

Harness students' passion to get through graduation

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To earn a diploma at Beacon Charter School for the Arts, every senior makes a short movie. It must address, however loosely, the questions: Where have I been, and where am I going?

So, for example, Jessica Paquin's movie tells the story of a fatal drunken-driving accident. Paquin herself plays the Emergency Room nurse whose job is to treat the drunken driver as well as the fatally injured young girl whom the drunk hit. The nurse also tells the victim's sister about the death, and tends to her grief. In real life, Paquin was the surviving sister in the same scenario. Currently she attends nursing school, where she too will learn to attend to saints and sinners alike, as they come to her for care.

Dan Pelletier demonstrates, on camera, how to make a chicken Parmesan dinner, which he serves to his mother and friend. The song he wrote for the soundtrack - he's also a musician - was very cool.

Kayla Menard made a movie about making a movie, and is currently studying film at Rhode Island College.

Michael Skeldon, Beacon's academic dean, says, "Once they've got the footage from the digital video and still cameras, they still have to learn a tremendous amount of computer software." As part of the process, each student writes a proposal and a research paper, keeps a journal, creates a storyboard and maintains a time line for managing all the work.

All that is in addition to the Rhode Island Department of Education's (RIDE) requirements for completing academic course work and taking state tests.

Only Beacon's seniors must make a movie to graduate. But by next year, all Rhode Island seniors will not only need adequate course credits and passing grades, but will need to demonstrate that they can apply their skills and knowledge to a project or problem. RIDE calls this "proficiency-based graduation."

Toward the end of the 1990s, the public was upset that too many high-school diplomas certified only that a student had warmed the seat for the right amount of time. Business and higher education complained about badly prepared high-school graduates, and taxpayers wanted more evidence of an educational bang for their buck. So states began to add state-level requirements of students, designed to give substance to high school diplomas. Most states chose to phase in standardized tests, often called "high-stakes" because seniors must pass them or kiss off their diploma. At first, students improved their performance on these tests, but over time serious

problems developed. States with high-stakes testing saw their drop-out rates go up, and many dropouts, believing they'd never pass the tests, were leaving school earlier than previously.

Perhaps most damning is evidence that students enrolling at the state and community colleges need roughly the same amount of remedial reading, writing and math as they needed before the testing was implemented. Their test-taking skills improved, but learning did not.

RIDE, led by Commissioner Peter McWalters, questioned the value of knowledge that gets regurgitated on tests but can't be applied to the sorts of real-life problems that a student will encounter in the workaday world. Evaluating these projects - like Beacon's movie - requires a panel of staff, parents and community members who measure the work against applied-skills criteria. Together RIDE and the schools must build an oversight system to ensure that each high school demands roughly the same degree of rigor from the students, even as each school pursues its own strategy.

Roy Seitsinger, RIDE's director of high school reform, says with a sigh, "We're all in this together, and we're doing it for the first time."

Students will still be taking standardized state tests, so RIDE and the public have a measuring stick to gauge whether the new diplomas are in fact improving academic performance. After all, diplomas will be withheld from those students who do not demonstrate proficiency - or fulfill the more traditional requirements - and to that extent, Rhode Island's diploma system also has high stakes.

But the advantages of proficiency-based diplomas are considerable. Precisely the sorts of students who despair of passing standardized tests will have good reason to persist in their work toward a diploma if they feel they can hit the target.

Furthermore, students' own passions are rarely welcome in school - which kids resent. Proficiency demonstrations, like Beacon's movies, elevate the students' interests to a position of importance. Kids design and carry out a project that advances their own goals. The school provides a supervised environment where teachers help them stay on track, find resources and mentors, deal with frustration and so forth.

And lastly, the graduation projects have the potential to involve the community in the life of the school as never before.

For example, Skeldon says, "Beacon's movie idea came about because we wanted the kids to express themselves in an art form that their peers, families and communities find accessible. Everyone watches TV or movies."

Prior to graduation Beacon rents Woonsocket's Stadium Theatre, across the street from the school, for a film festival of the seniors' work. Skeldon says, "Last year's film fest was so powerful, I saw parents blinking back tears." At last, the families and community could see what the kids could do as a result of being in school, and got to know a bit of what was on the kids' minds.

Test-taking is not a community-building event. These new diplomas could be.

The URL for more details about Rhode Island's diploma projects can be found at: www.rido.net/

HighSchoolReform/default.aspx .

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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