



Parents

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Lillian: Every time I do an interview the headline is going to be “Students Forced to Choose a Major.” They’re missing the whole point of the exploratory aspect of the Major Areas of Interest. A child can change their mind. We want them to experiment. That’s why we have this whole program mandated in our school systems to allow a child to experiment. That’s how they stay in school. We want them to try out as many things as possible so that they can – they can find their dream. And they can find their passion. That’s what this is all about. And that’s what we want.

We have to look at high school differently in Florida. We have to be better prepared to meet students’ needs.

Ed: For too many young people high school can seem like a chore, at best. That’s why the Florida legislature and progressive educators have begun to rethink the nature of high school in our state. Why they have begun to strengthen its value by strengthening the core

academic courses that are critical to our young people's ability to compete with children around the world. And why they have come to conclusion that school need not be – indeed must not be – a place where our children are told that they must abandon all hope of enjoyment, meaning and control over their lives. Florida high schools now require that children be given the opportunity to develop their own passions and the skills *they* most enjoy, along with the skills and knowledge adults have determined they will need.

Starting this year, the right to develop one's own area of interest, the right to pursue it enthusiastically, and the right to germinate new areas of interest, is recognized as fundamental to making high school a place where the great variety of our children's talents and their wonderful hidden competencies can flourish. By helping these talents flourish in our young people, the state hopes Florida itself will flourish.

Lillian Finn, the director of the state's high school reform initiatives, leads the campaign to leverage our young people's genuine enthusiasms and hidden talents into meaningful high school diplomas.

Lillian: The state recognized that we had a big problem. Students were leaving in droves and we were losing them in the transition between 8th to 9th grade. And something was happening. So we asked the kids.

Ed: Like Katie, a 9th grader in Tallahassee.

Katie: I would say that it's really an important thing to make kids really want to enjoy school and come to school everyday as opposed to being, "Oh it's a Monday, the weekend's over." "Yea, it's Monday I get to go to drama, my favorite class."

Lillian: We all know, and it's true in everyday life, if we can look forward to just one thing in the course of our day, we'll put up with everything else. And if a child has one class or one teacher that they're really engaged with – it's 7th period, they'll stick out the first 6 periods just so they can attend that class on the 7th period. Maybe if we actually gave kids a choice in what they can take, what their focus is, what their interests are, maybe they'll stay in school.

We said, "Let the child choose what they want to do."

Katie: I'm taking Drama I this whole year actually. It's definitely one of my top classes. I'm more excited to go to that class. I don't worry so

much about “Did I do my homework the night before? Did I get everything right on this?”

Lillian: And so this is why it’s called a Major Area of Interest. What is the child interested in taking? So it’s a grouping of four electives into a field of study that the child has chosen. It’s been amazing; kids have embraced this so deeply.

Katie: When I’m doing drama I get more confident and you feel like you’re doing something really well and you know people are enjoying that. As opposed to math, when you’re not sure that you’re doing it right. It’s not “you did this wrong.” It’s “I think you could do this better.” It does make me more confident to go in there and I at least know I have something that I’m really good at.

Ed: We all, I think, want to be able to pursue something we’re really good at. Being good at something, after all, gives us the confidence to work at the things we’re not so good at. Like math or science or writing. Things we need to learn but are difficult for us.

So letting students choose for themselves a personal field of study to pursue as a *part* of the overall program of core studies required of them makes sense. Unfortunately, when at beginning of this year,

the state mandated that each 9th grader choose a major area of interest, it was seen by many, including parents like Katie's mother, as something that would limit children's horizons. Not something that would expand them.

Madelyn: I have to be honest and say when I first heard about it, I was not overly enthusiastic because I felt that children beginning high school are too young to make a kind of life-education decision. But then I came to see the program more as a way to get them more enthusiastic about going to school. Particularly as I learned that they would not be locked into any choices. And I also saw the program as a way to get kids excited about school who might not otherwise be excited. I got more supportive of the program when I learned more about it.

Lillian: When I talk to parents I say to them right away, "What did you want to be when you grew up? And were you able to be that?" I can almost see it on their faces how many did not get that chance.

And then I talk about the fact that now their child is given a choice, this can focus a child's education or academic success towards a certain goal. Anything that keeps their son or daughter on track and interested in school they are thrilled about.

One of the biggest things is to open up that master schedule and give students an opportunity to experiment. Try on different hats and figure out what they want to do with their lives through the four elective credits. We have now over 400 Major Areas of Interest for students and schools to choose from. It's extremely flexible.

We want them to try it. If they don't like it, then they can change into something else. Until they get that experience or live life through that course for a semester or for a year, they really have no idea what it's about. So we want them to test drive that. If they don't like it, they can move off into something else.

Madelyn: It's a great opportunity to have your kids explore different areas other than the main academics and find something they might become passionate about. If they become passionate about something, that would make them more eager to go to school. And they get more involved in the school environment. And connect more to the school community. And I just think they become a better student and enjoy school more.

With all this emphasis on the FCAT I just think it's real important to look beyond that and look at the whole experience. Give kids something to look forward to in school.

Lillian: What's neat about the Major Areas of Interest is that for many, many kids who want to go straight into the work force, the majors provide them a four-year head start in job skills that could lead them to entering the work force at a higher level. There are many job-related courses in the majors.

Ed: It is so important to our state's future that we help many of the young people who will soon be our colleagues in the workforce, to find that exceptional skill that will allow them to enter the trades upon which so much of our growth depends. And to give them the training to achieve those skills.

For those students for whom college holds little interest — for students who would rather build, or wire, or draw blueprints the new re-emphasis on *their* “interests” will be a godsend. Indeed, their major areas of interest can be transformed into a certificate of technical accomplishment. And, it will be recorded on their high school diplomas, once again elevating the crafts to the status they deserve. This is a good thing for so many of our young people.

Lillian: The Major Areas of Interest is just a piece of the entire reform approach to what can we do better in the state of Florida to make sure

our children graduate with a high school diploma. Whatever it takes we're going to look at it and put it in the secondary reform initiative.

Ed: High school reform in Florida is based on what I think is a rather simple, but perhaps radical idea: That young people have minds of their own – er, let me say, “minds” plural, of their own. They have many interests, some they don’t even know about yet. High school reform recognizes the awful waste it is to make our children leave these minds at home when they come to school. Their interests have now become important.

Katie: I would say that it’s really an important thing to make kids really want to enjoy school and come to school every day as opposed to being, “Oh, it’s a Monday, the weekend’s over.” “Yea, it’s Monday, I get to go to drama, my favorite class.”

Lillian: That’s what this is all about. That’s what we want.

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