



Lexington Public Schools

146 Maple Street ♦ Lexington, Massachusetts 02420

Paul B. Ash, Ph.D.
Superintendent of Schools

(781) 861-2580
email: pash@sch.ci.lexington.ma.us
fax: (781) 863-5829

Reforming Our Schools

July 1, 2010

By Natalie K. Cohen, Principal of Lexington High School

It's a given that the momentum of constant improvement must be sustained, not only in the world of education but in other realms as well. But when we talk about school reform, when we write annual plans to address our needs, we are now faced with the sometimes competing responsibilities of, on the one hand, preparing students to excel on high-stakes tests and meet college admissions standards and, on the other, preparing students in areas of development that are difficult, even sometimes impossible, to quantify. Interestingly, parents and society at large increasingly look to schools to develop students' skills in those non-quantifiable areas.

Mike Rose, professor of social methodology at UCLA, has written several books that tackle the conundrum of school reform, among them, "Why School? Reclaiming Education for All of Us and Possible Lives: The Promise of Public Education in America."

In a recent article entitled "Reform: To What End?" published in the April 2010 issue of Educational Leadership, Rose poses some essential questions that merit pondering: "What is the purpose of education in a democracy? What kind of people do we want to see emerge from U.S. schools? What is the experience of education when we do it well?"

His discussion focuses on two areas: the need to grow good teachers, and the mandate to create learning-friendly environments.

Growing good teachers

Recently, the Lexington Public Schools implemented an aggressive professional development initiative intended to allow teachers, new and veteran alike, to delve deeply into courses intended to support effective practices, employ differentiated instruction, and provide tiered interventions to our students who bring to us their wide range of learning styles.

Despite the high level of expertise displayed daily by our teachers, they have hungrily responded to these course offerings, eager to learn and improve their practices and, by extension, their students' learning.

Most importantly, LHS teachers have energetically embraced the professional learning community (PLC) model (another road to professional development) in efforts to enhance their repertoire of best classroom practices. Teachers meet weekly in course-alike groups to refine curriculum, target course objectives, and create common, authentic assessments.

The professional development courses in synch with the PLC efforts exemplify what Rose describes as "serious, extended engagement" in necessary school improvement.

Learning-friendly environments

In his article, Rose posits six indicators of learning-friendly environments, all of which happen to be underpinnings of the current LHS School Improvement Plan:

- Safety — both physical and intellectual
- Respect — as Rose writes, “fair treatment, decency, an absence of intimidation, and beyond the realm of individual civility, a respect for the history, language, and culture of the people represented in the classroom”
- Student responsibility for learning — students contributing to the flow of classroom events
- Intellectual rigor — students taken seriously as intellectual and social beings
- Ongoing support — a range of guides, structures and assistance/interventions provided for students
- Concern for students’ welfare — confidence fostering, recognition of growth, and a feeling of opportunity

Rose’s conclusion offers clear and valuable direction for well-grounded school reform: “The formation of intellectually safe and respectful spaces, the distribution of authority and responsibility, the maintenance of high expectations and the means to attain them — all this is fundamentally democratic and prepares one for civic life. Teachers should regard students as capable and participatory beings, rich in both individual and social potential. The realization of that vision of the student is what finally should drive school reform in the United States.”

Words to live by...

Natalie K. Cohen is principal at Lexington High School.

[Copyright 2010 Lexington Minuteman. Some rights reserved](#)