Communicating Innovative Secondary School Practice to College Admission Offices

LESSONS FROM
THE INDEPENDENT CURRICULUM GROUP

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Same old, same old
But what if your school is doing (or wants to do) something new or out-of-the-box??
Messaging 101
Are you really doing it?
Is it real?
Is it true?
Is it you?
Call on your mission, values, and strategic priorities to test and establish authenticity
Does it matter? To whom does it matter, and why?
A relevance test: Will your practice draw positive attention and consideration from people whose attention matters?
Does it set your school or your students apart? How?
Will this mean that your students are bringing something unique or valuable to the table: a skill or a perspective? What will it be?
Here's where you have a story to tell.

Differentiating?

Authentic?

YES!

Relevant?
I don’t get it: “Innovation,” c. 2014
What do these mean:

➢ Design Thinking?
➢ Coding?
➢ Maker Space (or maybe Fab Lab)?
➢ Inquiry learning?
➢ PBL? (And is that “Project-” or “Problem-based”, anyhow?)
➢ STEM (or is it STEAM)?
➢ Authentic assessment?
Your tray of cookies?
Make sure you know and can explain the salient new aspects of your academic program. It’s that simple.
AUTHENTICITY
Make sure you get the full programmatic AND mission rationale for the practice—why this is so right for your school and your students
RELEVANCE

Make sure you know and can explain why your students’ new perspectives or skills should matter to colleges—to the admission office and to the community.
DIFFERENTIATION
Make sure you know and can explain how these new perspectives or skills set your students apart from the crowd
Explaining Innovation 101
Describe it *and* explain it; have the “elevator speech” version clearly in your mind; *avoid jargon*, no matter how cool it sounds at your school!!
Be eager and able to explain *why*, in positive terms: You’re enhancing your program for good reasons, not enfeebling it. Reasons, not excuses.
Be super clear and not afraid to overcommunicate to colleges what your most advanced or “rigorous” courses are and how your new work fits into your overall program.
Remember that a different kind of program differentiates your kids—that’s why your school did this in the first place
It’s in the Profile
The Mod System has been a cornerstone of our academic approach since 1973. Offering an innovative structure for our academic schedule, the Mod System allows for both focus and breadth in a responsive and inclusive curriculum. Here are some important things to know about the Mod System:

• The academic year is divided into seven five-week Modules.

• Each school day consists of three 75 or 90-minute Blocks, for a total of 21 blocks per year for academic and arts courses.

• Most courses are taught in a single block, but a few are taught in double, back-to-back blocks. For each block of instruction, students are awarded 1 credit. Three to four blocks of credit generally equal a full-year course in a traditional semester system.

• Some courses, particularly those in Math and Languages, span consecutive Mods.

• Athletics, service projects, other school activities, and certain Arts courses happen during a fourth block known as D Block. D Block generally runs from 2:45 p.m. – 4:15 p.m., four days per week.

• With roughly 300 courses to choose from, no two student schedules are alike.
St. Mark’s School (MA) Profile

Consistent with the national trend toward more flexible curriculum design and to educational innovation more broadly, St. Mark’s will no longer offer AP courses beginning with the 2014 – 2015 school year. The most advanced work in each academic discipline will continue to be taught at the college level, and, across the full curriculum, students will be exposed to far more interdisciplinary work and the opportunity to develop stronger scientific inquiry, historical research, collaborative problem-solving, critical thinking, and written communication skills. Newly developed courses such as our innovative STEM and Historical Research Fellowships along with Mathematical Research or Advanced Topics classes in Computer Science or Modern Language and Philosophy and Literature form the core of our most rigorous offerings.
Students at Beaver may be enrolled in Honors or Advanced courses in English, Mathematics, History, Science, and Modern Language. Advanced Placement courses were offered to members of the Class of 2007 in the Junior year, in Calculus, Biology, Chemistry, and Physics; those courses will no longer be offered, and Honors Advanced courses in these subject areas (see NEW below) will now offer equivalent (or greater) challenge.

NEW: Beginning in the fall of 2006, Beaver’s Science and Mathematics Departments offer Honors Advanced courses in several disciplines. These courses are intended to be the most academically challenging offerings in these departments, with syllabi and requirements equivalent to college coursework in the subject areas.

NEW: Beginning in the 2006–07 academic year, students may also receive Honors credit for certain courses in the Visual Arts.
09-10: Beaver goes BYO Laptop

standards as it acknowledges and honors the individual’s unique capabilities and experiences. Students experience multiple kinds of assessments, including tests, examinations, and large-scale projects. In 2009–10 Beaver became a 1:1 laptop school after extensive faculty training in Web 2.0-enhanced instruction.

10-11: Option to Attend NuVu term-away program introduced

Beaver offers students in grades 10, 11, and 12 the opportunity to spend a term at NuVu Studio, of which Beaver is a founding affiliate. NuVu was developed by graduates and faculty at M. I. T. and is based on a studio model, with a focus on creative, collaborative, real-world problem-solving and design thinking. A NuVu transcript and Profile will be sent for each participating student. Further information can be found at [www.nuvustudio.org](http://www.nuvustudio.org).
High Tech High (HTH) is not a technology high school. Some HTH students may specialize in computer programming, but all students use technology to engage in a wide range of pursuits: scientific, mathematical, literary, historical, artistic, and aesthetic.

HTH teachers work in teams to integrate the curriculum across subject areas. Students master critical content while pursuing their interests through individual and small-group projects. Frequent exhibitions and “Presentations of Learning” help students develop valuable skills of analysis and communication.

Innovative features include performance-based assessment, daily shared planning time for staff, state-of-the-art technical facilities for project based learning, internships for all students, and close links to the high tech workplace. Fully accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, High Tech High (HTH) graduated its first class in June 2003.

Digital Portfolios

In addition to the measures of achievement required of all California high school students, High Tech High students develop a digital portfolio that provides a comprehensive look at each student’s work and learning. Each digital portfolio includes a personal statement, resume, and work samples. The work samples include information about the students’ learning goals, projects and internships. Students update their digital portfolios each semester, documenting their learning over time.
AP Program
In 2005, the School discontinued its Advanced Placement program. Seeking an improved curriculum that demands more creativity, critical thinking, and independence from our students, we replaced the AP courses with our own advanced-level courses.

The “Most Demanding” courses in our curriculum are designated with an asterisk * on the transcript.
Laurel School (OH) Profile

Honors, AP and KAP* Courses

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<tr>
<th>AP English III: American Literature</th>
<th>Honors Algebra II</th>
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<tr>
<td>KAP English IV</td>
<td>Honors PreCalculus</td>
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<tr>
<td>KAP Theatre</td>
<td>AP Calculus AB</td>
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<td>AP US History</td>
<td>AP Calculus BC</td>
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<tr>
<td>KAP European History</td>
<td>Honors Multivariable Calculus</td>
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<tr>
<td>AP Art History</td>
<td>and Differential Equations</td>
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<tr>
<td>AP Psychology**</td>
<td>Honors Biology</td>
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<tr>
<td>AP Statistics</td>
<td>AP Biology</td>
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<tr>
<td>Honors Geometry</td>
<td>Honors Chemistry</td>
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<tr>
<th>AP Chemistry</th>
<th>AP Environmental Science</th>
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<tr>
<td>AP Computer Science**</td>
<td>AP Physics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Honors Physics</td>
<td>AP Physics C (Mechanics)</td>
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<tr>
<td>AP 2D Design</td>
<td>AP Chinese Language</td>
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<td></td>
<td>and Culture**</td>
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<td>Honors Chinese IV</td>
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<tr>
<th>Honors French III</th>
<th>AP French Language</th>
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<td>AP Honors Latin Literature –</td>
<td>Honors Latin Literature</td>
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<tr>
<td>Advanced Readings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Honors Classical Studies</td>
<td>Honors Spanish III</td>
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<tr>
<td>Honors Spanish I</td>
<td>AP Spanish Language</td>
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<td>AP Spanish Literature</td>
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*Classes with the designation KAP are part of the Kenyon Academic Partnership and students taking them for Kenyon College credit must be admitted into the KAP courses by the College. Kenyon gives credit upon successful completion of the course. The classes are taught by Laurel faculty who are associates of Kenyon College.

**Courses taken through Online School for Girls, a consortium founded in 2009 by Harpeth Hall (TN), Holton-Arms (MD), Westover (CT) and Laurel School. Today, more than 80 schools have joined the consortium. Laurel students may take courses through OSG that are not offered on our campus. Courses receive Laurel credit and grades are included in the cumulative GPA.
Evaluation

PDS uses comprehensive narrative evaluations in place of letter or number grades; students are not ranked. Official transcripts list courses taken and credits received. Evaluations address all aspects of student performance, noting strengths as well as areas requiring greater effort and attention. They are written with the expectation that even the most able and accomplished students can enhance their skills and understanding.

Advanced-Level Courses

PDS offers intensive Advanced Topics (AT) in a number of disciplines. AT courses are highly demanding, open to select, qualified students and taught at a level beyond typical Advanced Placement (AP) curricula; they prepare students for AP tests in literature, calculus and music theory.
Ravenscroft School (NC)
Profile

- International Diploma awarded to students who meet course and cross-cultural expectations
- Exchange program with Spain and China
- Consortium school for summer studies of the arts and humanities in Spoleto, Italy
- Participates in Siempre Verde summer experience in the cloud forest of Ecuador
- One of the original members of the Global Education Benchmark Group
- Frequent selection of students for English-Speaking Union Exchange, North Carolina Governor’s School, and North Carolina’s Summer Ventures for gifted students in science and mathematics
STUDENT WORK IS ASSESSED AT PARKER VIA PORTFOLIOS, using school-wide standards and rubrics. Students advance through the six-year program of studies at the rate appropriate for their individual development, achieving promotion via "Gateway Exhibitions." In Year-End Assessments, teachers evaluate student progress in narrative form. The school's comprehensive summary of these evaluations accompanies the Parker transcript. Parker does not rank its students, nor does the school award letter grades, honors, or prizes.

Understanding ‘The Parker Way’ of Assessments...

The Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School student’s Official Transcript is comprised of Narrative Assessments and a Transcript grid.

- Students are assessed on content and skills using standards drawn from state and national frameworks

  We have rigorous performance standards in:
  
  Reading | Scientific Investigation | Research
  Writing | Mathematical Problem Solving | Oral Presentation
  Listening | Mathematical Communication | Artistic Expression
  Technology | Systems Thinking | Spanish

- We don’t use numbers, rank, or traditional A-F grades

  Look to the Narrative Assessments for the student’s academic evaluations.
Some Profile principles:

➢ Values matter (frame your A - R - D)
➢ NEW stuff and MOST RIGOROUS get priority
➢ If it’s important, give it space
➢ Clarity, clarity, clarity
➢ Justify if you must; or not—just don’t fudge
➢ Design so important things stand out visually
Student power! Talking points, 1st-person narratives: *What has been special about your experience at St. Basalt’s?* (We collaborate! We design! We present! We program! We make!)
Schmooze the reps; if it’s really special, have a handout
And if it’s really, really special, put it on the road with a head or principal
Email early and often
When you can reference exciting, differentiating work in a rec letter, do it (and develop clear and efficient boilerplate language to describe whatever you’re doing)
And a couple of special cases
Changing your “grading” system?
If it looks like an A-B-C or 0–100, it should probably communicate what these systems have meant for years: proficiency, understanding, quality and thoroughness of performance.
If it’s communicating something else altogether (e.g., “process,” effort, learning dispositions) it should look like something else altogether.
Pondering dropping AP-designated courses?
oh nooooo!!
Other schools have done the heavy lifting here already; fear not!

- Fieldston got the college testimonials, in writing, back in 2002; it’s been done
- In a nutshell, once again:
  - Explain *why*, in positive terms
  - Make sure colleges know what your most advanced and challenging courses are
  - A different kind of program differentiates kids
  - Colleges don’t penalize kids for not taking courses your school doesn’t offer
A Resource: The Independent Curriculum Group (non-profit, founded 2008)

The ICG’s Mission:
To support schools and educators in building capacity to create, implement, and promote school-based, mission-informed curriculum and assessment

Find us at www.independentcurriculum.org
ANY QUESTIONS?
Thank you!

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