

*The Curriculum and Culture of Tahoma Senior High School:  
An Intern's Observations*

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(Informed by professional responsibilities and policies (a collegial and professional school setting), to include issues related to abuse including identification, impact, responsibilities, and prevention methods.)

This piece reflects my proficiency in understanding the need to be evaluative of student achievement in order to improve instruction. Respect will improve the culture of a school and make it a more enjoyable environment, but both the teachers and the students will need to contribute to improving respect. This piece also reflects my understanding of the responsibilities and policies regarding abuse.

“We’re all Tahomaies in da Bear Den!” reads the several foot-long poster in the student commons at Tahoma Senior High School (Tahoma). The high school, serving students in Maple Valley and the surrounding communities, has over 1,600 students in grades 10-12 and is 87.8% White (Office of Superintendent, 2009). Tahoma is a school that is intentional about student success and creating a community that cares.

*Student achievement to improve instruction*

Tahoma’s students and teachers work hard for the students to achieve. This happens in the regular level classrooms just as much as in the Advanced Placement and other college-level classes. Dave Peters is one of the American Studies (junior-level history) teachers; he also teaches leadership class, is the activities director, facilitates the Link Crew and Interact clubs, and helps plan and organize the annual Leadership Retreat. At a classroom level, Mr. Peters works to increase student achievement by assessing every assignment. “How the class does as a whole does on a project and individual students do” is assessed on each assignment, “to consider if learning styles need to be readdressed or if the entire project needs to be revised as a whole” (D. Peters, personal communication, May 18, 2010). While Mr. Peters works hard to make his lessons, he is not afraid to change them or discard them if they are not helping the students achieve the learning goals. Many teachers rely on tests to assess student learning; Mr. Peters has a different approach for assessment. “I don’t give that many tests, but just about every assignment is assessed in some way. They direct the future direction” (D. Peters, personal communication, May 18, 2010). Mr. Peters is not the only one at Tahoma who alters instruction based on academic achievement. For example, the school uses a block scheduling, which alternates periods one through three on Blue days and periods four through six on Gold days. This allows teachers to have the students for a longer amount of time in each period. Science classes especially benefit from this because the students can complete labs that they may not have otherwise had an opportunity to try due to time restrictions. In addition, several years ago the school created an integrated curriculum

combining history, English, and science into one course that lasted for an entire Blue day or an entire Gold day. This program has been so successful that the school created more opportunities like this with a larger variety of content areas. One of these additions was Outdoor Academy, which combines outdoor recreation, AP environmental science, and English. The Outdoor Academy teachers work to combine the three courses so the students have consistency across the curriculum. Programs like Outdoor Academy were created because students were succeeding in the original Integrated.

Standardized testing is one way to measure student achievement. The scores for students at Tahoma on the Washington Assessment for Student Learning (WASL) demonstrate that teachers change their instruction. Over 90% of sophomores met the standards in both reading and writing (Office of Superintendent, 2009). Scores were lower for math and science, with both having over 55% meet the state's standards (Office of Superintendent, 2009). The sophomore class in 2008-2009, the last class to take the WASL at Tahoma, had lower scores in all four content areas than either of two sophomore classes before it. While this does not speak highly of that year's sophomores, this does attest to the willingness of teachers to change their methods of teaching; sometimes the scores do not change the way the teachers had hoped they would. However, in trying new things, sometimes things get worse before they get better. Dave Peters (personal communication, May 18, 2010) believes that Tahoma is not afraid to try new things and make changes; he explains that "our school is always on the cutting edge of working to improve, regardless of the political arena." Even though standardized tests are changing, Tahoma will continue to work to help students learn.

There are a few minor things that Mr. Peters does to aid in student learning as well. He has found that it is beneficial for the physical layout of the room to "change periodically for various units" (D. Peters, personal communication, May 18, 2010). He prefers "tables rather than desks for group arrangements, clusters for groups, and hearing room mode for senate debates, etc." (D. Peters, personal communication, May 18, 2010). The students' attention is gained and they are drawn in to the learning

by a simple rearrangement of tables; this is a simple task that Mr. Peters can do in order for the students to be more engaged. Homework is another way that Mr. Peters has revised his teaching strategies for the betterment of students with different learning levels. He explains how he will “use homework to level out the time it takes to do an assignment. I provide enough time in class for higher learning levels to complete [an assignment] in class and the lower level people can finish it as homework” (D. Peters, personal communication, May 18, 2010). Mr. Peters believes that all of his students can succeed and that it is his job to help make that a possibility. He knows that his excitement about his content matter increases the students’ interest levels but that they do better when the teacher “loves kids just as much as their subject matter” (D. Peters, personal communication, May 18, 2010).

The teachers at Tahoma all teach with the school’s Outcomes and Indicators in mind. One of the outcomes they seek to create in students is called *complex thinkers* (Tahoma School District, 2008). Part of being a complex thinker includes being a problem solver, taking risks, being analytical, and also being metacognitive (Tahoma School District, 2008). For the school and the teachers to expect students to practice these traits without using them as well will not help student achievement; Tahoma teachers model the same qualities they want their students to adopt.

#### *The culture of Tahoma*

The culture at Tahoma Senior High School is unlike that found in many high schools across the United States. Tahoma is not very diverse ethnically or by socioeconomic status; however, the small diversities that there are do not prevent an authentic community from being created. Mr. Peters (personal communication, May 18, 2010) considers the school “one of mutual respect between teachers and students, where people tend to work together. We have a tradition of respect, but we don’t take it for granted. We work on it every year.” This desire for an authentic community of respectfulness became such a large desire in the school that the 2009-2010 school year was driven by the theme of “One School.” This movement sought to unite faculty, staff, and students together, with everyone

respecting everyone, regardless of age, rank, or involvement in the school. Terry Duty, Tahoma's principal, explains in a video how surveys were taken of students that showed that "students didn't seem to respect each other and they also didn't seem to respect their teachers. And they didn't think teachers respected them" (McCaslin, Anderson, Johnson, & Acker, 2010). The school experienced a disconnection between the environment it intended to have between students and staff and what students actually believed was happening. The *One School* motto was emphasized all year long to reestablish that unity between all groups.

The success of teachers is not only measured by their work in the classroom with the students, but also by the way they work together as a team. Formerly, without holding a staff-wide meeting, department chairs were the only representation of the teachers when it came to budgets, decision-making, and other important content. This system is traditional but it was leaving many teachers dissatisfied. The staff of Tahoma remodeled the system so that instead of only having department chairs in a meeting together, there are now the department chairs and a representative from each group of teachers with the same planning periods. Every couple of weeks during a planning period, the teachers sharing this planning period come together to discuss anything relevant to the school, from budgets, to schedules, to sports send-offs for playoffs, to the current happenings in the different departments or grade levels. This system is similar to a student council at the teacher level, the planning period representative relays information back and forth and the department chairs do the same. This allows for better communication and better community amongst the teachers, who were not content before.

Regardless of the location, demographics, or staff of a school, one issue that all teachers must be prepared to handle is that of abuse. Teachers at Tahoma are all trained and prepared in a way that is different from the teachers at the elementary level in the district because teachers only see their students two or three times each week instead of every day. Mr. Peters (personal communication, May 18, 2010) describes how "the trouble is that the signs we are looking for can mean a lot of different

things. That is why our basic step when we have signs that are ambiguous or may be nothing is to get the counseling department involved.” School counselors are trained at a deeper level in order to detect abuse. Counselors are only contacted if the signs are not at the level of mandatory reporting. Once mandatory reporting is involved, the Tahoma School Board procedures book states that “staff or the principal shall immediately contact the nearest office of the Child Protective Services...Such contact must be made within forty-eight (48) hours. Staff shall also advise the principal” (“Child abuse,” 2008). The policy describes events and situations that might raise concerns of abuse that make it mandatory to report, but Mr. Peters looks for other indicators, those are what he reports to the counselor. His intentions behind this are that “if we wait until [a student’s] teacher sees something that rises to the level of mandatory reporting, it is often later in the process than we would like” (personal communication, May 18, 2010). One example of something Mr. Peters might look for in his high school students “is when kids don’t seem to want to go home—always hanging around school after hours when not actually in an activity” (personal communication, May 18, 2010). Lingering is not something that must be reported to CPS, but Mr. Peters takes a proactive approach for the best interest of his students and might mention a lingering student’s name to the counseling department. Mr. Peters cares about the best interest of his students and wants to make sure that they get the attention they may need sooner rather than later.

### *Conclusion*

Respect. Care. Community. Learning. These words describe the culture of Tahoma Senior High School because every person at the school works hard to make it that way. Students are successful, with only a 2.6% dropout rate, most students complete their high school careers (Office of Superintendent, 2009). In addition to successful students, this hard work makes Tahoma a place where teachers and students want to be at. When both groups of people want to be at school, learning is possible and enjoyable along the way. As a result, *Newsweek* (America’s Best, 2010) has ranked Tahoma in the top six

percent of America's public high schools, an honorable position for a school that works hard for its accomplishments.

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