

***School Matters***  
**Purpose-Driven Curriculum**  
February 9, 2018

As I was entering my senior year in high school, the counselor asked me to complete a scheduling form on which I would list the classes I wanted to take in the fall. I knew this was an important decision that could impact my entire life. For this reason, I understood the need to carefully select courses that would enable me to realize success after high school. Harnessing the unmistakable logic of a 17-year old male, I was confident my decision-making skills were based on solid rationale. I utilized the trifecta criteria model for selecting classes. First, I took as many classes as I could with Mary Cantrell, my girlfriend. Second, I selected as many classes as I could with my friends. I knew the grading curve would have to be significant with this bunch and it would be more fun with them. Third, I took the easiest classes I could to ensure I had time for the important things in life, such as dating, sports, hunting, and fishing. Although this seemed to be a solid plan at the time, it didn't help me much as I entered college. I was not academically prepared for college and many of my undergraduate classes were a challenge. It took me several semesters of college to overcome my poor academic choices in high school.

As superintendent, I am confident the decision-making process for many high school students is similar to my experience. Some of our students are fortunate and will have parents who will require them to take challenging courses. Some will have that self-motivation and will be relentless in their pursuit of academic challenges; however, many students may not have involved parents and don't yet possess that internal drive. These students may have considerable freedom in choosing their own coursework, and this can have a devastating impact on them after they leave high school.

We want to make sure we create and implement a purpose-driven curriculum. This curriculum should be rigorous, challenging, and deliberately designed to help students be successful after high school. Although there will always be some degree of choice and freedom in selecting coursework, it is our responsibility to ensure students are challenged on a daily basis without being frustrated. We now live in a global economy and high school students need to have a purpose when selecting courses if they want to compete in today's environment.

We are beginning to explore the concept of a pathway program. This concept will require a great deal of discussion before we formally adopt it, but it is a model with some promise. Basically, the program will contain a series of academic pathways that will help structure and focus coursework for students. These pathways will be developed to provide a comprehensive and coordinated program of studies to meet the instructional needs of all students and help them enjoy success after high school. It is important to understand that these paths are fluid and students are not locked into any specific path. They are able to navigate from one path to another depending on their individual academic progress. It is critical that parents and students communicate with school officials to identify a path that is rigorous and challenging without creating frustration.

One path would be an honors program in which students are enrolled in advanced-placement and dual-enrollment courses. These students are some of our top academic scholars. They have

plans to attend a major university and will earn a four-year degree, a master's degree, and perhaps a doctorate degree. The second path would be a scholars program in which students are registered in some dual-enrollment courses and perhaps a limited number of advanced-placement courses. These students are academically able and they plan to attend a four-year college. The third path would be for students who want to attend college but need basic preparatory coursework to become ready for college.

The fourth path would be a general career and technical program. These students possess a desire to enter a specific vocation or technical field, and this path may be an extremely viable option for many of our students. Approximately 70% of the jobs created in our area will require some type of technical training, which can be earned through our community or technical colleges. Parents and students should really consider this path because many of these jobs are high paying and extremely rewarding. Many graduates of these programs will leave the community and technical colleges with the necessary credentials and licensure to begin work immediately. They will have virtually no student debt and will be ready to enter the workforce. The fifth path would also involve career and technical programming but would be very specific. We would partner with local industries and create an agreement to hire students upon high school graduation if the graduates complete specific academic coursework and technical training during high school. The sixth and final path would be for students with the highest degree of transitional needs. These would involve students with some type of disability and will ensure they have functional literacy skills and are able to be productive and independent citizens.

Creating a purpose-driven curriculum and the pathway program will not be easy. Certainly, it will involve numerous conversations with staff, parents, students, administration, and the board of education before we develop a final product. I am confident, however, that we can develop an effective curriculum that will engage students in meaningful coursework that will prepare them for success. It is critical that we prepare students for the workforce or for college. Looking back on my situation, a purpose-driven curriculum would have been extremely valuable to me. Having direction and focus would have helped me take more rigorous content in high school and would have better prepared me for college. However, with hindsight and advanced knowledge, I still would have taken at least one class with Mary Cantrell! I suspect this motivation and rationale of course selection will never change. Thank you for your attention to this article. Remember: School Matters!

--Jeff Perry, Superintendent  
Hamblen County Schools