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# Introduction

## STUDENT-CENTERED HIGH SCHOOLS

This book is about learner-centered high schools. It is about teaching to the student, not to the subject. Most of all, it describes our vision of the structure of our high schools as analogous to the universe. The universe was formed in such a way that wherever you are in it, you are at its center; this is because it is shaped like the outside of a balloon. Our belief is that wherever students are in their high school experience, they are at the center of their learning. In a traditional high school, the center of the system is the teaching of content or subject matter, not student learning.

This traditional “center” can be demonstrated by the way that we use language. If you ask high school teachers what they do, they will reply, “I teach history,” “I teach math,” and so on. They do not say, “I teach students history” or “I teach students math.” Traditional high school teachers see themselves as providers of subject knowledge (and the system perpetuates this).

The system we present to promote the shift from traditional content- or subject-centered high schools to student-centered high schools is called Collaborative Career Pathways—a system of organizing student learning interests and aptitudes around career paths. It provides a structure for students to reference their learning and connect each year of their high school experience. It allows students to plan and practice their skills while creating a smooth and successful transition to a postsecondary option.

Even though our quests for system change began separately, we both began to feel discouraged by our profession. Why? Because Pam, a 25-year veteran in the classroom, felt she was reaching fewer students, more of the time. Elaine, both as an administrator dealing with at-risk youth and as a curriculum director, began to see patterns in every high school that were counterproductive to students and society at large.

Working with both teachers and students, the same patterns kept emerging for both of us. These patterns could be put into two categories:

1. Teachers working harder with fewer positive results.
2. Students growing more and more disconnected with school and the learning process.

It seemed as teachers worked harder and students grew more distant, the gap we were experiencing simply grew larger. It was common to hear teachers complain about how much work they were putting into the classroom with less appreciation and engagement from students. It was also common to hear students complain about how what they learned in school had no relevance to them. The school day could not end fast enough for them—they were eager to get back to the Internet, their video games, computers, and what have you to continue to learn—what and how they wanted to learn. If you and your colleagues have felt this distance from students, the Collaborative Career Pathways Model can be of great assistance in closing the gap. It can help teachers reach their students, and it can help students take ownership of their own education.

A key aspect of the acceptance and understanding of Career Pathways for us was our own experiences as educators. Despite the facts and figures concerning the need for change in our high schools that we received, our own emotional connections to kids and our passion for their educational success was what made it possible for us to create change successfully. Change processes can be long and tedious with many roadblocks—some expected and some not.

Our model began in 1999 when Pam's high school, in the rural area of the thumb of Michigan, became a board-certified Pathways High School and piloted the Collaborative Pathways Model. In the fall of that year, Pam, a language arts teacher, and her coteacher Bob Isenberg, designed a Freshman Focus curriculum tailored to the new model. Each year since then, the school's Career Pathways team has added another level of Pathways. In June 2003, the school had its first Pathways graduating class. At the same time, other schools in the county also began to look at Pathways and adapt it to the needs of their districts and students. Elaine began working with administrators, teachers, boards of education, and students in Kingston, Mayville, Akron-Fairgrove, and Vassar High Schools, and Cass City Middle School (all in Michigan) to implement the beginning stages of what was to become the Collaborative Pathways Model. We were astonished that, at every step we took, we found educators and community or board members who saw hope for successful system change that would be for the benefit of their students. Of course, we also met with resistance, but we never expected to see the kind of passion for change that we encountered. So our team has grown with the best and brightest!

To demonstrate this, one day Elaine was working with a well-known staff member; one of the science teachers who had never actively participated in any in-service (and we all have them), he put down his pen (he was correcting papers), took off his glasses, and looked at Elaine. He then said, "This is good for kids, you have me." In another school the principal was afraid to go to the faculty and ask who would take on the Freshman Explorations class in the high school (all members of the faculty already had too much work on their plate). Elaine said, "Who is your best English teacher?" and the principal pointed him out to her. Elaine met with the teacher separately and went over the curriculum and the class purpose. His remark was, "This fits my English standards and will help kids succeed in this school. I'll do it." The English teacher, his inclusion teacher, and the technology teacher worked together to provide a successful

program, brought the rest of the staff with them, and then convinced the board two years later to change the schedule and hire two additional teachers.

We have also been astounded at the night-and-day difference between our Pathways students and those who have graduated from a traditional high school. We have found our students to be more focused and connected, more team orientated, better able to work with adults, and the true drivers of their own learning. To be part of such a complete systems change—not in one school but in an entire county—has been an emotional roller coaster but more rewarding and more renewing than anything we have ever experienced in our careers. We are, more than ever, convinced that student-centered systems make a difference, and we are willing to put ourselves on the line professionally over and over again. We fervently believe that if our public high schools are to survive the changes in our world, they must change their paradigm. They must take an honest look at the data, at their students, and at themselves. They must become student-centered, and Collaborative Career Pathways Model will provide a solid road to reach such a destination.

This book is not just from our minds or our experiences; it is from our hearts as educators and as parents. This book is about our successes, our failures—about bringing change to schools. It is our “blood, sweat, and tears” of creating positive change and sharing with our readers how it can be done effectively and efficiently. It is a high school “knight’s tale” of heroes and heroines—teachers, counselors, parents, students, and community members—who were willing to take risks and to be criticized for seeing a different vision for our youth and our educational system. This book is for them, for our readers, and, most of all, for students. It can changes lives for students and for educators. And the truth is, that is what being an educator is all about—making a difference in students’ lives.