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1 GOAL OF THIS ESSAY

The Goal of this essay is to improve [my school], in order to enhance learning and skills development to provide students with the necessary opportunities to be successful in college, the military, or the world of work. The second purpose of this essay is to allow students to more precisely choose their own future and direction, with less emphasis placed on older teaching styles, such as lecturing, homework (yes we will take a stab at this!) and even certain forms of testing.

1.1 ABOUT ME

I am a student at [my school] High School. *A Life Self Taught*, previously distributed is the basis for this work. This essay is an attempt at resolution of the issues raised within the former essay. The problems suggested will be expounded upon before solutions are explained.

1.2 ORGANIZATION OF THE ESSAY

This essay is broken down into numerous categories based on what I thought would be most helpful to the administration in analyzing its contents and acting dually. Realistic and Unrealistic approaches are taken because some solutions involving society changing fundamentally, which is indeed an unrealistic task, as no one understands the complexities of said society, much less how to change it. I have included these solutions anyway as maybe they can provide an outline for what must happen and hope that one day society will change for the better, in order for progress to take its course.

I have categorized this essay into realistic and unrealistic solutions. Realistic solutions are specific to [my school] and can be implemented if and when the administration wants to. Unrealistic solutions state societal and federal changes that must happen in the future to further education.

1.3 MISSION OF THE SCHOOL

I am confused as to what the mission is of the high school system. Is high school meant to prepare students for a career or college of their choosing? Is it meant to aid students in learning what their calling in life is? Is it meant to give students the basics of each subject, in order to let them make an

unbiased decision about what they want to study or do as a career? Is it meant to encourage lifelong learning and teach the benefits of higher level education? Since I am unsure as to which statements the school supports (and some are conflicting so not all can be elected), I will briefly summarize what each would mean in how a better school system would be accomplished.

1.3.1 Career and/or College Readiness

If career and/or college readiness is the purpose of high school, more distinct paths should be provided. Right now, [my school] offers a Core 40 diploma, a Core 40 plus Technical honors, and Core 40 plus Academic honors. These 3 basic categories are then 1) basic, most likely leading to a career rather than college, 2) intermediate, where the student could go straight to a career, or may go to an apprenticeship or attend a lower level college, and 3) highest, where the student plans on attending a 4 year college, possibly with graduate school following. If the purpose of high school is college and career readiness, these 3 degrees need to be broken down more specifically. Some general professions to consider might include the military, engineering, medical study, math and science study, general study, fine arts study, and journalism. JEL currently is a great option, especially useful for the first or second path. In the future I hope [our school] would be able to have a JEL center close to the school or even as a part of the school so half the day is not consumed in a single class. Also, a JEL program should be considered where less hands-on work is considered such as maybe a nurse's assistant or an intern at a software company. There needs to be a program for students who intend on holding jobs that are considered advanced or higher level, such as being a doctor or lawyer. JEL currently is directed at blue collar workers, which is great, but there needs to be a corresponding program for the white collar counterparts.

1.3.2 Identify the School's Purpose

If aiding students in finding what they want to do with their life is the goal, earlier in high school general studies should be greatly focused on, much how it is already. Later in high school, classes should be more specific since the student should know what they want to do, although general study should still be offered, since many students still don't know what they want to do by the end of school. It seems this is the mission of the school currently.

The primary problem with this approach is if someone knows exactly what they want to do, classes cannot be too specific since it is not economical to teach one on one, and it will always be impossible to do so using human interaction.

1.3.3 Give Students a base

If giving students a common and unbiased base to choose what they want to do is the objective, the current system in place does a good job. The main issue here is that most people have a general idea of what they like and don't like, what they are good and bad at, and this system punishes those who may be extremely good in a specific area but lack in other subjects. On a personal level, I have a hard time with foreign language, and I don't think I should be forced to take foreign language when I plan to work in the computer field, which is only an English based field^[1] (See section 2.2.1).

1.3.4 Lifelong Learning

This mission is the only solution that can be combined with any other without necessarily changing how a solution would be applied. In order to foster lifelong learning, the school as a whole would need to make a concerted effort to make students enjoy learning. Even with this being the primary goal, there will always be many students who don't enjoy learning. That will never change. But I believe there are some students who haven't thought of learning outside of school. They've never heard of lifelong learning or do not enjoy school enough to make them want to learn outside of the 8 hours they go to school for. There are several ways to encourage lifelong learning which can be found in the references^{[2][3][4]}. The general consensus in the books and websites referenced is that students want to have confidence. They want to be proud of themselves. Finding something a student can be successful in will encourage learning about it. After all, most people strive to work in a field they enjoy.

2 REALISTIC AND APPLICABLE SOLUTIONS

The first solution and the easiest to implement is one both the administration and teachers might now fully support, but I believe every student would lobby for this, and school is supposed to support the student.

2.1 LESS EMPHASIS ON HOMEWORK

In this section, “Testing” is defined as follows: A set of questions to access the skills of the student. Not a measure of knowledge. This is discussed in 2.2

2.1.1 Practice makes perfect.

This is the primary argument for this in support of homework, and I fully agree. But practice doesn't count for anything in real life, in the adult world. The only measure of practice is the outcome of the test in the business world. Whether employees have an associate's degree or a GED, if they get the job done, it doesn't actually matter.

My father is a good example. When he was a sophomore in high school, he 'dropped out' but got his GED. He passed the GED, and he had never even taken algebra. He's smart in many ways, but the school system didn't see that, or at least didn't have a way to recognize it. Today, he works in financial systems, owns a corvette, and lives in a good home in a well-to-do city. He had no formal training, but he performs, and the results show, and he works with others who have their master's degrees. The point of the story: homework should be assigned, but not graded. If the student needs to do the homework, they will (at least if they want to succeed). If they don't do the homework, then fail on the test, that's *their* fault. You learn best from your mistakes. In today's society, failure is perceived as the bane of life, but it shouldn't be this way. Success happens through numerous failures.

When students realize the value of doing homework, they will do it on their own. They won't be forced to do it. By not grading homework (at least a lot less homework), students' opinion of school will improve too. An improved reputation goes a long way; when was the last time you heard of a teenager who enjoyed being forced to do *anything*? You haven't. So when you eliminate mandatory homework, the students' attitudes improves. When a student has a good attitude, learning is enhanced. It is much easier to learn about something you enjoy (or hate less), and I speak from personal experience and numerous studies ^{[5][6][7]}.

For the students who don't do homework, but do well on tests, this will bode better for them also. Their grade will no longer be lowered by work they see as unnecessary and time-wasting. Some students would complain about this system, and for good reason; it is easier. Students would complain because they now must learn how to do something and show results, which homework doesn't do. Homework shows how well someone can copy information from some source and put information together, which can be important, but it certainly shouldn't be an encompassing feature of every classroom.

2.1.2 Students who don't test well

One argument to be made is some students don't test well, and homework helps them by boosting their grade somewhat. But does the student really know the information if they can't recall it? In the real world, employees cannot take time from their job to relearn skills that the job requires. They either know how to do the job and show results, or they don't. The adult world isn't padded for time. If you don't know, you don't work there. Time and results are what matter, not how it is done, and you as an employee matter in terms of time and money. Some may say this is a harsh world view, but I am speaking of the business world; it's not known to be a particularly fun place to be. If students don't perform well on tests, they wouldn't be able to perform what is being asked later either. This being said, I am a big fan of test retakes, as is currently done in Physics Honors^[8], which I believe worked very well, as it gave students motivation to go back and meet their failure with new invigoration to understand and perform better.

2.2 CHANGE TESTING MATERIAL

2.2.1 Test skill, not knowledge

I am sure every teacher has heard a student say, "When are we ever going to use this?" I know I've said it. And I believe that statement rings true for so many different subjects because school still teaches knowledge instead of skills. I know the school has recognized this through the "21st century skills" development campaign, but I don't believe it is being approached in the proper way. Technology is a tool, not a technique nor a skill in and of itself. I believe both the Physics Honors and English finals approach this concept better than others, when the answers are not online.

In Physics Honors, all the equations needed are provided, a student must figure out how to apply and manipulate the equations to complete the problem. When the problems are original, it both prevents cheating and allows for critical thinking and skills development. In English, questions are about a passage

provided, and only a good understanding of what was read allows for the proper answer. Reading skills have to be developed in order to be successful. In modern times, any knowledge based answer can be easily googled and copied, both in school and in the work force, and therefore by the time students reach high school, they should already have basic knowledge needed to succeed. High school should be skills development, elementary and middle school should be basic knowledge and basic skills development.

Below is a specific criticism of foreign language class that should be addressed:

In foreign language, never should grammar be addressed before vocabulary. I've been to numerous foreign countries, and people who live there don't require perfect grammar. In the Spanish speaking countries I have visited, I spoke in infinitives, meaning I used the easiest form of the verbs, to communicate, and everything went smoothly. A few examples include: "Yo neccistar Gasolina" (I to need gasoline), "Nosotros jugar futball con tu" (We to play soccer with you). Obviously, perfect Spanish was not required to understand. My mother speaks some French and my father some German, and rough communication works fine for any country. If students truly want to learn a foreign language, they do so in college, not high school. High school foreign language should focus on getting by, not on understanding every small nuance of any certain language.

That being said, I don't believe foreign language should be a requirement of any degree. Many studies^{[9][10][11]} have shown that by high school, students have a much harder time learning any language, and the best time to learn a language is in infancy. If, as a society, more than one language should be known and used, it must start with the parent, the most influential person on the child, and it must start early. Secondary education cannot fill this gap, nor should it attempt.

2.2.2 Coordinate testing dates

Every two weeks, or every month, I have tests in every class, all at once. This often means having 3 tests in one day. All students face this at some point, as classes go in two week cycles, or 5 class periods. An easy way to avoid this and relieve stress on the student would be to start class cycles at different times. For example, at the beginning of the year, the first math classes begin and start their cycles, while foreign language takes an extra introduction day, while science classes have an intro lab, then an introduction day before their cycle starts. This solution may need some more creative solutions, but the point is departments all start at the same time on the same schedule, and therefore oftentimes classes have tests on the same day, which is very bad for all students. Personally, as a junior I had a math test, a

German test, and an English test on the same day more than once. I would also have Physics and US History at the same time, and this made for some very stressful nights. It is entirely unnecessary and should be seen as an opportunity for departments to collaborate and improve student experience.

2.3 TECHNOLOGY IN SCHOOL

2.3.1 iPads

The iPads should not have been introduced for use within a learning environment. They are far too distracting. The iPad is meant for consumerism, not productivity. Games are the most popular apps in the app store, and [my school] allowed games on the iPads because it did not want to block all app downloads. Instead of iPads, Chromebooks or laptops should be employed. Not only are they cheaper and equally well supported, but they are meant for productivity, games are easily blocked, both come with keyboards, which I believe are completely necessary for successful technology integration.

Companies do not, and should not, use iDevices for actual work. They use computers, meaning laptops, PCs, or Virtual Desktops.

For me personally, I only do work on Windows PCs, as I have a personal animosity of Apple products due to Apple's support of closed, restricted software practices, and lack of .NET support. I may be biased, but I would lobby for universal windows use or Linux use as far as laptops or PCs go. I use both depending on circumstances and goals.

2.3.2 Phones

Students will lobby for phone use within school since technology is finding its way into the school ecosystem, as it should, but I would argue that phones are not appropriate in the classroom. A phone's primary purpose is communication with those not within immediate vicinity, which should not be necessary if students are actively learning, and certainly not when students are actively testing. There really is not a reason to text during class. An iPad, Chromebook, or laptop provides sufficient communication and collaboration, a phone is only a distraction. They should still be allowed in lockers, during passing period, and during lunch, as parents have a right to communicate with their children.

2.4 CHEATING

2.4.1 Background

I suppose this will be a revelation to some teachers and to the administration, but cheating is rampant in school, and there is something to be said about why and how it happens. Cheating normally happens when the question is short and online almost exactly as written. The answers are used when the student has the time to write it, meaning the teacher is not actively looking at the students, and when the answers are short enough to write. This may seem obvious, but if the conditions of cheating were so obvious, one would think teachers would take steps to prevent it, and most certainly do not. The iPads have only exasperated this problem, especially in classes where they are used every day, such as English, most if not all science classes, and most other classes that use the iPad extensively. Classes that do not make heavy use of the iPad, such as math and some foreign language classes, are restricted to older forms of cheating, such as the phone between the legs, writing on the hands or arms, a notecard in the pocket or lap, or looking at a neighbors answers because if you have no idea of what the answer is, any answer is good. I am writing about cheating because although I have done it, even recently, and everyone I know has done it at least within the last semester, I believe in learning. Students don't learn when they cheat, although most cheating consists of googling knowledge based answers, so if classes shifted from knowledge to skills, cheating would decrease drastically. Besides learning, if a student does not cheat, they are actually being cheated because they no longer are using the advantage that their peers possess. Lastly, it should be known that students do not tell on each other. If I see someone cheating, there is no chance I will tell a teacher, even if I don't like that person. It's just standard code. The teachers and administration cannot rely on students to stop cheating, they must take action.

Relating to cheating, this same idea goes for peer-reviewed work. When was the last time a teacher said students should rate each group member's performance and the entire group gave every person in the group 10/10? It happens almost every time. Students trade grades, so there is little point in asking students to review each other, since everyone has a self-interest in rating the others highly.

2.4.2 Prevention

These solutions to cheating could be implemented at any time, the real question is do teachers actually care? I have found that some of the best teachers already implement most of these solutions, because they care about their students. Other teachers blatantly do not care, as expressed in this actual scenario that happened in review week in my math class:

Two weeks before finals, for Pre-Calculus Honors, we had a test over the final chapter we were learning. I was sick the day of the test, along with 4 other students. On the test, there was a very hard question which we had not learned how to do, and only 3 of 165 students got it correct: the valedictorian, the salutatorian, and the third in our class. When the 5 who had missed the test took it the following week, the exact same question was there, and all 5 of us got it correct. Were we that smart? I was not. When our teacher finished grading the makeup tests, he said something to the effect of, "Well, I guess I should have changed that. I mean it's obvious what happened. But oh well." And he went on about his day. He didn't *care* about cheating, and that has to change if school is to improve. Teachers need to care. Teaching needs to be more than just a paycheck. That is a problem in itself which I am not qualified to begin to solve.

The easiest way to prevent cheating, is for teachers to actively watch their students during a test. Instead of teachers checking their email or Facebook, both which I have seen during student tests, they should be ready to engage and actively searching for cheaters.

There is a very simple trick for preventing cheating on quizzes and tests that are on the iPad. I have held this solution to myself because it is so good, but if skills development became the focus, this would come in handy for every teacher. With questions that are on the iPad, if a teacher puts a – in front of a word, if the student copies and pastes the question into google, that word will be excluded from all results. For example: "Which -English -Queen was responsible for destroying the -Spanish -Armada?" would search in google: "Which was responsible for destroying the". Good luck with that search result. This would be helpful because students would not have time to delete every – from their search query, and if they tried, teachers actively looking for cheaters would have little trouble spotting students who are typing on a multiple choice test or quiz.

When teachers actively scan for cheaters, they should be walking around, looking at hands that may have writing, between the legs for notecards or phones (if phones were not collected), and keep track of where the students are looking. If a student is looking in between his or her legs, odds are they are cheating.

2.5 ENGLISH

General Studies

In my last essay, I stated that English was one of the worst subjects in helping students. I will therefore evaluate how English could be both more enjoyable and better directed at teaching students how to read, write, analyze, and develop critical thinking skills.

2.5.1 Stop giving students writing formulas

English is not math class, and therefore writing should not be so strict in terms of structure. By forcing students into templates, their creativity and writing confidence is lowered. I have personally experienced this, and I honestly believe it is the greatest downfall of the modern English classroom. I have been subtracted 10% because I did not conform to the template one of my English teachers had given us, because I try different writing styles. I normally write a thesis in 2 sentences, not one. I sometimes have 2 introductory paragraphs. Other times, my ideas more intermingle and produce a different organization form than what was expected. Sometimes conclusions are actually a final point, and offer a final, best solution.

Writing is an art, not a science, and by treating it like a science the school system is degrading its value and producing a generation of inept writers.

This can be fixed in two steps at the classroom and administration level. The first is to not give handouts or templates to students. I realize that students like to be told how to do everything, but creativeness in writing makes the story, not conformity. Expressiveness should be valued above content in high school. Higher level English classes should work on grammar and writing forms, such as using participial phrases, alliteration, and synecdoche. The second step is to have an unbiased teacher. Some teachers will surely hint at ways an essay *should* be written, and give preference to essays they believe are “written the right way.” But as long as the grammar is correct, if students write in a way that flows, uses correct constructs, and is creative in at least one way, they should be rewarded with a good grade.

2.5.2 Books to read and analyze

Prior to junior year, I had read every book that I had been assigned to read through my high school career. During junior year, I found that I was short on time, and I got away with not reading a single book or spark notes and still doing well on the tests. I think I was able to do so because I’d ask a friend to give me a quick synopsis of the reading before any quiz or test. But the point of this digression is *why* I

didn't read the books, not how I managed to do so. Besides not having enough time, I was also genuinely uninterested in every book that we were supposed to read. Granted, I enjoy non-fiction history books primarily, which are dry to most people. But if I was able to choose my own book to read, analyze, then take a test over or write about, I would have certainly read a book of my choosing.

Students should be allowed to choose appropriate books to read and analyze. An easy way of doing this is have the student write about their book in class (where the internet cannot be used) every few days. Each time a student is writing, a certain percentage of the book should have been read so everyone would finish by the end of the cycle. The final test could be a creative question such as, "Discuss how two characters changed throughout the novel using specific events and evidence." Teachers don't have to read every book, just reading the back cover of each book would suffice in seeking out those who didn't read. When events are extremely unspecific or rant about a single event only, it should be apparent that the student did not read or did not wholly read the book.

At minimum, a list of books should be provided that students can choose from. This is done in some classes, and it is appreciated, but it should be the rule, not the exception.

2.5.3 Grammar and Structure

There is something to be said for grammar and its importance in writing, but it is overdone in English class. Knowledge of grammatical structures is meant to influence writing by allowing for me creativity in style by using different structures. Grammar isn't meant to be memorized, but it seems that currently the school wants every student to know the definition of compound and complex sentences exactly, to know exactly when a semi-colon, colon, comma, or conjunction should be used. None of this is directly necessary for able writing. Types of sentences are not meant to be conscientiously thought of as one is writing, and after reviewing what they are for one section, the class should move on. Every English class I've been in since 7th grade has taken substantial time in reviewing what compound, complex, and simple sentences are. If a student doesn't get it after 3 comprehensive lessons, they probably never will because they don't want to learn it. Punctuation is meant to allow the reader to pause when the writer intends a pause. The rules of when these should be used should be less emphasized, while more attention should be placed on how well the writing flows.

The more advanced grammatical structures, such as gerunds, infinitives, and past or present participles should only be touched on very late in ones' school career, if at all. Very few people actually know what these are, and therefore they are not very practical to learn.

3 UNREALISTIC AND INAPPOSITE SOLUTIONS

Solutions that are out of the control of [my school] Schools.

3.1 AS A SCHOOL

I don't have all the answers, and there are some issues that I'm not sure can be fixed. Some students are just not meant to be in a school environment. Some haven't had an opportunity to learn and have turned away from learning. I don't know how to include the worst students who still have talent that doesn't apply to school. But I do know that starting at the teacher level and moving upwards, from the local school administration to the state and even federal levels, the education system could truly evolve into a modern, student based proponent of learning.

What I do know is the best teachers I've had were inspiring. They truly made me love learning, not even necessarily their class. An example would be Mrs. D of [my school] Middle School. I hated learning grammar; infinitives and gerunds confused me, and it was a real struggle to keep a B in the class. But Mrs. Dudgeon enjoys her job. It's obvious. She wants students to enjoy learning. Although I really struggled in her class, it made the rest of high school so far so much easier. She taught me how to write much more effectively, how to read more quickly and to understand what I read.

3.2 WITHIN SOCIETY

As Jeff Livingston^[12] stated, "I think our society hasn't been serious enough about the career part of that equation." As a school, there should be more than one track. Students know if they were meant for college, so why are those who are going to college taking the same classes as those who aren't? There needs to be separate 'tracks' available that provide different objectives. Those who are not going to college don't need to know what a matrix is, or how imaginary numbers work. They may need to know financing, or hands on skills such as fixing electronics or building structures. As a society, such a track should not be demonized.

Also, I believe schools, while following a sort of national curriculum, allowing colleges to make better decisions is necessary, currently schools vary so much in the implementation of the GPA scale that it

really doesn't mean anything. At some schools, 4.0 is the maximum GPA anyone can get, at [my school], the valedictorian currently has upward of a 4.7. The GPA needs to be on the same scale at every school.

Localization of the school should also happen to some degree to better fit students. For example, Hamilton Heights offers an agricultural class, presumably because many of its students live on farms. That makes sense. If a school existed in a manufacturing town, it should offer classes on welding, metal working, manufacturing and the like. At [my school], this could mean providing a more advanced business class that goes far beyond the basics of business, along with an agricultural studies class since there are rural regions in [my school].

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