
Teaching Even Hours a Week Leaves Children Behind



Suppose a teacher in an urban high school wanted to do more than survive. Suppose he wanted to do the job right. Sharpening his pencil and firing up his calculator, Mr. Gleibermann decided to find out just how long that would take.

BY ERIK GLEIBERMANN

TWO WEEKS after a year of urban high school teaching, I sat down to calculate how many hours a week it would take to leave no child behind. That's no child out of 150, since last year I taught five classes a day, averaging 30 students a class, in a San Francisco public school. I added methodically: teaching five sections of two separate courses every day, tutoring all the students who needed extra help to pass, evaluating papers and projects, and collaborating with other teachers to shape the school's academic program. The total was 140 hours per week.

Discovering this mathematical absurdity softened my long-standing despair. Throughout my teaching career, I worked inhuman hours and

ERIK GLEIBERMANN worked in Bay Area public high schools as a humanities instructor and teacher trainer for 15 years. He currently has a private academic mentoring practice and consults for several San Francisco independent high schools.

yet wondered if I was giving enough. Only by putting the raw statistics on paper did I find an antidote to self-blame. I finally discerned that when a great many of my students fall by the academic wayside, the blame belongs not to me, but to a system that would require a teacher to work 140 hours a week to support all his students.

How did I arrive at such a frightening figure as 140? The deciding variable is the time required to respond

that teachers have long experienced one arduous day at a time. Our school system is based on a 19th-century factory model that cycles 150 students a day through a teacher's classroom, a process that was never intended to ensure that all students achieve high-level skills. But we have yet to promote alternative models that might point us toward universal success or to provide resources for public education that would appreciably reduce teacher workload. The current testing regimen and strict-

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to the academic needs of each *individual* student. Consider writing as a test case. In a couple of hours I can craft and deliver a focused and engaging writing lesson on thesis design, embedding quotations, or parallel construction and have students edit one another's essays and take notes from a PowerPoint display. But if the goal is to ensure that each of my 150 students can apply the lesson to essay writing and take a step toward passing the writing portion of the state exit exam, no elegant lesson with any group of 30 students will ever succeed. Having high school sophomores learn to write by observing me construct a coherent paragraph on an overhead screen is the instructional equivalent of teaching them to ride a bicycle by showing videotapes. Writing is a complex mental journey. Children need a mentor to navigate the way. If they are going to succeed, I will need to coach many of them individually outside the regular school day.

Conscientious teachers who are determined to open academic doorways for all students have been aware for decades that they lack the resources to meet the needs of well over 100 students. But recent state and federal education policy has brought this condition to public awareness. The goal of No Child Left Behind appears admirable: by the year 2014 every child in the nation will test to proficiency in core math and literacy skills. In addition, most states now require seniors to pass an exit exam to receive a diploma. California's high school class of 2006 was the first to fall under this requirement, following a delay four years ago when more than half of the first cohort failed.

However, as we investigate what schools need to reach these ambitious goals, we publicly expose a difficult truth

er teacher credentialing requirements of recent education policy do not even touch the deeper structural problem. Until we begin to provide resources that, at a minimum, allow teachers to work with far fewer students, any teacher who aims for universal success prescribes for himself eventual mental exhaustion.

The problem for me begins mildly in August when I begin to frame the curriculum. I have one section of Advanced Placement senior English and four sections of sophomore humanities, the latter course blending world history and language arts. To begin planning for sophomore humanities, I have to consider California's official standards. There are 50 world history standards and 62 English standards. A typical history standard requires students to

analyze patterns of global change in the era of New Imperialism in at least two of the following regions or countries: Africa, Southeast Asia, China, India, Latin America and the Philippines, in terms of the independence struggles of the colonized regions of the world, including the role of leaders, such as Sun Yat-sen in China, and the role of ideology and religion.

If taken seriously, these 112 standards would be overly ambitious for an undergraduate major anywhere in the Ivy League. My method for cutting a swath through the standards jungle is to devise one inquiry question that frames the year. Using the Iraq War as a current connection, I pose the question, "What does it mean to live in peace?" I like the broad simplicity of the question, which allows us to range through historical periods and literary works.

I craft three quarter-long units on three separate struggles: the Chinese Cultural Revolution, apartheid South Africa, and the Holocaust. During the final quarter, students choose a political conflict to explore. Rather than try to cover every time period and geographic area mentioned in the state standards (which stretch from ancient Greece to the contemporary international economic order), I take the “less is more” approach. How in six weeks could a teacher ever cover the whole of Africa, a continent of 54 countries, many more ethnic groups, and centuries of layered history? I prefer to use a South African case study to explore wider themes of indigenous civilizations, European colonialism, liberation struggles, and 21st-century social problems. This streamlined approach will prepare students more effectively for standardized tests than will buzzing frenetically through 112 standards in 40 weeks.

A thematic approach demands far more teacher preparation than does a course that relies on the textbook, but it allows students to internalize more material than they would learn from a wash of briefly covered facts, concepts, and skills. My students may not be able to enumerate all the African regions colonized between 1870 and 1920 or all the dates when colonized peoples became politically independent, but they will be able to explain the key dynamics that shaped colonization in one region. When they study colonial history in the future, they will have a solid model.

I teach 25 classroom hours a week and spend another 20 outside the school day designing daily lessons. For about half the preparation time, I read and preview resources: a Chinese philosophy curriculum package, videotapes of Holocaust survivor testimony, poetry compiled from my trip to South Africa. Being a well-informed teacher means being a perpetual graduate student. Herbert Kohl tells a story in the classic book *36 Children* about his novice year teaching first-graders in a Harlem elementary school. When the children begin to ask Kohl about the hidden meanings of the Greek myths they have been studying, he realizes that he has to do background research to respond. Other teachers begin to whisper about this fanatic who frequents Columbia’s graduate stacks to prepare for first-graders.

A teacher could easily fall back on a textbook, but this approach limits students. Most history textbooks present a two-dimensional, declarative overview of the past to be absorbed passively. Some of my students are robust enough to manage on this intellectually anemic diet. But even today’s best textbooks, filled with teaching strategies and supplemental resources, cannot lead

most of my students to in-depth understanding. Textbooks are valuable because they pool key material; but, contrary to the hope of the workaday teacher whose students answer chapter questions while he sits up front grading yesterday’s chapter questions, textbooks do not teach. Even if my assigned world history text presented more substantial material than its three paragraphs on the Cultural Revolution, it could hardly support my 30-day China unit for more than a day or two. The text may tease us with an excerpt from Chairman Mao’s writings, but I have to craft the reading lesson that allows students to decipher the propaganda and unpack the ideological assumptions. Deep understanding requires multiple experiences. The textbook is only a springboard. No single source can offer students the historical experience I want them to have: a dynamic, open-ended debate in which political perspectives and ideologies compete to reveal the human experience.

Besides mastering my own curriculum, I spend time mastering a second curriculum that my students expect me to know: popular culture. Music, film, television, sports — these are the cultural fields to which students continually refer to shape concrete meaning out of remote and abstract ideas. To lack familiarity with students’ living culture is more serious than merely being uncool. It constitutes a form of illiteracy.

If I want a tool that captures everyone from the Ivy

League aspirant to the alienated truant who can barely write a paragraph, nothing works better than references to urban teenage dramas. Given a standardized test on popular culture, I would want to score proficient or above so that I have a large reservoir of reference material. In 2006 that meant I needed to be able to identify and explain Beyoncé, 50 Cent, Eminem, Queen Latifah, Harry Potter, Hello Kitty, Kobe Bryant, Yao Ming, Barry Bonds, Tom Brady, American Idol, and FuBu.

dents develop and integrate their strong and weak areas. I have had to discard the traditional notion that I can offer students a single solution. In previous generations we did not worry about everyone reading at grade level or about having 100% graduation rates. We did not equate dropping out with being left behind. The young people who could not make it in the one-size-fits-all system could pursue vocational education or work in a factory or on a farm. But today, in a society where

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Who knows what else 2007 might bring? Conversance with hip hop culture is particularly critical for the urban-based high school English or social studies instructor. Hip hop is the prevailing idiom of urban teenagers, the basic currency of exchange across racial boundaries. Teachers need to have a position on Tupac if they want credibility.

The goal is not to supplant academic texts with *Entertainment Weekly*, but to apply accessible experience to challenging concepts. The best of my students succeed without street metaphors and shopping mall anecdotes, but I have to find ways to broaden presentations to reach everyone. Thus I spend several hours a week designing lessons with flexible choices so that students whose skill levels differ greatly can all access the material. Sometimes I need to give special, written instructions that segment the step-by-step guidelines for an annotated time line into half-steps. Without the extra instructions, one struggling student can get by with a student mentor I assign, but another just tunes out and remains stuck.

Students need challenges at their true intellectual levels, and the reading comprehension levels in my undifferentiated classroom range from second grade to college. Whether or not a school separates its students into supposed ability groups or tracks, classes in most urban settings today have a rich palette of learning profiles. Teachers must find creative ways to work with this diversity and even find advantages in it.

Cognitive psychology has formalized what educators have always known: people are generally stronger in certain cognitive areas than in others. The cognitive revolution demands that I diversify teaching so that stu-

almost all living-wage jobs require a high school education, we demand that everyone be competent. If I am serious about serving all my students well, diversifying the curriculum is hardly an indulgence; it is essential.

And yet I fall short. The time I have itemized so far already amounts to 50 hours per week: 20 to prepare my basic courses, 25 teaching in the classroom, and five to stay abreast of everyday news and popular culture. In addition, I spend another five hours diversifying my curriculum, but I would need at least twice that to prepare all my 150 students for the high school exit exam.

And none of the 60 hours I have so far listed involves what I regard as the primary teaching activity: sitting alone with one student and carefully entering her mental world to help her take the next steps. How often does public classroom teaching allow us to spend longer than two minutes on such an encounter? I might arrange a tutoring session during lunch when I do not have a department meeting or in the morning before first period if my lesson plan and classroom are already set up. But it's piecemeal. The most direct instruction many of my students receive in a typical week may be written comments on a paper, a poor substitute for live interaction. Many students, especially those not performing at grade level, require one-on-one work to learn complex skills, especially analytical reading and writing. I could easily work with certain students for an hour building the basic frame of an essay, and I still would feel that we had only just begun.

Given my time limits, I do scattershot tutoring. I work with a few selected kids: one who was motivated enough to badger me at the right moment, another whose parents insisted she get help, and a third I invited be-

cause I believed he could succeed. For every one of these, there are 15 or 20 I do not reach. I manage to squeeze out seven hours a week helping students individually, but successful tutoring would require at least 20.

The necessary 80 hours I have tallied so far is enough to break me over the course of a semester. But grading is the *coup de grâce*. Do I give another unit exam to 120 sophomores? With objective and short-answer questions and two brief essays that I can scan quickly, I can grade a test in 10 minutes; 120 times 10 means 20 hours. Using Sunday mornings to knock out a class at a time, I can grade the tests over a month.

Besides papers, I have to grade research presentations, character monologues, time lines, maps, personal journals, and other assignments. If I gave rich feedback to everyone, I would have to grade another 50 hours a week, which equals only 20 minutes a student.

I have an additional 10 hours weekly that includes professional training and administration. As the teaching profession evolves, I must continually retool. I attend and sometimes present at workshops and conferences. My school can no longer pay my way, but I can afford one self-financed trip a year. I also subscribe to three professional magazines, including the *Phi Delta Kappan*, and try to skim them before summer. Meanwhile, I maintain professional dialogues online and occasionally visit other schools to absorb new ideas.

Teaching spills into administration. The traditional division of labor between teachers and administrators has begun to fade. Now that urban public schools are getting serious about universal achievement, they notice that schools with hierarchical structures separating teachers and administrators also tend to separate students. Schools may give the lion's share of resources to

so-called honors populations that uphold a school's reputation while passively tolerating an invisible stream of dropouts and failure. But schools that are serious about equity bring together teachers, administrators, and sometimes parents to research institutional practices and explore innovative approaches. My school requires every student to conduct a full-year research project covering several academic disciplines and to present the findings in a 45-minute exhibition in order to graduate. I help design and administer the projects, though I teach only one class of seniors.

Despite the effort I put in, almost 30% of 150 students fail the spring semester. I should confer with each failing student and his or her parents to plan remedies for next year. A half-hour per student means 23 hours discussing F's.

Colleagues console me by pointing out that I have done everything within human limits to help students be successful. I didn't leave any child behind. The ones who failed left themselves behind.

Or did I get left behind? When I finally add up the hours, I feel legitimized. There is no individual solution: not in 40 hours a week, not in 80, nor even in 140.

Federal, state, and local funding combined provide urban public schools with nothing close to the level of resources they need to fulfill their mission. Yet this wealthy country has the means to fully fund the mandate to educate all children well. We just require the courage to radically reprioritize budgeting.

Imagine teachers operating in classes of 15. My sophomores might sit around one table debating Mao's philosophy. Everyone can see everyone else's eyes. Imagine classrooms enriched with literature, documents, music, films, and artifacts of world culture. Everyone gets a free copy of Nelson Mandela's autobiography. Teachers might receive one full day a week to plan curriculum and shape the school program with their colleagues while students go to weekly community-service internships set up by a full-time service-learning coordinator. They fan out through the city, helping a public interest lawyer at the ACLU or describing dinosaur bones to third-graders at the natural history museum. Imagine that when these students return to school, they have individual writing tutors, full-time college advisors, and onsite psychological counselors. I could wear my instructor hat a little more securely and shelve the other hats. Imagine how much more I might give. I could sit down with a child during a quiet break and guide her through a poem.

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For further information, contact:

Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc.
408 N. Union St.
P.O. Box 789
Bloomington, Indiana 47402-0789
812/339-1156 Phone
800/766-1156 Tollfree
812/339-0018 Fax

<http://www.pdkintl.org>