

When I first became a principal back in Iowa, I was provided the opportunity to lead a two-section middle school in the district where I had been a high school teacher. I had taught one section of 7th grade geography so the middle school experience was not entirely novel but I was definitely more of a high school teacher than a middle school one. A lot more. Before the year had even started, however, the elementary administrator in our district departed for greener pastures and suddenly I became a K-8 principal. My only experience in elementary school was attending one as a student.

As it happened, I quickly learned to love my time as a grade school principal. The teachers were outstanding, the children welcoming and endearing, and the whole culture positive and engaging. Even so, when I had my first meeting with a couple of parents and a classroom teacher about a month into the school year, I was afraid my lack of experience might ‘show.’ The mom and dad were the parents of a very bright young lad who was reading so far above grade level he routinely had literary nose bleeds. He had also hurdled any number of algebraic concepts, notions he would not see in school for at least three more years. His parents were concerned that he was not being challenged in school and would soon become bored. I could certainly see their point.

His teacher did not. She calmly explained to the parents that she had a classroom full of students who ranged in ability from well below grade level to well above grade level, with the majority—bell curve like—huddled around a mid-point. “What else can I do,” she asked, “but teach to the middle?”

What else, indeed?

The parents were less than happy with that response and I was a bit flummoxed. It was obvious that telling the boy’s parents that he would simply need to cool his heels in a classroom in which he had already mastered everything that was being taught was not going to satisfy them. It was also obvious, though, that the teacher didn’t really have much other choice. Faced with a classroom of students who ranged over 3 or 4 different grade levels of ability, she could do little else but teach to the middle.

My, how things have changed. Today at Mitchell Middle School some MCL students are successfully completing any number of high school courses before ever reaching MHS. Scores of Mitchell High School students are engaging in post-secondary classes taken from our own faculty, virtual programs, DWU, MTI, and the many offerings by the regental universities in our state. The result is a ‘push from below,’ the arrival of students at each level who have needs higher than we have tended to experience (or at least to perceive and admit), and to which we must adjust. Suddenly, we have to make changes, institute reforms, alter the way we’ve done things, and discard forever the notion that the only solution is to teach to the middle.

The upshot of this will be interesting; in fact, it already is. It means that we are currently talking with a postsecondary school about the possibility of offering to interested students a course of study which will simultaneously earn them their high school diploma and their 2-year

associate degree. It means that technical schools need to adjust their scheduling so that postsecondary credits earned before high school graduation will actually result in graduation sooner than 2 years. It means that American universities will need to remove non-lode bearing impediments to graduating in under 4 years the way so many of their counterparts have already done in Europe under the Bologna Accord, resulting in continent-wide acceptance of a bachelor's degree earned in just 3 years.

What's the rush? you may ask. None, necessarily. But there are students, in numbers far more than we ever believed according to recent research on student abilities vis-à-vis grade level designation, who are ready to move forward, who don't want what is now thankfully becoming the disappearing senior year slide, who relish the idea of moving more quickly through a bachelor's degree so they go on to graduate school or secure that first job, who don't want to be held in place by arbitrary notions of 'the middle' or what is deemed best for everyone.

Increasingly, in education, it is a brave new world. Not the 'brave' new world of Huxley but rather that of Shakespeare. A world of possibilities, of adventure, of doing things better and faster. What fun it will be to enter that world and actually recognize "...such people in't!"