELL students.

We are only at the beginning of our journey to develop and use authentic assessment towards the equitable achievement of the high expectations we hold for our students. Even at this early stage, we are seeing results in which our students are able to connect their ongoing educational experiences and achievement to a clear and personalized purpose—and as a result, to expect, prepare for and celebrate success.

Leadership High School is one of the only non-segregated high schools in San Francisco. 95% students of color attend LHS and our students represent wide ranges of socio-economics and ability. Though most of our students come to us significantly below grade level in reading and math, LHS has been commended by an independent audit as one of the only high schools in San Francisco to make progress in closing the achievement gap. 100% of our graduates are prepared to attend the UC system. On average, 95% of LHS's graduates attend two and four-year colleges.

The San Francisco Coalition of Essential Small Schools (SF-CES) and Leadership High School offer workshops on developing authentic assessments during their Teaching for Equity Summer Sessions. Please visit <http://sfcess.org/events.html> for more information.

Leadership High School's School Wide Outcomes (SWOs)

Communication: To understand and clearly and confidently express ideas, opinions, information, attitudes and feelings to and from diverse audiences, through a variety of media.

Critical Thinking: To draw conclusions, solve problems or create through analysis, reflection, interpretation, reasoning and evaluation.

Personal Responsibility: To be self-aware; to identify, access and utilize skills, knowledge and resources towards development as a life-long learner, and to be accountable to one's self.

Social Responsibility: To effectively work and lead in groups, families and communities by actively demonstrating respect and accountability to others and their differences.

To see a sample letter and PowerPoint presentation used to introduce and train community evaluators, go to CES ChangeLab at www.ceschangelab.org. Use the Assessment tab to navigate to Leadership High School's contributions.

Gregory Peters has served the community of Leadership High School for the past eight years. After serving as Principal for six years, Gregory has taken on the role of Co-Principal in order to open and direct SF-CES (San Francisco Coalition of Essential Small Schools), a CES regional center.

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