

Adults need to face facts: High school is the real world

Adults are fond of telling children that school is preparing them for “the real world.”

But, what exactly do we mean by that? Isn't high school real? And if not, why?

I found myself jotting these questions in the margins of my notebook at a seminar last week sponsored by the New Jersey High School Redesign Steering Committee on building a better high school system. The seminar was filled with plans and surveys and a promise to make students learn more before bestowing upon them a diploma that says they are ready to enter “the real world.”

As I listened, I was struck by the gap that exists among employers, schools, parents and students of just what being in the “real world” means.

Adults treat high school like an alternate universe, yet we somehow expect students to blindly accept that what they learn in school will be vital to them once they get into the “real world.” Trust us, we tell them. We know what we're doing.

Meanwhile, students are staring out the window thinking what they have always thought: “Why do I need to know this stuff?”

A lot of attention is being paid to high schools nationwide, largely spurred by employers complaining that too many high school graduates can't do job-related math, write a report or solve a problem — in other words, they can't function in the real world.

“It's a dead-end world for a kid who can't learn on the job,” Jane Oates, executive director of the N.J. Commission on Higher Education, said at the seminar.

But, by its very model, high school protects students from the real world, rather than preparing them for it.

Students don't get fired from high school for doing poor work. In fact, they're more likely to get remedial help. Try telling a boss that the solution to your poor work performance is to hire someone to help you.

Skip school, and maybe get detention, but you're still in school. Skip work, get fired.

As long as you pass, you graduate. A “D” is passing in school, but won't get a student far in life. Learning isn't always its own reward. We have to be willing to provide other incentives, and employers have to help.

The high school reform movement calls for smaller schools that give students more individual and specialized attention. But what many students also need is more exposure to the real world so they can learn what they want to do, and how to achieve it. Some schools are doing this now — academy programs and vocational schools make it part of their mission to integrate real world jobs with the school lessons.

The state response is likely to include requiring students to take more classes that are more rigorous. But we also should require that the material be learned more effectively and connected to the real world so students aren't so clueless when they get there.

The one issue on which everyone seems to agree is that if students are motivated, they will learn.

I would then ask this: “What are we doing to motivate the 21st century student?”

A new high school design must do more than just add more class time — it has to make that time mean something to the students.

School should not be a bitter pill we take because it's good for us. It should be a buffet that excites us to want more.

More information on the High School Redesign Steering Committee's work is online at:
www.highschoolsummit.org