

The HS2 Story: New School, New Practices

Health and Sciences School (HS2) offers students a unique choice within the Beaverton School District's options schools and programs. With a total enrollment capped at about 750, HS2 has the following distinguishing features:

- It is a combined middle and high school, serving students in grades 6 through 12.
- It is committed to serving diverse, traditionally underserved student populations.
- Its core curriculum incorporates a focus on health and sciences.
- It is part of the Expeditionary Learning/Outward Bound (ELOB) school network that emphasizes rigorous, inquiry-based and often project-based learning.
- It practices proficiency-based assessment and grading.
- It expects all students to graduate ready for postsecondary education.

This document was prepared for HS2 by the Oregon Business Council and Employers for Education Excellence (OBC/E3) to document the context for the Oregon Proficiency Project work during 2009-10.

Startup Planning

The idea for HS2 was born in 2004-05, the product of converging needs in the Beaverton School District. District administrators were concerned about accommodating projected growth in high school enrollment and they had an interest in expanding the district's health and science career offerings to a broader range of students. In the prospect of a new smaller school, district leaders saw an opportunity to absorb additional enrollment while enriching the district's existing lineup of options schools and programs established as alternatives to larger middle schools and high schools.

The district assigned Steve Day, then a middle school science teacher on special assignment, to plan and lead a new high school. At that time, he also had lead responsibility for the district science curriculum, a science fair, and science teacher development. He assembled a small team including science teachers Mark Geren and Maria Carrillo to do the planning. By the spring of 2006, the HS2 group was talking with national representatives of Expeditionary Learning/Outward Bound about making HS2 an ELOB school. Although it considered other national models, the group liked the ELOB commitment to diversity, its rigor, and the fit of expeditionary (hands-on, project-based) learning to a curriculum with a focus on health and science. ELOB, in turn, was interested in HS2 and offered the school staff training and program coaching under a five-year grant.

The design of HS2 took shape over the summer and fall of 2006. The planning group decided to create a relatively small school, grades 6 through 12, focused on health and science, and operating on the ELOB model. It also was the Beaverton district's first school to replace traditional points-based grades and credits with proficiency-based assessment and credit. In opting for ELOB, HS2 committed to a learning program with such features as expeditions (student learning experiences) that cut across subject areas, production and presentation of student work, reading and writing instruction in all subject disciplines, and inquiry-based math, sciences, and social studies. ELOB also embraces a school culture that fosters character, equity, high expectations, a supportive learning environment, a professional community, and engagement of families in the life of the school.

About the same time, HS2 also became a part of the Oregon Small Schools Initiative (OSSI), which operated primarily from 2004 to 2010. Funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Meyer Memorial Trust, OSSI was a network of some 40 Oregon small schools created from scratch or from the conversion of traditional comprehensive high schools into smaller autonomous schools. Joining OSSI brought HS2 additional resources that were used for a teacher planning retreat, extra instructional coaching, equity conferences, and student summer camps and family nights to attract prospective students.

The growth plan for HS2 called for phasing in grade levels. In 2007-08, the school started with one cohort of ninth graders. In 2008-09, it added a sixth grade and another ninth grade cohort while the previous year's ninth graders moved up to tenth grade. In 2009-10, new sixth grade and ninth grade cohorts were added while earlier classes moved on to become seventh, tenth, and eleventh graders. In 2010-11, another cohort of sixth and ninth graders will be added while existing students will move on to fill up the seventh, eighth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades, completing the school's enrollment at roughly 700 to 750.

Getting Ready for the First Year

Work picked up speed from summer 2006 through summer 2007 as HS2 readied to open in the fall of 2007. Chief preoccupations were recruiting students and staff, securing facilities, and orienting staff to the ELOB program.

HS2 developed promotional flyers and a variety of activities to attract prospective students, particularly summer science camps, family nights with parents, and presentations at nearby middle schools during 2006-07. Positioning HS2 as a small, family-oriented school turned out to be an effective strategy with Latino parents.

HS2 recruited teachers between winter and summer of 2007, looking for those with an interest in an options school with a health and science focus, an ELOB format, and a proficiency-based assessment and grading system. Eleven teachers signed on.

By May 2007, HS2 had its eye on the Capital Center as a prospective site. Located at the intersection of SW 185th and Walker Road, this cluster of single-story buildings has served a variety of collaborations over the years between local high technology industries and school districts, community colleges, and the Oregon University System. In July HS2 secured a lease for 20,000 square feet of space. Less than a year later the school district, on behalf of HS2, purchased and remodeled 190,000 square feet of Capital Center space, enough to eventually accommodate 31 classrooms and related facilities.

The summer of 2007 was dominated by staff training and preparation. New faculty members attended ELOB program training in Oakland, California, then trainings in Kansas City, Missouri in reading and Portland, Oregon in writing. All hands attended a planning retreat at Menucha in the Columbia River Gorge in July and were paid for an extra week in August to prepare for school opening. HS2 also held a summer camp in August to orient incoming students.

First Year and Subsequent Growth

HS2 opened in the fall of 2007 with 115 ninth graders. This group more than met the diversity objective of the school's recruiting strategy, including 38 percent Latino representation (compared to a district average of 18 percent) and 42 percent of students from low-income families (compared to a district average of roughly 35 percent). Just over half of HS2 students now are low income.

In 2008-09, HS2 grew to 285 students and 18 teachers; in 2009-10, 490 students and 28 teachers. Since its second year it has admitted returning students and their siblings but used a lottery system for new applicants. Based on the HS2 experience, the district adopted the lottery system for admissions at its other options schools.

The Impact of Growth

HS2 has had some growing pains. In 2008-09, its second year, it planned to add staff. Because high school enrollment in the district declined, contrary to earlier projections, some of the new teachers were transfers from nearby comprehensive high schools. Some of the incoming teachers have faced challenges of getting up to speed on ELOB instruction and proficiency-based assessment. Day and the founding teachers have therefore had the additional task of keeping the original school vision and helping new teachers adopt it as well.

With recent growth, less than half of HS2's current staff has had training at the ELOB High School Institute. The founding group of teachers are somewhat concerned that the school is using fewer cross-disciplinary ELOB expeditions at the high school level, although it is using more in its middle school grades.

Communication with families has also become more challenging. With the original class of ninth graders, HS2 had the luxury of reporting at length – up to seven pages of narrative – on the progress of each student per trimester. With student growth, the school has reduced that to two or three pages per student, which still exceeds the district's typical one-page report. In 2009-10 HS2 added a monthly newsletter to complement its communication with families and the community.

HS2 and Proficiency-Based Education

HS2 has had a role in proficiency-based education in two ways. As noted earlier, it was the first school in the Beaverton district to supplant points-based grading with proficiency-based assessment and grading. From July 2009 through June 2010 it was also one of two school sites receiving supplemental support from the Oregon Proficiency Project for work in proficiency-based education. With grant support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Proficiency Project, managed by the Oregon Business Council and Employers for Education Excellence, provided instructional leadership coaching for the principal at HS2. HS2 and Beaverton district personnel also participated in the deliberations of the Proficiency Project's policy advisory group.

Proficiency-based assessment. HS2 came to proficiency-based education through its assessment system. This, in turn, was the outgrowth of a larger interest by the Beaverton district in more objective assessment tied to learning objectives. Day and many other administrators and teachers in Beaverton benefitted in recent years from participation in proficiency-based assessment workshops run by Rick Stiggins, founder of the Assessment Training Institute, which provides training in classroom assessment nation wide. HS2 planners felt this assessment and grading system, because it is objective and fair, would complement their equity aspirations for students. "It was about equity in grading and reporting," Day recalls.

The proficiency-based assessment system, as its name implies, measures and grades demonstrated student proficiency relative to well established, clear learning targets. Proficiency-based assessment relies on formative assessment to measure student progress toward objectives and uses summative assessment as a measure of students' demonstration of proficiency. At HS2 students have multiple opportunities to demonstrate proficiency in their learning targets. There are no letter grades but three numbered levels of proficiency: 1, not yet proficient; 2, acquiring proficiency; and 3, proficient. Students at levels 1 and 2 are accorded additional time and opportunities to acquire and demonstrate skills and knowledge at level 3.

HS2 did not institute proficiency-based assessment with the intent that it evolve into proficiency-based instruction as well, but it has done so in various degrees with a number of the school's teachers. Since the fall of 2007, when the school opened, Day has urged teachers not only to write clear learning targets for all subjects, but also to post them conspicuously in every classroom so students know exactly what they need to learn and how to demonstrate that learning. "That's when the 'ah-has' started coming from the teachers," said Day.

Teachers found that writing learning targets and rubrics to measure student proficiency has given them greater clarity about what they are teaching and how to help students achieve. "I have such a clear understanding of what I'm teaching and where I want students to get," said one of the founding teachers. "I didn't have that in my prior 12 years before coming here. I had days in my previous school where I wondered where I go next."

Students who have praised the proficiency-based approach say they appreciate knowing exactly what they are expected to learn and must demonstrate as evidence of that learning through posted learning targets. A number of HS2 teachers have embraced other aspects of proficiency-based education, such as robust student discourse in classes, collaboration with other teachers on lesson planning and instructional improvement, and classrooms open to observation. These practices have been encouraged but are largely discretionary, depending on the interest of individual teachers and the time available to them. Proficiency-based education is compatible with ELOB principles and practices.

Oregon Proficiency Project support. During the 2009-10 school year the Oregon Proficiency Project provided instructional leadership coaching to Steve Day at HS2, primarily to take advantage of HS2's early start in proficiency-based education. Max Silverman, from the University of Washington's Center for Educational Leadership, worked with Day to identify and act on opportunities to expand proficiency-based instruction. They focused on such matters as greater student discourse and engagement, teacher collaboration, and distribution of decision making.

Work Going Forward

With grades 8 through 12 fully phased in, HS2 will be at planned capacity in 2010-11. This final phase of growth itself will be challenging as class loads increase and as additional teachers familiarize themselves with the philosophy and practices of the school. The school will want to retain as many founding personnel as possible for program continuity while it strives to keep the original HS2 vision on track. It also has work ahead on a number of technical issues, such as making time and scheduling flexibility available to teachers for the extra work involved in collaboration and attentive formative assessment, spreading literacy instruction over more subject disciplines, and helping some graduating seniors make up credit deficiencies, and designing earlier solutions to this issue.