



Admin-Podcast-1

Merry: Folks we need to rethink this, it is not what do we want to offer, but what do the kids want to take.

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 my favorite class."

Lillian: That's how they stay in school. That's what this is all about. We want them to find their dream. And they can find their passion. And that's what we want.

Merry: We want to go back to making schools relevant for kids. We want them to buy into their future. And let them see what they are doing in their classrooms today ties into that future that they are looking at down the road.

Lillian: We said, “Let the child choose what they want to do.”

Ed: The Major Areas of Interest initiative has been for many of you, I fear, something of a major area of aggravation. From news reports of how children will be condemned to inappropriate life-paths by bad adolescent choices; to parents agitated by the fear that we’re shunting their children away from college; to administrators tearing out their hair as they tear up their master schedules, too little has been said about the Major Areas of Interest as an important first step in our effort to make school more worth coming to for all our children.

At heart, this initiative sets out to create high schools that are positioned to leverage the incredible power of young people to be interested in what interests them into an education that will prepare them to lead interesting – and productive – lives. Underlying this initiative is the notion that successful learning is driven mostly by an inner passion rather than an outer compulsion. This initiative recognizes that our schools can truly succeed only if each individual, flesh and blood student is the starting point from which an education is built.

Merry: I keep trying to tell people this is very simple. What we never did from a school point of view, is we never created opportunities for kids to make sure that we give them what they want.

Ed: Merry Ortega is the associate superintendent for high schools in Leon County and an exponent of a more student-centric education.

Merry: We got the English and the Math and the Science and we said okay, now you have a blank on your schedule third period and fifth period, this is what we got, choose from one of these; oh you can't have that one because it is already full. We aren't going to open another section because you can't have that. We didn't go out to the kids and say what do you want? We said you choose among what we are offering to you.

And now we have to really focus on what that child's major area of interest is and it should be given equal opportunity with those required courses to be scheduled so the student can get what he wants in that major area of interest. I believe there is going to be more pressure on our schools to meet the kids' interest, as opposed to making them fit into what we want to teach.

Ed: Lillian Finn is the state department's director of high school reform initiatives. Ms. Finn understands very clearly what's in this for our students, our state and for us educators.

Lillian: 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. 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.

Merry: Look at your discipline data. Because I don't think you are going to have as much discipline problems if the kids are in the classes they want to take, as opposed to the classes you stuck them into. Let's look at your attendance rates, kids don't come to school if they find it boring and not relevant. And I think we will find that if the kids are happy in school, the parents are happy with the school.

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. That's what this is all about. That's what we want.

Merry: I believe that we do a really great job of preparing kids to go to college. Unfortunately, we teach 100% of the kids to go to college and the reality is that only 40% go. There is a huge population that we have not paid enough attention to.

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, there are many job-related courses in the majors.

Ed: The state is, as are you, very concerned with making school much more interesting and relevant to the majority of our students who are not academically driven – students who are driven more to do than to listen. These are, of course, our students least likely to pay attention in the core courses; students most likely to disappear between 9th and 11th grade.

When the legislature took the initiative to assert students' interests and their right to the education they wanted, they had these too-often neglected students in mind.

Since the Major Areas of Interest initiative is only an opening salvo in the effort to make high school worth attending for all of our children, progressive educators like Merry Ortega and her superintendent recognize that simply giving students' interests a firmer hold in the schedule will not, in itself, transform high school into a place worth coming to. What really interests kids must be meaningfully connected to what we know they must learn; there should be no gap between knowing and doing.

Merry: We can create these MAIs, but it isn't going to be 100% successful until those core academic subjects roll into playing a very important part. If you are working on reading skills and the students are in an auto mechanics program, are you teaching them to read the technical books and the technical things that they have to read?

And do the elective teachers even know the English teachers and the math teachers, because we usually build our buildings so we have an English wing and a math wing and a science wing and a social studies wing. And the technology and vocational programs are out back next to the gym.

I really think the whole MAI thing hit too quickly without everybody understanding and being on the same page and I think we are now much, much further along.

Ed: Transforming high school into a place where young people's genuine interests and the very legitimate interests of adults are balanced will not be easy. If it were easy it would already have been done. The legislature took the initiative by asking us to begin this work by giving greater value to our students' desires to control their own futures – and their own learning. It hasn't been, nor will it, be easy. It will be, however, very much worth the effort.

Merry: I think we need to continue to make these initiatives happen without overreacting. And I think we are seeing things change and we are only halfway down this path.

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

Katie: Yea, it's Monday. I get to go to my favorite class.

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