

Four Levels of American Schools*

By

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Introduction

Education in America is a complex enterprise, with many different types of schools and many different programs. Each state has its own standards, curricular requirements, and testing procedures. Schools vary in their organizational structures (public, charter, privately managed, private, parochial), in their goals (college bound, technical and career, high school, middle and elementary, pre-school), and in their size (large, impersonal high schools, small learning communities, small school structures).

Never-the-less, we believe that there is a way to categorize schools into four levels that indicate how well they are doing to educate students in an Era 3, 21st century world. This categorization is based, in part on our belief that the mission of schools in an Era 3, 21st century world should be that:

All students should develop a foundation of knowledge, skills, habits of mind, attitudes and behaviors that prepare them for:

Lifelong Learning

Intelligent Citizenship

Self-Development and Understanding

A strong Era 3 school that adopts this mission implements it through eight major characteristics:

- **Mission Driven Education:** There is a commitment to *an Era 3, Outcomes Based Mission Statement* by all members of the educational community.
- **A Success-Oriented Learning Environment** develops *organizational policies* and *a learning environment* that support the implementation of the mission statement.
- **A Meaning-Inquiry Based Curriculum at all levels** utilizes rich core content and understandings from literature, history and the social sciences, science and technology, the arts, health and physical education, and foreign language to focus learning; key inquiry, communication and mathematics skills are embedded in the curriculum in all subjects; interdisciplinary units, courses, programs, and projects are infused into the curriculum.
- **Multi-dimensional assessment and accountability** focuses primarily around *student performances, actual student work, self-reflective tasks, and portfolios.*

- **Engaging student activity** utilizes multiple types of instructional strategies (e.g. thinking, project and problem based learning, graphic organizers, interpretive discussions) that promote an Era 3 mission, such as *student understanding, five skill development, individual development and self-understanding, citizenship, collaboration, and student motivation.*
- **Multiple options and choices** support student self-development through classroom choice, elective courses and programs, multiple enrichment activities, and support systems.
- **Authentic learning** includes *connections to and participation in the outside world* of work, community organizations, learning institutions, and expertise. Students frequently *apply their learning to authentic, real life, and novel situations.*
- **Program renewal/professional development activities** enable schools and teachers to be *growth oriented and adapt to change*, and to solve multiple challenges in creative ways.

Below we describe a four level system to identify how closely a school enables students to meet the three outcomes and have adapted the eight characteristics of schooling to an Era 3 world.

Level 1 Schools. The mission of level 1 schools comes closest to being organized to achieve the three Era 3 outcomes – preparation for lifelong learning, intelligent citizenship, and self-understanding. They have generally incorporated the learning environment, curriculum, teaching, and assessment characteristics that support student success. These schools understand that a strong and rich content driven curriculum at all levels is critical for student success in an Era 3 world. Strong science, literature, social studies, arts, and other subject areas permeate all early childhood, elementary, and secondary grade levels. Instead of “covering” a lot of fragmented information and facts, these schools focus virtually all their curriculum around student understanding of key ideas, concepts, critical issues, problems, and challenges. There is a natural and seamless integration of “uncovering” important ideas within and among subjects. Skill development is primarily embedded within the teaching of subjects and content, through activities that promote skills such as reading for understanding, searching for and processing information, developing written products, participating in discussions, making presentations, collaborating, thinking critically and creatively, and solving complex problems. There is also a special focus on the knowledge, skills, attitudes and actions critical for intelligent citizenship.

Students are given multiple options for learning and enrichment, and have opportunities to reflect on their strengths and plans.

The curriculum is often integrated. Subjects are often taught together (e.g. math and science courses and/or social studies and English) so as to create a more meaningful, contextual curriculum. Interdisciplinary units of study are often organized around projects or performance tasks framed around big ideas, understandings, essential questions, research, communication and thinking. Habits of mind, such as curiosity, perseverance, and thinking interdependently are naturally integrated into the flow of working from essential questions and problems, processing information, conducting research, and developing culminating presentations and written products.

Level 1 schools place significant emphasis on improving learning and providing students with feedback through ongoing formative assessments, and assess success primarily through the results of projects, open-ended authentic assessments and public presentations. Students are expected to do quality work, and models of excellent student work are shared regularly among students. Students keep and reflect on portfolios of their work, often electronic, over time.

Students are often expected to participate in culminating performance activities and experiences that demonstrate their overall abilities, skills and their knowledge and understanding gleaned over their many years of learning. They often take the form of courses, internships, and/or specially designed graduation tasks that synthesize and integrate learning, constitute a portfolio of their work, and demonstrate self-understanding. The development of a portfolio of student work, self-reflections, and a tentative plan for the future is often a key requirement for graduation, including a student presentation of the portfolio to a panel of professional and lay people.

Most students in level 1 schools are well prepared to go on to college or career. They have developed a good background knowledge and understanding of key ideas and concepts. They have learned how to read and understand multiple types of texts, organize and evaluate information, write coherently, do research, think critically, creatively and persuasively, collaborate with others, apply their learning to new situations and challenges, solve problems, and communicate results. The school program helps them develop a clear perspective on their interests and strengths that

may lead them in directions other than a four-year college experience. They have also developed the “habits of mind” that enable them to persevere in the face of difficulty, seek help, work collaboratively with others, think flexibly, and so on.

Many of these schools often structure learning and organize facilities and schedules differently from traditional school structures. Daily schedules provide longer time periods to work with one or more teachers, and allow teachers to go into depth and use projects and performance tasks regularly. Rooms are larger, often designed to accommodate two classes together so that teachers can work as teams. Technology is regularly and seamlessly incorporated into the learning experiences, used to help students find assignments, download resources, connect regularly outside of school with staff and others, do research, edit papers, organize thoughts, and connect to the outside world. Mobile chairs and tables accommodate small groups of students who work together on projects and performance tasks. Many of these schools organize students by heterogeneous grouped classrooms, inclusive of special education students, without distinguishing between honors and non-honors classrooms.

Some level 1 schools use radically different models to engage students in learning and promote Era 3 learning. For example, “Big Picture” schools focus learning around customization, personalization and “self-understanding” – helping students discover their interests and what motivates them to learn. As students develop interests, they begin to do research around them, find internships, and build their knowledge and skills through an integration of interests, projects, research, thinking, and curriculum. Some schools also provide students with a significant choice of courses and experiences as part of the school requirements.

Level 1 schools generally have developed strong school and professional learning communities, in which both students and teachers learn collaboratively. In many level 1 schools, students continually work in small groups on collaborative projects. Many level 1 schools also set aside multiple professional development days for teachers to evaluate student work together and learn from each other. Teachers have time set aside to work regularly with their peers. Peer coaching and feedback is a prime learning experience for teachers at many level one schools.

Level 2 Schools. Level 2 schools meet fewer of the criteria of Era 3 excellence and are organized around a more traditional school and classroom environment. They often have a subject centered, coherent curriculum, high expectations for most students, multiple assessment measures, formative assessments and high levels of support for students who need help, and some form of a professional learning community designed to help teachers become more proficient and collaborate with each other. Students graduate with some of the knowledge and skills appropriate for Era 3 living, but level 2 schools have more of a “hit or miss” approach to achieving Era 3 outcomes.

Level 2 schools have either implicitly or explicitly (usually implicitly) adopted some parts of the outcomes and program elements that help students meet Era 3, 21st century outcomes. There is a reduction in the amount of content to be taught in all or part of the curriculum. Some of the curriculum is designed around “big ideas” and ‘essential questions”, and the “backward design” model of curriculum development helps teachers to implement an understanding based instructional program. These schools or districts have in many cases, adopted curricular programs at all levels that promote rigorous, “understanding based” learning, such as reading workshop, writing process programs, Social Studies/History Alive!, Everyday or Singapore Math, and project or problem based learning. Some use Understanding by Design/Teaching for Understanding formats for organizing, planning and designing units and courses. Some have adopted all or part of the International Baccalaureate program to provide a more coherent approach to their course structure. Although there is some emphasis on creating a streamlined, more focused curriculum, it is often not as coherent and focused as in level 1 schools. For example, the high school programs in these districts often have many Advanced Placement course options and electives that are designed to provide rigorous learning experiences, but also tend to fragment the curriculum and are not connected to other course offerings.

Many level 2 schools usually maintain traditional subject-centered schedules and classroom organizations, especially at the middle and high school levels. Some have incorporated a “block” schedule at the middle and/or high school levels that provide subject area teachers with more time to foster in-depth learning, halve the number of courses that students take at any one time, and halve the number of students working with any given teacher during the day. A few schools have developed team teaching opportunities that enable teachers to teach in pairs or in “small learning communities”.

Many students have longer school days in level 2 schools. In high socio-economic schools, extra time generally takes the form of a choice of many after school (and sometimes in-school) enrichment activities, Saturday SAT-prep sessions, and the like. Many low socio-economic level 2 schools often have required, extended school days, extra school days during the school year, required summer sessions, and required Saturday activities.

Level 2 schools may have some components of an Era 3 assessment system, but by and large traditional assessments (e.g. multiple choice and short answer tests) are the measures that they use to determine success. In some courses, research projects, performance tasks and reflections enable students to learn and demonstrate Era 3 abilities, such as research skills, information processing, higher-level thinking, writing, and communicating results.

Some level 2 schools have strong civic education programs, both integrated into the curriculum and as a separate component. Many of these schools require students to do “service learning” in order to graduate. Strong after-school programs promote “self-understanding” and the development of student talents and interests.

In level 2 schools, a large majority of the students also graduate and go on to college or careers. These schools do a reasonably good job in providing students with understandings, background knowledge, key skills and habits of mind that students need for college work and other options upon graduation.

Level 3 Schools. The large majority of schools in the United States are at level 3. These schools currently have limited connections to Era 3, 21st century programs and characteristics. Their programs tend to be very fragmented and traditional, with “coverage” and basic skill development as the primary emphasis, and the use of traditional textbooks as the core of the student’s learning experience. For example, much of the early childhood and primary grade programs are taken up with daily reading/language arts and mathematics programs, and as a result few of these schools have rich, understanding based, early childhood and primary school programs in science, social studies, the arts, and language. At all levels, most students are generally not asked to do rigorous intellectual work, research projects, high levels of thinking, or to apply their learning through authentic, open-ended

tasks (unless they are in honors or gifted education programs). Some of the stronger schools in this category have a somewhat coherent curriculum, a number of teachers who teach beyond basic textbook learning, a group of its students in AP classes, and many of their students going on to college. Others have a relatively weak coverage based curriculum, not very high expectations for most students, a reliance on textbook learning, few students in AP classes, and around half or less of their students going on to college. Teachers and students tend to work and learn on their own rather than collaboratively. Few if any classes use project or problem based instructional approaches or other activities that tend to engage students and foster interactive learning.

Most assessments are “traditional” – multiple choice exams, short answers, and emphasis is on doing well on standardized tests, the measure of success for most of these schools. There is little use of formative assessments, designed to provide students with feedback and improve learning. Few if any multiple measures are used to determine success, such as performance tasks and self-reflections. Student work is “hit or miss”—no emphasis is placed on looking at student work and analyzing it in order to create models of excellence. Little emphasis is placed on helping students create portfolios of their work over time.

There is little emphasis in these schools on systematically improving the curriculum over time or on creating Professional Learning Communities that focus on fostering 21st century outcomes and improving teaching skills and curricular programs.

Level 4 Schools. The fourth level represent the "failing" schools constituting, at the most, 15-20% of American schools. These schools are dysfunctional. They tend to be in high poverty areas and/or generally in both urban and rural settings. These schools are unclear about their mission, and are unlikely to prepare students with lifelong learning background understandings or skills, intelligent citizenship, or self-understanding. Their school environments generally stress conforming to behavior codes, are sometimes unsafe and disorderly, and usually do not stress achieving at high levels. The school programs tend to be fragmented. They have a weak curriculum and generally low expectations for students. Teachers are usually isolated from one another and rarely collaborate to support one another, create a coherent curriculum across subjects, provide excellent instruction,

or deal with school and classroom problems. Traditional assessments are the rule, with few if any opportunities to do performance tasks or reflective essays. While some teachers do an excellent job with students, there is little consistency across classrooms. There is a lack of student engagement, little parent support, and high turnover of teachers and principals. Relatively few students manage to meet high academic standards or stay in school and graduate. There are few opportunities for students to connect with the outside world. These schools need strong support and help in order to overcome their difficulties, including ways to create a positive school climate, small classes, a strong curricular and instructional program, support systems for students, motivational activities, adequate time for student support and extra-curricular activity, and the like.

These four levels of American schooling provide a framework for understanding the state of American education today, and suggest the need to create more schools that are in level 1 or 2. More level 1 schools are especially critical, for these schools are in the vanguard of educational excellence and are leading the way towards Era 3, 21st century educations for all.