

WHY THOMAS HANEY?

January 11, 2013



BLENDDED LEARNING

Principal's Message Sean Nosek

January 2013

I have been fortunate in my career to have spent many years working at a school known for its innovative and "outside the box" approach to education. Thomas Haney Secondary School, a member of the Canadian Coalition of Self Directed Learning, is one of very few schools around the globe that was specifically built with the 21st Century in mind. Our aim from the beginning was to foster competencies like self-reliance, critical thinking, global awareness, social responsibility, and creativity and innovation. Designed with an open architecture, students at Thomas Haney would not be

spending all day in small classrooms. Instead, when students were not attending required seminars, they could choose to work in open concept areas called great halls. These great halls were wonderful, multi-graded learning spaces. These spaces were supervised by teachers, and students could access their expertise as needed to complete the learning guides that made up their courses. Students were invited to work at a rate that best met their learning needs, and were given much choice with respect to what, when, where and how their learning looked. Learning

became more personalized.

What is more, every student was assigned a Teacher Advisor. Students would meet daily with their Advisors in a setting not unlike a Homeroom. In this setting, students would complete short term and long term planning and goal setting. Students would have the same Teacher Advisor for the duration of their high school experience, and thus, strong and sustained personal connections could be formed. The Teacher Advisor was a student advocate, a liaison with home, and a daily

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Teacher Advisory Personalized Learning

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source of support and guidance. The Teacher Advisory system continues to be invaluable to our school.

The first years were very exciting but not without challenge. The first learning guides were so voluminous that some students struggled with all the paper. The seminar format was brilliant in theory, but attendance was spotty and some felt more structure was required. What is more, some students were simply not progressing through their guides at a reasonable rate.

Despite these growing pains, the school was also producing some amazing results. Academic scores on provincial exams (standardized tests) were consistently strong. It was something else, however, that was catching our collective attention. We realized in short order that our kids were different. That is to say, they were developing a different set of skills. These skills were not so easy to measure, but they were certainly easy to notice. Our kids could negotiate like lawyers. They were comfortable speaking to adults. They looked you in the eye. They developed relationships with teachers that were more personal than in a conventional model. They could navigate uncertainty. They learned, sometimes the hard way, how to prioritize and manage their time. Even those kids that struggled with the amount of freedom they were given, somehow never blamed anyone but themselves. They took ownership.

Our students developed citizenship qualities in ways we had not anticipated. Our flexible schedule did not require students to sit in formal classes all day long. This meant that they had time during the school day to get engaged in other meaningful ways. And did they ever! When it came to issues of social justice, the environment, or school spirit, our kids got involved in a big way. Students could plan, organize, and/or participate in events, campaigns, and school culture initiatives in ways we had not witnessed before. In a world where collaboration, teamwork, and global awareness are paramount, we knew this was no small thing.

As the years, passed, we continued to



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Sean Nosek

THSS 21STCENTURYSCHOOL

refine our model. Our guides got better and more engaging. In recent years, as technology evolved, we have been able to take advantage of what we call blended learning. By making our curriculum and learning resources available on-line, our students have access to powerful learning around the clock. A student can now watch Mr. Radom's Math video on solving quadratic equations on a Tuesday evening at 10:00 pm if he or she chooses. This digital learning does not replace the face-to-face school based learning. Our kids still engage in the spirited discourse and debate and idea exchange that happens in school, but they are freed – free to expand their learning and to move on to the next level when they are ready, not just when the school year ends. Free to incorporate their own passions and interests into their learning. Free to develop a flexible timetable that allows them time to travel, or train, or work, or deal with unexpected difficulties that might mean physically “missing” school for a while.

The vast majority of our students now bring laptops to school. We encourage this. Laptops are not only powerful in terms of allowing students unparalleled access to information and material that is available on the world wide web, but they can use these digital tools to create meaningful work for authentic audiences. They can post a powerful video on YouTube, Write a blog, Publish or produce a professional caliber presentation using Prezi or Powerpoint. Increasingly, they can also submit their assignments

electronically, organize themselves better (less paper), and login to see the how the teacher is grading them.

Technology has finally caught up to our model, and this has allowed our students and our school to soar like never before. Today, Thomas Haney draws students from 23 of our district's elementary schools, and many students travel good distances just to be able to attend here. Our school district is currently in a time of decreasing student population, a phenomenon happening in many places across the country at present. We have the distinction of being the only high school in the district to be actually increasing in population. Why? In addition to offering learning opportunities that are more flexible and more personal, our community tells us again and again that the students we graduate seem better prepared for life after high school.

Our school is now internationally renown for its innovative ways. We attract visitors, typically educators and policymakers, from around the world who come to see our school in action. Why all the attention? If you ask me, it is because we have something worth looking at, namely, a school for the 21st Century!