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### The Sixteen Criteria for the Ultimate K-12 Schools.

I use the word ‘ultimate’ here in its most literal sense. The premise here is that somewhere there exists a single imaginary ultimate K-12 public school. I say imaginary with the confidence that there is no such school – as yet. This ultimate cannot be one person’s vision, based on the limitations of his or her own prejudices and imagination. Although this ultimate is the creation of my own prejudices and limitations, I offer it as a beginning, based upon what I perceive to be the reality of the nature of children and how they best can learn. This is not based upon the reality of our existing schools and how best they can be saved. I theorize that a considerably protracted dialog among child development experts (other than educators) would eventually arrive at a single, unified concept of the ultimate school, ideal for all children, in all situations and in all communities. I would hasten to add that I do not propose a single education for all children, but rather a single method of education that will be ideal for all children. I’m sure it could never satisfy all parents because their expectations will likely be limited by their own schooling and their expectations for their own children. Nor will it satisfy all cultures and religions which will have their own agendas for their young. Because we are operating here under the protection of harmless theory, I hope that few will feel threatened by our dream or attempt to hamper our efforts.

I do not expect that the ultimate school, though it might be clearly defined, will ever be accepted or practical. No ultimate ever is. As they say, be careful for what you wish for, someday you might get it! Perhaps the schools that are created around these principles will attain 80% of them in the beginning. Each school will accept as its mission to strive even further towards that ultimate as it grows. (I ascribe to the notion that schools can be students too.)

This is not a fantasy about hand-picked students, inspired master teachers, and unlimited budgets, in an idyllic community. This is a search for the ideal K-12 school that would serve any and all communities well and achieve outstanding results with the widest range of students.

Examine these sixteen criteria for their relevance and value. You will find many of them so unusual that few existing schools would begin to meet them. As you will see, this list is a performance- rather than a process-based standard. It measures what is actually learned and accomplished rather than what is taught or intended.

The sixteen criteria are as follows:

1. The extent to which each student has his own custom-tailored curriculum that is continually updated according to his actual progress.

Who would quarrel with this ideal? Is it impractical? Would it require a teacher for each student? Because we have always assumed that children have to be made to learn what it is we feel they must know, we have long been locked into the notion that all students must be forced-taught, in unison, a standardized curriculum.

2. The extent to which education is driven by the students' desire to learn rather than the teachers' need to teach.

Most teachers would claim this one as their own. But if they have a lesson plan for the day, and if they are teaching a group of students in unison, it could only be by sheer coincidence that this is even remotely true. All children are born voracious learners. The big question is whether they would really want to learn what it is we feel they should know. If there really is a good reason for doing so, and it can be plainly demonstrated to the child, why not let the student drive the process? I can appreciate that it may be hard to imagine this kind of student initiative, especially when all we have known is forced teaching.

3. The extent to which media rather than teachers lecturing is the primary source of information.

Lecture teaching is expensive and a most inefficient means for delivering information. The content and pace seldom matches the level, comprehension, and readiness of each of the students in the class. By replacing lecturing with recorded or printed media, education becomes individualized and student-driven rather than teacher-driven, freeing the teacher to work individually with students.

4. The extent to which every student has a teacher who takes the time to become a respected mentor, advisor, and close friend.

How could teachers possibly have the time? They could if education wasn't lecture-based. Teachers must become counselors and resource coordinators rather than talking heads. How else could they know what each student really knows and is ready and eager to learn?

5. The extent to which parents are directly involved in the educational work of their child.

We are not talking about joining the PTA, or the ritual of annual 15-minute parent-teacher conferences. Education must go beyond being something done to students by a professional teacher. At-home reinforcement is essential. What must a child learn that his parents shouldn't already know themselves?

6. The extent to which the educational process is measured entirely by what was actually learned rather than by what was taught and for how long.

How do the grades students get affect the curriculum? They don't. Test scores simply indicate to what extent the curriculum succeeded or failed. Education must be a

measured, logical progression that links what each child has adequately learned to what needs to be learned next. Fragmented learning must be replaced by progressive learning. Grading what was and was not learned must be replaced by measuring the actual level of what has been learned in a useful and permanent form so the student may advance from there.

7. The extent to which there is continual educational and social interchange between students of widely divergent ages and backgrounds.

Education must be a bi-polar continuum of learning and teaching. Teaching is another form of reinforcement and testing. Conventional unison teaching and scheduled advancement requires age segregation, which leads to a narrowing of acceptance for and interest in others who are unlike ourselves. If mixing older kids with younger ones today is considered unadvisable it is because children don't learn this kind of acceptance and the responsibilities that comes with it. Age cross-pollination is the natural result of students advancing at their own best pace.

8. The extent to which there are a sizable number of registered adult volunteers working directly with students on a regular basis.

(Don't ever suggest such a thing at a teachers' union meeting!) The ultimate school should have at least a 5-to-1 teachers-to-volunteer ratio in school at all times. Sound impossible? What is the percentage of adults in your community who are at work at any hour of the working day? You would be surprised. Every community has boundless resources of people with fascinating experiences and skills to share with the young. But would they make effective teachers? The skill necessary to teach someone something is inversely proportional to the student's eagerness to learn it.

9. The extent to which students formally evaluate themselves, their teachers, and their school on a regular basis.

Having teachers and students exchange report cards is certainly a radical notion. Children from K thru 12 are perfectly capable and intuitive enough to give a meaningful evaluation of their own teachers and their school. Ask the right questions in the right way and the students can teach the school quite a bit. The tough part is in dealing constructively with the results.

10. The extent to which students are actively involved in the policies and operations of their school.

We are not talking about a student council here. Every school is a model of the real world. It is a government, business, commerce, law and order, and community. As such, it is an education in itself. An experienced scoutmaster could tell you that children are quite capable of taking on substantial leadership responsibilities consistent with their developmental level. A curriculum-driven school has no time for such diversions. In the

ultimate school nothing will be done for students that they could do practically as well for themselves.

11. The extent to which students' behavior is motivated by self-control and consideration for others rather than by rules and punishments.

Conventional education is all about having to control children in a very artificial educational environment. All the power and responsibility must be held by the staff. The students' responsibility is to conform and succeed at what is required of them. Rules and punishments are a necessity for an orderly society, but they are not the real reasons for doing the right things. A school that empowers children and encourages and rewards their good judgment and sense of responsibility seldom has to apply these behavior control mechanisms. When each student knows that his school depends on him, the school will be able to depend upon the student.

12. The extent to which significant contributions of material support are donated to the school by members of the community on a regular basis.

Based on the tight budgets taxpayers place upon them, one would think that our society does not value its schools very highly. Perhaps this apparent low regard relates to the poor results our schools produce. Another cause is the closed door policy most of our schools have. If the public is kept out, except on special occasions, it has little awareness or interest in the schools' material needs. Most every community has an abundance of goods and services that could be eagerly donated to the local schools if only someone would ask.

13. The extent to which students and teachers go to school each day feeling safe, challenged, appreciated, and needed.

This is a tall order that ultimate schools can amply fill. A school where students of all ages are actively involved in the operation of the school while eagerly pursuing an education specially tailored to their individual needs is just such a place. No matter how mean the streets outside may be, the hallways of the schools will be very friendly places. Of course there are mean hallways too. The ultimate test of a school's social environment is the absence of bullying and insults by both students and teachers. A school which does not meet these criteria can never achieve its mission.

14. The extent to which the school is the central focus of community activities.

School facilities are expensive to build and maintain. What logic is there in having them closed when the last bell of the school day rings? Having duplicate ball fields, gyms, pools, and libraries is a waste created by the mind-set that education is a specialized activity best kept apart from the life of the community. Ultimate schools will be smaller neighborhood facilities whose diversity, inclusiveness, and accessibility will give whole new dimension to education as a life-long community endeavor.

15. The extent to which the school is open year round and for extended hours.

When K-12 education escapes the bounds of unison lecture teaching and the teacher becomes a consultant, librarian, and counselor rather than a talking head, the limitations of scheduled classes will be replaced by individual and small group activities utilizing a wide range of media over extended hours that better satisfy our 24/7/365 world.

16. The extent to which the school's diploma accurately represents each student's achievements and is held in very high regard by higher education and business institutions.

Education has long been a process rather than an experience, measured by the time spent being taught rather than what has actually been learned in a permanent and useful form. The generic high school diploma is as meaningful as a used plane ticket. It says only that the person made the journey. The ultimate 'smart' diploma will be a continuously updated, lifetime, and certified resume of the acquired knowledge, skills, and experiences of the individual.

Make two copies of the list below for each participant in your group. First have each person mark in pencil 1-10 the extent to which they feel each standard is feasible. Compare notes and after some discussion have them revise their results as they see fit. Conduct a second survey in which each participant rates your local school. You will likely find the results very low. Discuss those results and weed out patronizing "Yes, we do that" comments that are more hopeful than realistic so as to arrive at the most accurate survey. Depending on the interest level, dedication, and determination of your group, you could move on to more specific goals such as advocating specific reforms in your local school based on a few of these standards.

Perhaps a single evening session would produce interesting results, but because the topic is so complex and significant, you might find your group interested in pursuing the matter in greater depth. A second session could be a repeat of the first but with the benefit of hindsight.

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2. Education is driven by the students' desire to learn rather than the teachers' need to teach.
3. Media rather than teachers lecturing is the primary source of information.
4. Every student has a teacher who takes the time to become a respected mentor, advisor, and close friend.
5. Parents are directly involved in the educational work of their child.
6. The educational process is measured entirely by what was actually learned rather than by what was taught and for how long.
7. There is continual educational and social interchange between students of widely divergent ages and backgrounds.
8. There are a sizable number of registered adult volunteers working directly with students on a regular basis.
9. Students formally evaluate themselves, their teachers, and their school on a regular basis.
10. Students are actively involved in the policies and operations of their school.
11. Students' behavior is motivated by self-control and consideration for others rather than by rules and punishments.
12. Significant contributions of material support are donated to the school by members of the community on a regular basis.
13. Students and teachers go to school each day feeling safe, challenged, appreciated, and needed.
14. The school is the central focus of community activities.
15. The school is open year round and for extended hours.
16. The school's diploma accurately represents each student's achievements and is held in very high regard by higher education and business institutions.