

EDUCATION

Autonomous teamwork and the Common Core

BY WADE SUTTON  
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*"We live in a world that's increasingly social, interdependent and transparent ... the most innovative among us are breaking away from traditional structures to be more flexible, more collaborative and nurturing."* — John Gerzema, author of The Athena Doctrine at Tedx-Women Talk 2013.

Imagine your child's day at school: In history they read and examine forms of government, the next period he or she plays soccer after reading and discussing an article on the qualities of leadership and teamwork, in environ-

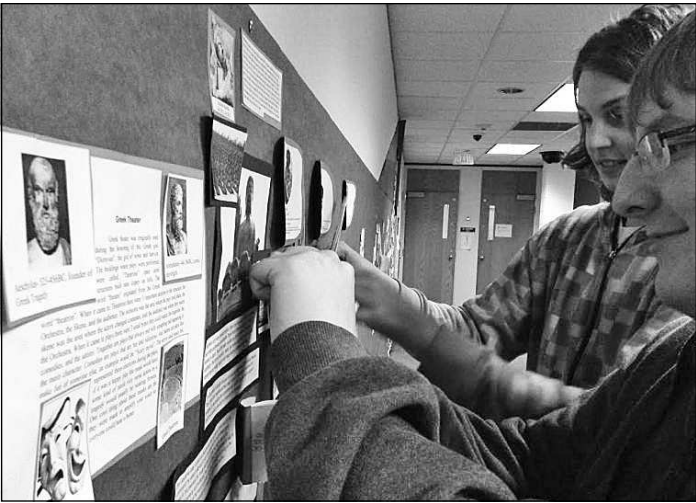
mental science the class examines the needs of a balanced ecosystem and reads an essay on current issues and later continues to build a terrarium in shop. At the same time in English your son or daughter is reading The Lord of the Flies and discussing democracy and fascism. It all fits together and reinforces itself. In this imaginary school, each teacher is autonomous and expert yet nurtures the learning experienced by the students throughout their day. Imagine autonomous teamwork.

Traveling to MSNBC's Teacher Town Hall and Common Core Teaching

Institute in New York last October gave me the opportunity to revise a lot of what I thought I knew about Minnesota's transition to the Common Core literacy standards. I like these standards, however, the basic truth remains that educational improvements (including the Common Core) must come from within a school where staff, students and parents work together. Mutual trust and teamwork is essential.

Of course we at Indus can always improve, and trust is built over time. But autonomous teamwork among teachers is what makes good education become great. In the 21st century, schools must be "flexible" and "collaborative." Good leadership nurtures and encourages this, and, if it is the common practice, your school is serving you. Your son or daughter will benefit. When students, parents, educators, and administration commonly rely on each other's strengths we become the real core of education.

Autonomous collaboration makes education work. Literacy standards begin at home and great student achievement is the result of school staff and parents working together. This has struck me consistently in my conversations with educators whom I respect from across the country working in schools I admire. As an educator at Indus School who values an extended team, I am not alone in feeling the desire for more parental involvement. This is not a criticism; it is a request that parents accept our respect for what they do. Parenting is difficult



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Jordan Riggs and Jonah Fuller at Interdisciplinary Timeline.

and a good school seeks involvement in the learning community. Parents are the foundation for successful literacy. I trust parents more than the Common Core because that trust is key to a successful education.

The Common Core itself will not raise standards of education, but excellent educators, trusted and trained, will. As Amanda Ripley, author of The Smartest Kids in the World: And How They Got That Way, said at MSNBC's Teacher Town Hall last October, "Teachers need training; teachers need respect; teachers need autonomy." As an educator, every day I consider how I am working in unity with my peers. The responsibility that comes with professional trust within a school can drive me toward high standards far more than any directive could.

Over the years I have experienced how a professional team of autonomous educators can leverage basic education and transform it together to meet literacy needs throughout the day. While literacy begins at home, the Common Core at least recognizes that reading is not isolated in English class but is taught "in history/social stud-

ies, science, and technical subjects." A hallmark of a school implementing Common Core literacy well is a team that works together. Classes are not islands and teachers are not overwhelmed with classroom sizes so unmanageable that they are not able to be flexible according to the needs of your son or daughter.

As a parent can we evaluate whether teaching is done as a community? I believe yes. You can judge your child's school by how well they listen to you and by how much time is created for educators to educate themselves, improve and work together.

One of the exemplar educators at the MSNBC Common Core workshop confided in me that her school does not provide time to work together. It is a major failure in her district while at the same time it is necessary to meet the literacy standards. At your next parent/teacher meeting ask your teacher what the atmosphere is like for them: Is there an atmosphere of professional trust? How do they collaborate with other subjects? How is administration nurturing and valuing time to collaborate among professionals? If your child's school

organization provides time for educators to meet, plan and teach together then they are on the right track and ready to work for you, the parent. If it does not, then speak to its leaders to encourage them.

Find out how often teachers meet to match the reading and exploration in their class with another: At Indus we keep learning. Our science teacher and Family and Consumer Sciences teacher collaborate on the topics of food safety and sanitation and scientific principles related to biology and chemistry. Best of all, they work together on the school garden project.

We have created a working timeline in our hallway where students from all grades post responses to informational texts and topics in their classrooms. Our history teacher has recruited me to grade the essays on her world and American history tests according to what students learn in English and I organize my subject matter according to her timeline to streamline the literacy and student learning.

In science students practice similar methods for reading and understanding texts as in other classrooms to meet Common Core literacy standards. Our art teacher critiqued the rough drafts of the world literature projects for visual communication and I use art to teach text interpretation. She is also having the seventh and eighth grade illustrate their own short stories for publication. And the ninth grade class at Indus is mentoring the fifth grade in composition which helps both grades. As a parent I like what I see. As a teacher I have learned that this works and hope to keep improving together.

Because autonomous education within a school should be commonplace.

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February 22<sup>nd</sup> & 26<sup>th</sup>, 2014

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Name: Michael Patnaude

Address: 2956 County Road 2 N, Int'l Falls MN 56649


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SIGNED BY: Michael Patnaude

MAILING ADDRESS: 2956 County Road 2 N Int'l Falls, MN 56649

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