



*Personalizing*  
the **HIGH SCHOOL**  
**EXPERIENCE**  
for Each Student

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# *Personalizing* the High School Experience for Each Student

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# 1

## A FAILURE TO ADAPT

### THEY'RE NOT STUPID

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“I’m not stupid!”

That comment represents one of the most heart wrenching and memorable conversations of my life.

It’s a quote from my son Erick. Erick was adopted, along with his half brother, Mauricio, from Guatemala when he was 8 years old. The boys’ arrival expanded the number of children in our family to six. While two of our other children were also adopted, the addition of Mauricio and Erick exposed the woefully inadequate education experience that immigrant students are subjected to in this country.

When Mauricio, then 12, enrolled in the 5th grade English as a second language (ESL) program and Erick enrolled in the 1st grade ESL program, we became aware of an equity gap that was systemic and abusive. We had been assured that the ESL program was academically rigorous and appropriately personalized for the students, who represented nearly a dozen different cultures and languages.

To our dismay, we discovered the contrary to be true. The program was neither personalized nor rigorous. In our first visit to the school, we discovered that Erick was in a classroom in the basement that had been the locker room when I had attended junior high in the same building. More appalling was Mauricio’s room, which had been the lumber storage closet for the woodshop when the building was a junior high. The textbooks on display were decades old and had covers and pages missing.

My wife, Pat, and I became very concerned, so I went to the school to observe their classes the next day. Mauricio was in a class with 18 other 4th, 5th, and 6th graders crammed into the former storage closet. They had a dedicated teacher struggling to educate this group of students who were from Europe, Asia, Latin America, and Africa, and who spoke Portuguese, Polish, Russian, Italian, Korean, and Spanish. Erick's class had a little more space but more students—about 30 in the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grades. At the end of the school day, I had a long conversation with both of those teachers, who were struggling to educate their students in all the core subjects with little support from the building or district administration.

After this discovery, I went through the local channels to address the inequities that I saw. I met with the building principal, who felt that his hands were tied by the district. So, I met with the superintendent, who subsequently asked the district director of special populations to conduct a study of the situation. The study was immediately carried out, and the conclusions were bizarre, to say the least. The report concluded that each of the two classrooms required the addition of two paraprofessionals—one who could speak Portuguese and one who could speak Spanish—so that instruction could be personalized. Because the classroom conditions were so crowded, however, the report concluded that adding the paraprofessionals would increase the noise level in such a confined space, and therefore the final recommendation was to do nothing!

Now incensed, I approached the local school board. Remember, this was my town, and I knew each of the board members personally. They listened politely and refused to change anything to improve the conditions for these students. So, I then filed class action discrimination appeals to both the state and federal offices for civil rights. Miraculous things happened when the district office learned that it was being investigated by the U.S. Department of Education. Books arrived. The paraprofessionals were hired. A new director of special populations, who was committed to doing things differently, was also hired.

The program was changed so that Erick was able to improve his learning and gradually achieve to the point that when he was leaving 6th grade, he was considered a pretty good student. In fact, at the school's graduation banquet for the 6th grade students and their parents, the

principal chose to read Erick's essay, "Coming to America." Many parents had tears in their eyes. We were understandably proud of Erick and thought that good things lay ahead for him in his education. Unfortunately, that night turned out to be the high point of Erick's public school education.

We were then—and still are—firm believers in public education. My father, myself, my four siblings, and our five other children had all graduated from the local public high school, and we were certain that Erick would as well. In addition, I was employed at the Rhode Island Department of Education and worked part-time in our town as the boys' high school soccer coach.

Despite our constant advocacy and cajoling, Erick started on a downward spiral when he entered junior high. Things got really bad when he became a high school freshman. He started to run from the school at every opportunity. He was a great athlete, but the carrot of athletic eligibility didn't sufficiently entice him to engage in learning. We were involved in countless school meetings with Erick and his teachers and administrators. At one of those meetings, I tired of the accusation that we weren't doing everything possible to get him to attend school. I declared: "We are doing everything possible to get Erick to come to school. The one thing we can't do is get him to like it here. But *you* could do that if you tried!" Although making that statement helped me feel good, it didn't do anything to help Erick's situation. These events are so strongly etched in my memory that I still cringe when I hear educators blame parents for students' lack of engagement.

Erick didn't earn very many credits in his first year in high school. As a result, he had to repeat the 9th grade. During this repeat year, I encouraged Erick to look into applying to some private schools that might better address his personality. He refused. So, we had another tough year, and once again he didn't earn enough credits to become a sophomore.

During his third year as a freshman, Erick asked me if he could look into private schools. Needless to say, we were ecstatic for Erick—but certainly disappointed that our community was incapable of providing him with an adequate education. After doing some research, Erick chose Saint Andrews, a small private school in Barrington, Rhode Island, that

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**FIGURE 2.4**  
**Student Assessment of Advisors**

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Dear Advisee,

Please take the time to thoughtfully complete this Advisor Assessment. We take your opinions very seriously, and as we discuss our professional practice, these assessments will play a significant role. Please note: This is not about whether you like or dislike your advisor. It is about the quality of facilitation you are experiencing. Please take this seriously. Answer the questions carefully and honestly.

Directions: Please assess your advisor's work in each category below. Please explain your assessment in the space provided.

Advisor's name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

For each question, choose the answer that best characterizes your advisor's work in the area. Choose one of these answers: JB (Just Beginning), A(Approaching), M(Meeting), or E(Exceeding).

- Knowledge of advisory purpose: Is your advisor clear about the purposes of advisory? Does he/she seek to help the group meet these purposes?

JB                      A                      M                      E  
Please explain:

- Advising style: Does your advisor use a variety of methods to facilitate the advisory group? Does his/her style motivate and engage advisees?

JB                      A                      M                      E  
Please explain:

- Ability to organize advisory content: Do you like the activities you do in advisory? Do you learn from them? Do you see their connection to the advisory purposes?

JB                      A                      M                      E  
Please explain:

- Classroom management skills: Does your advisor maintain an appropriate advisory environment? Does he/she help the advisory resolve conflict and stay on task?

JB                      A                      M                      E  
Please explain:

- Relationships with advisees: Does your advisor listen to students? Does he/she treat advisees with care, compassion, and respect? Does he/she try to understand advisees?

JB            A                    M                    E  
Please explain:

- Serve as your advocate: Does your advisor serve as your advocate? Does he/she help you resolve difficult situations, access various resources, and refer you to others when appropriate?

JB            A                    M                    E  
Please explain:

- Academic advising: Does your advisor help you through the PLP process? Does he/she monitor your progress in academic classes and toward your PLP goals? Does he/she create opportunities for reflection and celebration?

JB            A                    M                    E  
Please explain:

- Individual meetings: Does your advisor meet with you individually during the year to maintain communication and to address academic and social concerns as needed?

JB            A                    M                    E  
Please explain:

- Connection to home: Does your advisor have contact with your home? Does he/she help to answer questions, explain decisions, and celebrate your successes with your parent/guardian?

JB            A                    M                    E  
Please explain:

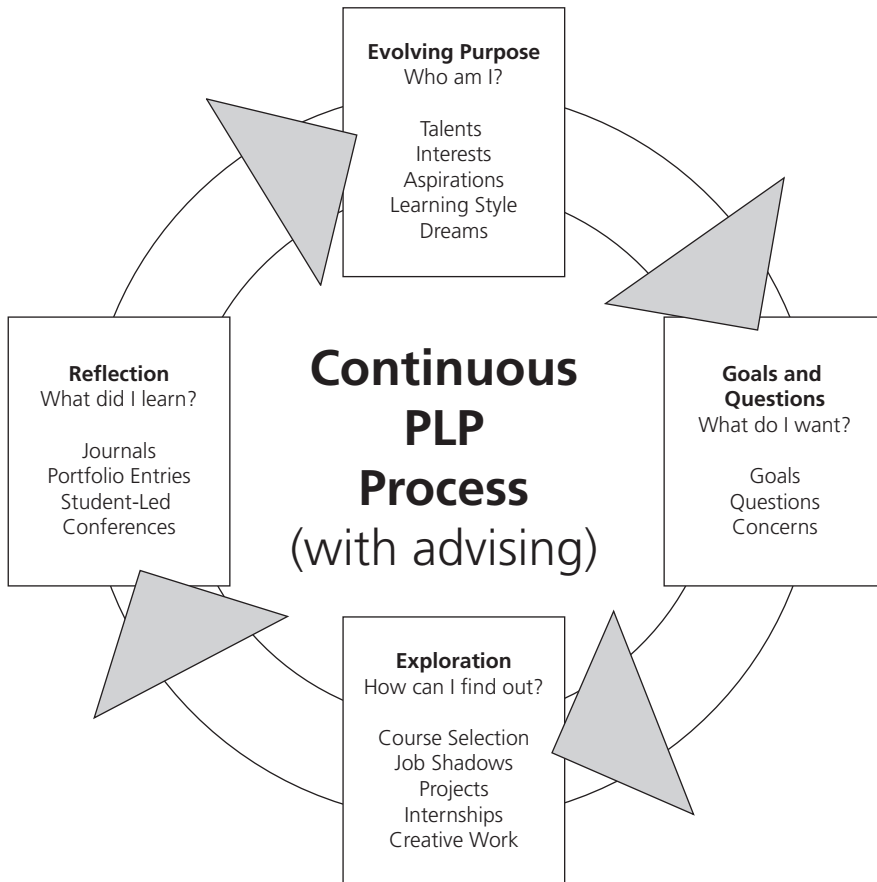
- How would you assess your own performance, attitude, and behavior in this advisory?

JB            A                    M                    E

Source: Used by permission of Debbie Osofsky, Advisory Coordinator, Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School.

At Granger High School, the method of assessing the effectiveness of the advisory program is based on two indicators of student success. One is the percentage of students who have a parent attend the

FIGURE 3.2  
A Process for Personal Learning Plans



## The Shape of Personal Learning Plans

In 2004, the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) made personal learning plans a central component of its