

Making Grade 12 Meaningful



International Center
for Leadership in Education

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Chapter 1: Redesigning the American High School

Chapter 1 examines the various challenges that confront American high schools today as identified by the major reform movements and offers a rationale for why high schools must change. Key components for high school redesign are introduced as well as the characteristics of successful schools.

Chapter 2: Rationale for 12th Grade Focus — Story of a “Wasteland”

Chapter 2 offers an in-depth review of the numerous reasons that contribute to making the 12th grade a lost year in many high schools. The failure to meet the needs of seniors has proven to have a profound impact on them as they struggle to transition to the world beyond high school. The standard responses that high schools undertake to address the challenges inherent in the 12th grade have limitations in their ability to engage seniors fully in rigorous and relevant ways.

Chapter 3: A Developmental Profile of 12th Graders

Chapter 3 identifies the developmental characteristics of 12th graders and establishes six key premises about who they are and what they need educationally in order to flourish in the final year of high school. Seniors are:

1. in transition
2. capable
3. in need of new experiences
4. ready to apply learning to the real world
5. eager to have a voice in what they learn
6. in need of adult interaction and mentoring

Given these premises, seniors need opportunities that foster the following qualities:

- leadership
- service
- self-advocacy
- independence
- diversity awareness
- interaction with adults
- education beyond the classroom walls
- self-directed learning
- self-knowledge
- independent living skills
- interpersonal skills

Chapter 4: Getting Started — Creating a Mandate

Chapter 4 provides schools with a deliberate process for establishing a grassroots mandate for recasting the 12th grade experience. An exploration committee is charged to assess the current status of the 12th grade program, create buy-in for change, and develop a plan of action. Various strategies for managing the change process are discussed in detail.

Chapter 5: Making It Happen — Implementing Change

Chapter 5 outlines the steps a school can take to begin planning and implementing new initiatives that respond to the areas of need identified by the exploration committee's work (as described in Chapter 4). A steering committee is charged to articulate a mission statement for the 12th grade, research and design program(s), and set goals and timelines for the implementation of new initiatives.

Chapter 6: Infusing Relevance Through Personalization

Chapter 6 discusses the value of personalization in promoting engagement in the senior year. A powerful vehicle for infusing relevance in the 12th grade is to personalize the learning by providing opportunities for self-exploration: career interests, personal goals, learning styles, individual interests, core beliefs, etc.

Chapter 7: Building Relationships Through Personalization

Chapter 7 emphasizes the efficacy of creating a personalized learning environment by implementing advisement programs and/or other small learning communities that can provide needed mentoring and guidance for 12th graders in this critical year of transition. A process for creating an advisory program for seniors is described in detail.

Chapter 8: Personal Skill Development

Chapter 8 makes the case that beyond rigorous academics 12th graders need to develop a host of personal skills to meet the demands of life after high school. A student-directed guidance plan is featured in which 12th graders identify topics of interest that are then addressed during the year. The program culminates with a Senior Institute, a day of workshops, speakers, and activities. This chapter focuses on the importance of giving seniors a voice in what they learn.

Chapter 9: Rigorous and Relevant Curriculum and Instruction

Chapter 9 offers numerous strategies for bringing much-needed rigor and relevance to the 12th grade curriculum. Specific models for advanced study,

small learning communities, independent study, and alternative methods for assessment, such as portfolios and presentations of learning, are just a few of the approaches included in this chapter. Best practices from across the country are highlighted.

Chapter 10: Learning in Real-World Settings

Chapter 10 explores the need for 12th graders to move beyond the classroom walls and immerse themselves in the dynamic world of experiential learning where they can pursue topics of personal interest and interact with adult mentors. Myriad models for senior project experiences are examined. A variety of strategies for structuring project-based learning are included.

Chapter 11: Engagement Through Service Learning

Chapter 11 reviews current research and illustrates how service learning experiences can foster significant engagement among 12th graders as students both give back to the community and enrich their academic learning. The differences between service learning and community service are explained. The components of an effective service learning program are defined and models of best practices are shared.

Chapter 12: Engagement Through Leadership

Chapter 12 demonstrates how 12th graders must be given opportunities for substantive leadership roles within the school community and even beyond, if possible. As arguably the most capable students in the school, seniors are ready to assume significant mentoring roles as they minister to younger students. Also, seniors should have access to quality leadership training as they will benefit from the skills they acquire when they move into the adult world. The Senior Instructional Leadership Corps (SILC),

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as well as other model programs that provide both training and leadership experiences are described in detail.

Chapter 13: Professional Development

Chapter 13 discusses the importance of supporting 12th grade programs with strong professional development that truly empower teachers since they are the most valuable asset the school possesses. Giving teachers the opportunity to hone their instructional skills is one of the best ways to increase student learning. Successful schools recognize that professional development should be both ongoing and collaborative. Teachers need ample time to work together in teams, such as in the professional learning communities described in this chapter. Other key characteristics of effective professional development are discussed and topics for professional development that are germane to the 12th grade are identified.

Chapter 14: Program Assessment

Chapter 14 emphasizes the importance of regular assessment of new programs and student progress if schools are seriously intent on making the 12th grade meaningful. Schools need to collect and analyze data from a variety of sources that go beyond the traditional local and state instruments that so often drive assessment. Deliberate efforts must be made to use the data to improve programs in a timely fashion to assure enduring reform and greater student achievement.

on along the same old course. The challenges of the transition underway are enormous, but the potential for tremendous growth is possible if the energy to which Valhouli alludes can be harnessed.

Six Key Premises About Seniors



Six key premises emerge given the unique profile of seniors and the attendant significance of the 12th grade. They exhibit the following traits.

1. *In transition.* This dynamic period of transition must be openly acknowledged and addressed. Twelfth graders are negotiating a threshold year that must be fully embraced and uniquely engineered to usher them into the adult world.
2. *Capable.* They are arguably the most knowledgeable, skilled, and mature students in the high school who have the potential to do far more than they are generally asked to do. They are an invaluable resource to the school and the broader community.
3. *In need of new experiences.* They are tired of the same old routine and school structures that they have lived with for 12 or more years. They are eager to encounter fresh challenges in new settings.
4. *Ready to apply learning to the real world.* They are ready to test their abilities and knowledge in the more complex and adult environment.
5. *Eager to have a voice in what they learn.* They are “filled up” of the teacher-driven curriculum that has dictated their learning since first grade. They seek a more personal and relevant connection to a curriculum that reflects their interests and needs.
6. *In need of adult interaction and mentoring.* They are struggling to prepare for the post high school world that will bare little resemblance to the controlled environment that they have thus far experienced. Personal relationships with adults who can model and guide them are invaluable.



CD and DVD

Also included is a CD that contains numerous handouts, surveys, and activities from the kit. An icon in the margin next to the text indicates when an item is available electronically on the CD. The DVD, which was recorded at the Model Schools Conference, is a 50-minute presentation by the authors related to the contents of the kit.

About the Authors

Janice Dreis and Larry Rehage, authors of *Making Grade 12 Meaningful*, draw both on their myriad experiences as leader teachers and their 15 years as the co-directors of an advisement program that served more than 1,000 seniors at a nationally recognized high school. They have presented frequently at national conferences for the International Center for Leadership in Education, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, the National Society of Experiential Education, and the National Association of Secondary School Principals, as well as for state and local organizations. As consultants to school districts, they have conducted workshops on advisement programs, senior project initiatives, the Senior Instructional Leadership Corps (SILC) program, service learning, and rethinking the senior year. In addition to publishing articles about the senior year, Janice and Larry were named K-12 Experiential Education Leaders of the Year in 2005 by the National Association of

Student Survey on Grade 12 Experience				
Please respond to the questions in the following survey that asks about your 12 th grade experience – how engaged you are, what you have found meaningful in your classes, how the senior program might be improved, etc. Your responses are valuable in helping teachers, administrators, and others improve conditions that contribute to your learning and development in the final year of high school.				
Part I				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. My classes are appropriately challenging and interesting.				
2. My course work is relevant and meaningful in preparing me for the next stage of my life.				
3. I am involved in extracurricular activities (sports, clubs, government, newspaper, etc.) that are important to me.				
4. I am having experiences at school, outside of my classes, that are helping me to meet the challenges of life after high school.				
5. I put significant effort and time into doing homework and preparing for my classes.				
6. The academic work is more challenging in the senior year than in the junior year.				
7. I am getting the information and help I need to make appropriate plans for the next stage of my life after graduation, whether college or the workplace.				
8. There are teachers, counselors, coaches, or other adults in the school who know me and care about my future.				
9. I am learning personal life skills and important information about others and myself that will serve me well after graduation.				
10. My school recognizes my need for greater independence and is helping me to become more self-reliant.				



Creating a 12th Grade Mission Statement

Possible key components might include:

- **Meaningful transition experience to the world beyond high school**
- **Connections to the real world**
- **Challenging academics**
- **Leadership training**
- **Service opportunities**
- **Career exploration**
- **Diversity Training**
- **Self-directed learning**
- **Self-exploration and reflection**
- **College planning**
- **Adult mentors**
- **Life skills**

These components become the “planks” of a platform that then can be expressed in a mission statement.

Sample mission statement:

_____ High School is committed to providing a 12th grade experience that serves as a meaningful transition to the world beyond high school. To this end, seniors need rigorous academics in order to prepare for college and the work place. In addition, they should be given opportunities to pursue personal interests, independent inquiry, service, leadership, and connections to the real world. To facilitate post secondary planning and a variety of other topics germane to senior guidance, 12th graders will meet regularly with advisors for individual conferences and group discussions.

Topics for Reflection

Numerous self-exploration activities entailing written reflection can be included in a 12th grader's portfolio. Topics that can be especially meaningful in the final year of high school include:



- challenges I have overcome
- where I think I will be in ten years
- my personal heroes
- what I believe to be true
- future goals and aspirations
- living in a diverse world
- what motivates me
- what I want to know

Two examples follow of how topics from this list can be developed as reflection pieces for the senior portfolio.

Core Beliefs

Twelfth graders can calibrate their moral compass in preparation for the dilemmas and ethical challenges that they will inevitably encounter as they move into the adult world.

The following activity is especially helpful to 12th graders as it compels them to deliberate on what core beliefs and values are instrumental in guiding them in their life either generally, or in relation to a specific issue. Twelfth graders can calibrate their moral compass in preparation for the dilemmas and ethical challenges that they will inevitably encounter as they move into the adult world. This activity, which is derived from the National Public Radio (NPR) revival of Edward R. Murrow's *This I Believe* program, can be easily adapted for various reflection exercises. Responding to NPR's open invitation to members of its audience to submit essays in which they express their personal beliefs, veteran English teacher Sherry Medwin from Wilmette, Ill., designed the following pilot program as a final writing assessment for senior English classes.

Wood quoted
in Faucci,
Jeanne et al.
*The Advisory
Toolkit*,
Wildwood
School, p.377.

The way the graduation portfolio fits in and capstones the advisory experience is that advisory is all about personalizing your educational experience. It's been about students gradually taking control of themselves as learners. Education isn't something that's done to you, it's something you do. So, one of the underlying themes of advisory is always, 'What are you doing to take control of your life and learning?'

Designing a 12th Grade Advisory Program

If a school already has an advisory system in place, it may be helpful to consider how the senior advisory can work to make the 12th grade more meaningful through addressing many of the guidance strands mentioned previously. If a school does *not* have an advisory program and sees merit in implementing one, then the following design and implementation process may be helpful. Keep in mind that there are multiple advisement models in schools across the country and each one has a unique configuration of key variables.

Some of these key variables are:

- Who serves as advisor?
- What is the size of an advisory?
- How are advisor groups constituted?
- When is advisory scheduled?
- Where are advisories located?
- What are the goals of the advisory program?
- What are the envisioned student outcomes?
- Is there a set curriculum?
- Who is responsible for creating the curriculum?
- Is there advisor training/support?

In adopting an effective advisory program, a school must develop a program that is unique to its needs and culture. No school arrives at the ideal realization of advisory on its first efforts by simply buying a canned program or by trying to do exactly what worked in another school.



Step 2: Give Seniors a Voice

An effective vehicle for fostering engagement in seniors is to invite them to identify some of the topics about which they want to learn. This process should begin in September by giving the following survey to each senior after the senior guidance committee has been established. If a senior advisory program is in place, it is the ideal vehicle for launching the survey and delivering the guidance program. If not, surveys can be distributed through common senior classes such as English.



Dreis and Rehage
[www.twelfthgrade
programs.org](http://www.twelfthgradeprograms.org)

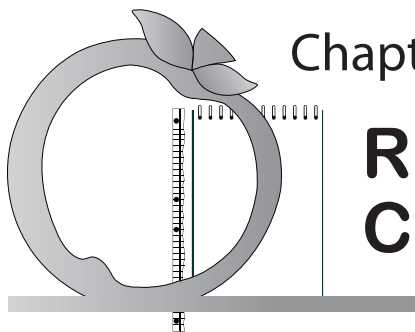
Sample Senior Survey

What do you want to know in preparation for life after high school?

This is the last year of schooling before you move on to the next stage of your life, whether that is college or the workplace. Your senior year is a major transition period that will usher in an adult world of much greater independence than anything you have experienced before. Beyond what you may have learned in school, at home, through a faith or service organization, or from your peers, what information/knowledge, skills, or issues are vital to learn more about in order to prepare you for the coming years? In other words, what haven't you learned that you now need to know?

Your most thoughtful input to this survey will provide information that will be used to plan a meaningful senior program that is intended to respond to you and your classmates' specific interests and needs.

What issues, skills, information/knowledge do you think are important to address in the senior year that will prepare you for life after high school? Examples might include money management, date rape, roommate issues, etc.



Chapter 9

Rigorous and Relevant Curriculum and Instruction

Raising the Bar

See Chapter 2.

National Commission on the High School Senior Year. *Raising Our Sights: No High School Senior Left Behind*, pp.5,9.

Effective schools have designed 12th grade experiences that endeavor to assure that the final year of high school is replete with the kind of rigor, relevance, and relationships that will give students the necessary skills, knowledge, and confidence for the successful transition to the next stage of life.

The absence of rigor and relevance are two of the features that are most commonly identified as contributing to the blight of the 12th grade experience. As students in their final year begin to feel the expectations to perform diminish, and the sense of purpose fades, the malaise of senioritis sets in. The cost of what many educators refer to as “a lost year” is significant as the appalling figures of failed starts in both college and the workplace reveal.

The report of the National Commission on the High School Senior Year calls for a revamping of the 12th grade to ensure that high school graduates are prepared for the challenges of postsecondary education, the demands of the workplace, and life in the increasingly complex 21st century.

The Commission calls for more (and more rigorous) alternatives to traditional senior years that merely prolong “seat-time” by encouraging the development of capstone projects, the development of meaningful internships, and opportunities to take college-level courses. These efforts will raise educational achievements and aspirations so that all students have access to the rigorous academics currently offered only to the so called “college-bound.”

Beyond the rigor that is explicitly cited and the relevance that is implied in the previous statement, the Commission goes on to say that the “... primary goal of high schools should be graduating students who are ready (and eager) to learn more, capable of thinking critically, and comfortable with the ambiguities of the problem-solving process.”

Effective schools have designed 12th grade experiences that endeavor to assure that the final year of high school is replete with the kind of rigor, relevance, and relationships that will give students the necessary skills, knowledge, and confidence for the successful transition to the next stage of life. A host of approaches and strategies are required to achieve this end.

of being a deficit, the inability of small schools to differentiate students by offering a diverse curriculum seems to be an advantage. It forces small schools to teach a core academic curriculum in heterogeneous classes – and this factor is associated with a higher and more equitable level of achievement among students.’”

Senior Studies

Allen, Dave and Newman, Steve. “Senior Studies Overview, Evanston Township High School”

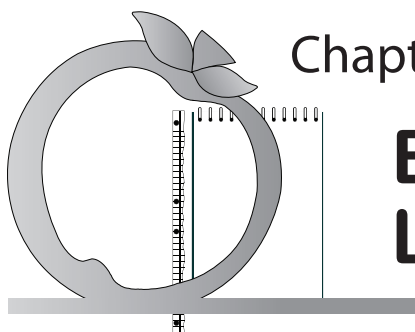
A program that has many of the features of a best practice small learning community for 12th graders is the senior studies program at Evanston Township High School, in Evanston, Ill.

Senior studies is an interdisciplinary team-taught course that incorporates the disciplines of English and history, as well as a community service learning component. Approximately 60 seniors participate in this close-knit community of learners. The program consists of two semester-long, project-based learning experiences. In the first semester, students explore eight core thematic units: orientation, community activism, local history, writing, education, crime and punishment, arts, and race. A brief overview of three of these compelling units follows.

Community activism. Includes the exploration of community problems and issues and the design of a service activism project by a pod of five-six students.

Local history. Involves the investigation of the local community through community asset mapping, neighborhood tours, resident interviews, and an individual home research project by each senior.

Education. Entails research of various school models by a pod of three-four students in order to create a charter school of their own design. Each pod presents a rationale, mission, and curriculum for their school’s educational plan at a charter fair in which Chicago area educators evaluate each pod’s presentation and proposal. The following student handout describes the



Chapter 12

Engagement Through Leadership

Let Seniors Lead

“For seniors the opportunity to exercise leadership is one of the most valuable aspects of the American high school. No matter how small the job, the seniors learn much about themselves and how to play a positive role in their community. For many, the same kind of chance will not come again.”
-Nancy Sizer in *Crossing the Stage: Redesigning Senior Year*

See Chapter 11.

National Association of Secondary School Principals.
Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution

As described in Chapter 3, by virtue of their age, capabilities, and general readiness, 12th graders are the natural leaders of the high school. They have the potential to play significant leadership roles both within the school and their community. Effective schools foster opportunities for seniors to step up and assume a host of leadership roles that go beyond the traditional arenas of clubs, athletics, and student government to include community service, service learning, delivery of the curriculum, and even the very management of the school. Leadership activities such as these have the potential to help 12th graders develop and hone valuable life skills that can empower them in the next stage of their lives. As NASSP’s Breaking Ranks Model affirms:

The high school years provide preparation for the rest of life. Some students who evolve as leaders in high school almost certainly will be leaders in other spheres as adults. But even if they never again take on the responsibility of leadership, those who have the opportunity to lead in high school gain experience that will serve them well.

Providing real leadership opportunities to seniors has the added benefit of engaging them in the “here and now” and creating relevance at a time when they are easily inclined to see little meaning or connection to the high school world. As leaders, however, their connection can be strengthened when they believe they are making a difference to the school or the broader community. As mentioned in Chapter 11, one of the key benefits of service learning projects for seniors is that they provide fertile ground for developing leadership skills, whether they are planning the project, advocating for a cause, or teaching others about the target issue.

The feeling of making a contribution affirms seniors’ emerging adulthood and gives them both pride in what they have accomplished and confidence that they are ready for the greater challenges of the life ahead. Perhaps the

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Link Crew Leader to identify with. Through identification and connection with a Link Crew Leader, the belief is that ultimately freshmen will start to see themselves as leaders on campus, too. This program benefits not only the freshmen, but also the seniors who have the opportunity to gain valuable leadership skills and to assume real and purposeful responsibility that contributes to the school community.

Senior Instructional Leadership Corps

The Senior Instructional Leadership Corps (SILC) has kept many seniors constructively involved in a number of schools that have adapted this powerful program. SILC has yielded a host of unexpected benefits to entire school communities. The program is based on the premise that seniors admirably fulfill leadership roles in athletics, student government, and other co-curricular activities, and therefore it is likely they could assume effective leadership roles in the classroom. SILC offers leadership positions and training to qualified seniors by giving them the opportunity to assist a classroom teacher in a variety of activities associated with classroom instruction.

Seniors in SILC are required to fulfill the following goals and expectations:

- Assist a mentor teacher in his or her classroom two to five times a week in whatever curricular activities the teacher deems appropriate.
- Meet with their mentor teacher once a week outside of class to plan activities.
- Attend monthly seminars with the program coordinators for focused training and discussion of issues germane to their leadership roles.
- Keep a journal of their weekly activities and reflections.
- Write a final self-evaluation at the end of their semester experience.

Dreis, J. and
Rehage, L.
"Recasting the
Senior Year"
www.silcleaders.com



Topics for Professional Development

Rigor

- advanced studies: Advanced Placement (AP) coursework, senior seminars, International Baccalaureate (IB), dual enrollment, middle college programs, etc.
- college readiness, standards-based alignment with higher education
- interdisciplinary courses
- habits of mind/scholarship
- alternative assessment: authentic assessment, portfolios, presentations of learning, peer review, etc.

Relevance

- project-based learning
- service learning
- leadership opportunities and training
- experiential education
- self-directed learning/independent study
- senior projects
- community, business, and parent partnerships
- career exploration
- career academies
- diversity awareness
- personal skill development/life skills

Relationships

- personalization
- advisement programs
- small learning communities

Other

- flexible scheduling
- flexible space

Sample Senior Exit Interview

1. What was the most significant educational aspect of your senior year? Why?
2. If there were one thing you could change about the 12th grade, what would it be?
3. In terms of your growth and development as a learner, which of the last four years was the most challenging?
4. What educational opportunities do you think should be included that were not available in your final year?
5. To what extent do you feel the school prepared you to meet the challenges of life beyond high school?
6. In what subject areas do you feel the best prepared? The least prepared?
7. Is there a teacher or staff member who stands out as having had an especially positive impact on you? (Some schools have found that passing along the responses to the teachers and staff members who were named is often both a poignant and unexpected morale booster, especially at the end of the year when teachers need it most. The effect of this small gesture can be far-reaching, if not downright magical).

Some schools have found that passing along the responses to the teachers and staff members who were named is often both a poignant and unexpected morale booster, especially at the end of the year when teachers need it most. The effect of this small gesture can be far-reaching, if not downright magical.

While the first four questions address some of the crucial issues of the senior year, the last three questions could reference any of the four years of high school. Clearly, depending on the time and resources for interviewing that are available, more or fewer topics might be covered. Although schools might enlist any number of different school personnel from faculty to administrators to support staff to conduct senior exit interviews, a team of administrators who take on this responsibility can add great value because they:

- may offer a degree of anonymity since seniors would be less likely to have had them as teachers
- make a powerful impression on seniors when the leadership of the school shows genuine interest in their views

Regardless of who conducts these exit interviews, it is essential that the purpose of the interviews be clearly explained so that seniors understand that their input is valuable both in helping to make the senior experience

