
Forty-Three Valedictorians: Graduates of the Met Talk about their Learning

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We're all the success story. . . I think that what I will remember most is just the ups and downs that we all went through, the highs and the lows and how we all came together to make this one last high. . . It's a great feeling to know that we succeeded together.--
Nadia, Met School, 2000

On June 9, 2000, forty-three young people received their high school diplomas from the Metropolitan Career and Technical Center—the first graduating class of a unique, state-funded high school in Providence, Rhode Island. Almost every high school can boast a few success stories—students who have reached beyond what they or anyone else thought possible for them. But, as the student quoted above indicates, no one graduating from the Met has to feel like the “exception.”

Every Met graduate applied and was accepted to at least one college, many receiving substantial financial aid packages (totaling \$500,000)—an unusual circumstance for an urban school in which seventy percent of the students are children of parents whose education did not go beyond high school. All but 3 plan to enter college in the Fall. Interestingly, those who plan to defer are all from college-educated families.

Upon entering the Met, the class of 2000 looked very much like their peers in the Providence school system. In fact, the composition of the graduating class is an almost perfect mirror of the Providence schools: 52% of the students qualify for free lunch; 22% are African American, 38 % Hispanic, and 38% white. School records reveal that the first cohort included a substantial number of students who entered the Met two or three years behind grade level in skills. The group ranged from students who had repeated or were about to repeat a grade to students assessed as gifted and talented, with most clustering at the lower end of the achievement scale—getting by, receiving passing grades, yet not developing the skills necessary to succeed in college and careers.

At the Met, these students found themselves in a school like no other they had ever attended, or probably even imagined. Instead of being handed a schedule of classes, each student plots how s/he will make progress towards the school's learning goals in a quarterly meeting with a team including a teacher-advisor and a parent. Instead of spending their school day in classes, they fashion independent projects through which to explore their interests and meet their learning goals. Instead of tests, they do quarterly exhibitions of their work and accumulate a four-year portfolio. Instead of seeing six or seven different teachers and groups of peers each day they spend intensive time with one advisor and advisory group (of 13-14 peers) and with adults in the community who mentor them in an interest area.

The first graduation of the Met marks a rite of passage for the school as well as its students. The Met has made it through its first four years, quadrupling in size and spreading out into two campuses before graduating its first class. The school, like the students, is on the cusp of maturity. With two Met campuses (100 students each) in operation, the school has received the go-ahead from the state of Rhode Island to break ground for a brand new campus where 6 new Met schools will be built on the same model, serving a total of 800-900 students.

Started with state money that had previously been earmarked for a new regional vocational-technical school, the Met's mission from the beginning has been to improve the long-term career prospects of its graduates. Its co-founders, Elliot Washor and Dennis Littky, created a model that defies categorization as "vocational" or "college prep." They are betting that a personalized program ("one student at a time") that provides students with extensive learning opportunities in the community ("learning through real work") will prepare young people well for both further education and careers. Although it is too early to judge the school's success in that regard, the short-term results have been positive enough, and the school has attracted enough vocal supporters, to allow the expansion to go forward.

This report provides a close look at a school success story in-the-making, through the eyes and voices of six of its students. Part I reports on and analyzes themes that emerged in interviews conducted in the students' freshmen and sophomore years, as they transitioned from middle school or other high schools into the Met and then had to prove themselves ready to move on into the "Senior Institute"—the Met's term for its upper school years. Part II focuses on their experiences in the two-year Senior Institute, as they turned their sights and their energy towards a successful transition from high school to college.

As the first graduating class, members of the class of 2000 have a unique perspective on what the school has to offer. On the following pages, they talk about how they have been affected by the school and what they now feel prepared to do as they make the transition to their lives after high school. Among the key themes that emerge, the following stand out for their resonance with current debates about the purpose and shape of high school:

- 1) *"Now I do more, I concentrate, I go into depth."* The Met may look and operate more like a high quality youth program than a traditional school, yet students consistently reported working harder and learning more at the Met than in any other years of their schooling.
- 2) *"I just want to keep improving and taking it to a higher level."* All of the students cared a great deal about the quality of the work they were producing and seemed to be holding themselves to higher and higher standards as they proceeded through the Met. By their final interviews it was clear that they viewed standards as dynamic rather than static and understood how their own efforts could lead them from good enough to better to best.
- 3) *"We've laughed, we've cried, we've argued. It's just been so great because we're able to understand each other so well."* Met students returned repeatedly to their close relationships with their advisors, describing them as adults who were always there when they needed them-- from helping to revise a paper or ferret out a piece of needed research to offering a ride to visit a college or even a shoulder to cry on when the stresses of daily life got to be too much.
- 4) *"Knowing how to seek for resources and how to basically get what I need to get out of the course and raise my hand if I have a question and not be shy to attend any study groups or even organize any, I think that's something that has helped me a lot."* In naming the skills that were helping them the most in their first college courses, Met students acknowledged that while they had covered much less content in high school than their classmates, the experience, competence and confidence they had gained as independent learners more than made up for it.

Schools such as the Met are often seen as too small or idiosyncratic to offer much to the mainstream conversation about how to improve high school. This report challenges that belief. The words and actions of the Met students raise provocative questions about the boundaries between formal and informal learning, about what “counts” for a high school diploma, and, finally, about the combination of knowledge, skills, and personal qualities youth need to succeed in higher education and careers.

Dead People, Money, and a Self-Sufficient Doghouse

I began interviewing students soon after the Met opened its doors in the fall of 1996. Experienced at the business of school change, Met co-founders Dennis Littky and Elliot Washor understand the importance of documentation, both for ongoing self-assessment and adjustments and, ultimately, for influencing policymakers and practitioners to consider new ways of doing things. They approached me because of my own history as a co-founder of an alternative high school and, my more recent involvement in developing and writing about new forms of project-based and work-based learning.

Despite this grounding in many of the principles and practices underlying the Met, during my first few visits there I felt a dizzying identification with Alice just after her fall down the rabbit hole. According to the conventional wisdom of the world above the rabbit hole, students need to master the basic skills before they can begin to apply them and they need a general liberal education in the academic disciplines before they can be trusted to make sensible choices about what to learn. Like Alice, a visitor to the Met finds herself in a world turned upside down and inside out.

Unlike most high schools, the Met does not require all students to proceed through a pre-ordained curriculum or set of classes. Fourteen year-old ninth graders spend their days carrying out independent projects and internships –activities that in most schools happen, if at all, in the second semester of senior year after students have already met all the course requirements. In their senior year, when their peers in “regular schools” are likely to be slacking off, Met students spend much of their day in classes—on nearby college campuses.

The most successful teachers in most high schools are the ones who find ways to make the required curriculum interesting or relevant to students. At the Met, the road to effective teaching proceeds in a very different direction. Teachers, students, and parents are collectively responsible for developing a learning plan (and revising it four times a year) that lays out how each student will meet the Met’s learning goals, a listing of the knowledge, competencies and personal qualities the Met believes to be essential to a successful transition to college and careers. Starting from what students find interesting and relevant, teachers look for ways to help the student articulate and pursue these interests through projects and activities that are rich with opportunities for reaching the learning goals laid out in the plan.

As one Met student patiently explained to me, it’s never boring because every day is different. There is no such thing as a “typical day.” Unlike most schools that pride themselves on setting a schedule in April or May that determines what will happen each hour of the day, every day of the following school year, the Met’s schedule differs from day to day, week to week, and student to student.

Rather than following an ordained schedule, students create their own “un-calendars” –Met terminology for the daily plans advisors help their students to write out at the

beginning of each week. These plans revolve around all of the things that would be considered peripheral, supplementary, or extra-curricular in most high schools: meetings with one's advisor or advisory group, internships in the community, conversations with mentors and potential mentors, travel to conferences, outdoor adventure experiences, and a variety of school activities or projects, from planning trips to creating designs for the new Met building. Anything can become a legitimate activity, as long as it relates in some way to the student's learning plan.

The Rhetoric Meets the Reality

My first visit to the Met occurred just as the class of 2000 began designing a first round of projects. The rhetoric of "one student at a time," and "learning through the real world" hit the reality of the actual choices fourteen year olds make. In my first interviews with students, it seemed as if the school might be heading towards a confirmation of the worst fears of those who doubt the wisdom of progressive education.

One student told me that she had chosen "dead people" as her interest area. Another, hard pressed to come up with an answer to what interested him, had finally settled on money, because as he simply put it, he planned to be rich someday. A third, preferring to work with his hands, had decided to build what he called a "self-sufficient doghouse" for his pet. Then there were the girls who wanted to do projects on topics such as "nails" or "hair care."

How, I wondered, would the school handle and make something educational come of such requests? Perhaps the students were wondering the same thing—testing the limits of this new "un-high school" they had entered. The school stuck its ground (the co-directors kept saying "no back-sliding" until it became a mantra) and students began the process of developing written proposals for the interest areas selected.

"We're doing informational interviews with people who know about our interests," one student primly informed me when I asked how she was spending her time. For the young woman interested in dead bodies this resulted in her making a connection with a funeral director, who allowed her to spend a few days a week for a month helping the crew prepare bodies for wakes and funerals. She wrote a five-page paper describing this experience and discussing cultural rituals surrounding death.

The young man who wanted to be rich interviewed a young banker, who created a year-long internship for him at the bank and served as his mentor for that year. The young woman interested in nails interned with the beauty care coordinator at CVS; she ended up learning to use Power Point to train sales staff and managers on products and to use Excel to investigate overstock.

As students realized that they were really going to be allowed –indeed, encouraged--to pursue their interests, they began to articulate key differences between their new school and their old. Two themes stand out from the interviews of that period: the degree to which students saw their learning as "real, not fake" as in their old schools, and their simultaneous relief and anxiety at being known well and watched closely by adults.

Although these issues receded in importance as the memory of their old schools faded, additional themes emerged as I continued to talk with these and other students in their first two years at the Met. Central among these were their realization that one can actually "get smarter" in school, and their feeling of empowerment as they developed the ability to talk confidently with a range of adults.

Real Not Fake

Although coming to the Met with very different schooling histories, all of the students I interviewed repeatedly came back to how “phony” or “fake” their old schools seemed to them. And all contrasted this to the authenticity of what and how they were learning at the Met.

Nadia’s first project centered on the cost of clothes. She wanted to figure out why stores charge so much for this merchandise. Her advisor helped her figure out how to create a formula to express what she had learned from a series of interviews. Describing this project, she had this to say:

In the traditional schools, you go in, you do a worksheet, you’re out. But how do I use the equation I learned and apply it to my real life? I never figured that out. Here at the Met I’m working on that. It’s actually harder to look at math and use it in a real situation than to just do a worksheet.

Nadia indicated repeatedly how important it was to her to see a connection between learning in school and out, and to feel that she was at a school that would recognize and help her to develop her strengths. In the comments below she even offered her own version of multiple intelligences theory:

This year has helped me a lot because now I feel like it counts for school and it’s also good for me because it will help me in the future. But in other schools you don’t feel like that. If you’re a very talkative person, it’s like a bad thing. If your teacher’s talking and you want to get your point across that’s not possible because you’re a student, you’re supposed to listen and the teacher is supposed to talk. . .

I feel like the Met looks at the qualities that you have and puts them to work to help you. But in some schools you have many qualities that don’t even help you. Like some kids while the teacher is talking about math, they’ll be there drawing. They might be good at drawing, and that’s something they’re working on, but it’s not developed because they feel like that’s not important.

These same themes emerge repeatedly in the comments of other students. Looking back at the schoolwork she did before coming to the Met, Maya explained her difficulty with the subject matter this way:

In school I did little pieces of everything, but it didn’t really stick to my brain. Pieces isn’t enough.

Johnny placed a lot of the blame on the textbooks that were assigned:

You go to regular school, you sit there, you open a chapter or whatever. In this school I work a lot harder. A lot of people at Classical [the examination school Johnny did not get into], they’re not doing well at all. . .The way they teach, I wouldn’t have done o.k. The books here, they’re real books. . . not regular textbooks. . . This *is* math.

Of all the freshmen I interviewed, Freddie went through the most dramatic turn-around, going from someone who missed “a hundred and something days” in his previous school to perfect attendance at the Met. As he notes, in one of his many comparisons of “regular” high school and the Met:

Last year I wasn't doing anything. They gave you stuff to work on, stuff *they* thought you had to learn. I got to do a lot this year. Anything I was interested in, I worked on: the stock market, economics of slavery, what will people do for money. . . Now you're motivated because there is something you want to learn.

I'm learning adult things like how to act, important words to use, correct English and all that. They try to teach you that in other schools, but then again they just slip down and let you do anything you want. I think I learn more here, because they give you more experiences to learn off of than just learning in the classroom.

Being Known Well

A common lament coming from young people who are struggling in or dropping out of school is that “the teachers don’t really care.” Yet in many cases, their teachers are hard-working professionals who have chosen to spend many of their waking hours with teenagers and who put in a great deal of effort planning lessons and correcting papers. Why then do so many students come away with this impression? In their comparisons between teachers in their old schools and their advisors and mentors at the Met, students were able to illuminate this issue.

The Met students, like most of their peers in “regular schools” had learned to see their teachers as people who assigned work and gave it a grade. At the Met, they saw their advisors as people who were there to support them in doing projects that they themselves chose and to give them detailed feedback that would help them keep improving the final product. This shift in perception seemed to be equally true both of those who struggled in school before coming to the Met and those who did well academically.

For example, Leah described herself as someone who sometimes studied very hard, but still did not do well--a situation that was intensely frustrating for her and for her parents. In the following passage, she explains how the Met was different:

The teachers help me. There they didn't. Like if we had a report or something and I asked for help, they'd just say, 'hand it in and I'll correct it.' They didn't want to hear what you had to say.

At the other end of the academic spectrum, Maya knew how to get good grades, but did not end up feeling any more noticed or attended to:

Last year we used to write book reports. We knew the teachers do not pay attention. I did my first report, and I gave it in again, a second time. My notebooks--I'd have blank pieces of paper, o.k. One page would have something written, the next one would be blank. And she'd say, 'Oh good, Maya.' I had an A on a blank piece of paper!

Maya also brought up another important difference in the relationship between teachers and students at the Met, one that has more to do with how the development of social as well as academic skills:

Usually other high schools they don't really bother with you. Since it's so big, they don't care. . . you're just known as a number. Teachers at my other school, they treat you like nothing. These teachers, they get personal with you, not too personal, but they know how you are, they get down to it.

After describing how often she was suspended for fighting in her middle school, Maya explained how and why she changed:

Here, I haven't been into a fight yet. I was going to get into a lot of fights, but Doc [the students' nickname for Littky] sits you down and talks to you. He makes you laugh, makes you understand your problems. At other schools, it's just, "you're suspended, goodbye!"

I'm changing the way I do my work, the way I act towards people. . . Now, I just breathe first, think about it, and go talk to someone here. When you want to fight, you don't think about why, you just want to fight the person. When they sit you down and you talk about it, you understand that you shouldn't go into that kind of stuff.

For Freddie, discussions in advisory provided an opportunity to confront his feelings about race:

What did I learn this year? How to get along with others, especially different races. Like the first quarter, I said, 'Wow, all white people.' At Central they had 'em, but I would never talk to them. . . But now I just talk to anybody. This school gives you the opportunity to focus on a lot of things that you want to learn and do. Even things you don't want to learn, you end up learning it, just general habits. Like shyness, or, if you talk a lot, you learn how to control that, your anger. Students in this school had real bad attitudes, now they're all friendly with everybody. The school really changed them. My attitude would take a long time to come out of me, now it never wants to come."

Yet, Freddie also expressed some ambivalence about losing the anonymity of being in a large school:

There's too many people in that school [Central] for them to want to mess around with you, so they only take the motivated ones. . . It's a lot harder here. . . The teachers here give you a lot of attention, a little too much. The teachers here, they see a lot of stuff. They describe all my strong points, all my weak points, everything.

Students also repeatedly bring up mentors as important adults whom the Met has brought into their lives. It is common to hear students say that they can "talk about everything" with their mentor, that their mentor is someone to look up to, a great role model. As Freddie explained:

Manny is like another advisor, someone who coaches me to do what I need to do, shows me the ropes, how to present myself to people. He shows me the grown-up world, the business world. I can tell he's not a teacher, but I learn a lot from him. He has very good advice, so I take that and that helps me out.

One of the most striking things about the interviews from the first two years was the extent to which all of the students seemed to be developing the ability to talk articulately about their own growth and development and, even used the interviews with me as occasions to reflect on the change.

These students described an environment where time is set aside to engage in a daily and weekly practice of reflection--frequent meetings with their advisor and advisory group to discuss how things are going; summary accounts of these discussions in periodic letters to Littky and Washor; meetings with advisors and mentors to design work-based projects; quarterly narratives written by advisors with input from students evaluating progress on their learning goals; and then quarterly meetings with their learning teams to plan for the next few months.

Many schools would see this as valuable time taken away from learning. At the Met, it is one of the central ways that students develop a sense of themselves as learners and gain energy for the hard work of continuous self-improvement.

Internalizing Standards: Working Harder and Getting Smarter

During their first two years students reported with notable consistency that they were working harder, learning more, and feeling more successful than they ever had before in school. This was as true for Freddie, who had already repeated ninth grade twice because of his penchant for skipping classes, as for Maya, who had mastered the art of recycling “A” papers from one year and one teacher to the next.

Students seemed to enjoy the feeling of doing something challenging and getting enough support to do it well. This was especially true for students who had never felt successful at school. Repeatedly I heard a real sense of exhilaration from students who, for the first time, found themselves getting help to do something well, rather than being judged for doing it badly. For Sando, this was a real turning point in his learning:

I wasn't into regular school. I'd always come on time and this and that, but I could never enjoy it because I was never good at working, and especially the way they was trying to teach me . . . I thought I was so dumb; everybody was around me and everything I did, people would show me how to do it and when to do it.

But now that I'm here, it's like they teach you how to learn and how to step by step do this. . . It's so different. They teach you how to actually get things done, and, if you can get things done, you can actually get the work down, you know what I mean? When I was in regular school I did lots of everything, and I wasn't getting better. I came here and I do less of that, but I know more. For real!" (Sando)

A number of features of the Met appear to reinforce students' sense that they can succeed and that their work at the Met matters more than the usual schoolwork. In particular, their comments point to the importance of the detailed feedback students get from their teachers and peers, and to the periodic “moments of truth” that occur as they present their work publicly to advisors and other Met staff, peers, parents, and sometimes mentors. The process of getting and giving feedback, of collecting a portfolio of work, and of going through periodic exhibitions (both as presenters and as audience at other people's exhibitions) seemed to lead students to internalize higher and higher standards for good work.

For Freddie, the first presentation was where he learned that the Met's standards were going to be much different from what he was used to. By the second presentation, he was determined to do a better job, and had a sense of what good work would look like:

Before, I had to do reports, but not like the way the Met makes me do it. In the 8th grade I had to tell a little bit about it, maybe 2 minutes. Here I have to do a half hour presentation, everything I learned, where I got my information, all that. unhhh, very painful. . . My first presentation was a total disaster, it was bad, very bad.

The second one I did the stock market. I found out you could make so much money so I tried to find out as much information as I could it was 120% better than the first. Some of the people were there for my first, so they saw a big difference. I was nervous but it just started to flow, it could have gone on for about 2 hours.

Johnny also experienced the exhibitions as a very different form of assessment, one that made it much more difficult to skate through:

You can cheat your way through other high schools and you can cheat your way through elementary and middle school, but here you can not cheat at all. It's impossible. When you have to stand in front of everyone and do your exhibition, you've got to have something.

Like many other students, Maya came to the Met with a habit of always doing the minimum in school: In explaining why she was working harder now, she pointed to the importance of knowing her work was being taken very seriously:

I changed the way I do my work. I did my work, but it wasn't top quality. It was usually just sloppy, just do anything. Now I do more, I concentrate, go into depth with it. . .I've improved on my writing really a lot. You have like five people go through it to make sure if it's good. First, I read it over, and then I give it to my advisor and then to anyone who wants to read it, other students, people pass it on. Finally I give a copy to Doc and Elliot and they put it in a big book. My last paper was like 30 drafts. Before, I would just turn things in, no corrections."

Unlike Maya, Leah was not able to get good grades simply by going through the motions. Believing she would do badly no matter how hard she worked, she stopped trying. Finding herself at a school that clearly rewards effort, Leah began to believe again in her own potential to succeed, and this enabled her to apply herself to school. This turn-around became evident when she brought her portfolio to the interview in June and proudly showed me multiple drafts of each of her papers.

Like last year we had tests and I did really bad on tests even if I studied and everything. A project is better. I think you learn more. And going out into the world. You really see what a job is; it's fun and there's always something you can learn. . . I used to throw my work out right away. Now I want to keep everything. . .

In comments such as these, Met students offer support to recent research of cognitive scientists, such as Lauren Resnick and Howard Gardner. In Resnick's work with school districts, she has found that classrooms are too often structured to reinforce the notion of intelligence as a fixed commodity. Her goal is to help districts create "effort-based classrooms," where students can clearly see a connection between thinking and working harder and getting smarter. According to the students, the Met is creating just such learning environments.

Even Nadia, who did well in her previous school, appears to have gained needed confidence in her ability to do higher level academic work:

Now that I've done all I've done I think next year I can take on more challenging things. . . I probably feel more confident on doing challenging work. I want to keep on working on the skills that I was working on this year. . .My writing I feel like I should keep improving because I know it's not something you learn and then you learned it. It's something you keep improving at. It has improved a lot, just the way I approach different tasks and the way that I reflect on what I do . . .That's something that's really great because now I feel I can do a paper, a report, an essay better because I can write and think and it's easier for me. I feel like I've definitely improved. I mean last year I could not see me writing a 5-page report or writing an essay, you know: 'hold it, what am I going to write about.' It's hard but it's paying off.

A year later, when I interviewed a number of these same students as sophomores, I was curious whether they would continue to feel challenged to improve. Once they had learned the ropes, even of this very different high school, would they show the tendency exhibited by many sophomores to do the minimum required to get by? (Teachers commonly refer to this as the "sophomore slump"),

But these students talked about working harder and feeling smarter than they had as freshmen. If anything, they seemed to feel more empowered and to be pushing

themselves more, as Nadia had predicted, to “keep improving and taking it to a higher level.”

One design feature of the school that seemed to help build this continuing sense of challenge was the discussion, beginning early in the sophomore year, of what the requirements should be for entry into the Senior Institute. As the first group to proceed through the Met, the class of 2000 had a big hand in shaping the last two years.

As Nadia explained:

Standards are more real and different from last year. Now we have to prove to the people attending our last exhibition—people who don't really know that much about us-- that we are ready and have improved and have the skills to go on. I have acquired what I need to be in the Senior Institute and here is the evidence.

We are constantly comparing ourselves now to selves a few months ago: Looking at my first paper to now how do I think about a professional paper, how do I sit down and organize it? Before I thought this was good; now I think it's just okay and this is better. The standards that our teachers have for us are definitely getting higher. We're going on to more complex things; really proving it with evidence.

On numerous occasions, in small advisory groups as well as in the larger community, sophomores met with teachers to discuss how the Senior Institute could best prepare them for college and, backing up from that point, what they would need to show as evidence of readiness to enter into this level of work. As the statement above indicates, students took these discussions to heart.

Developing a Voice

Through doing projects, working alongside adult advisors inside school and mentors outside of school, and participating in the democratic life of their school, freshmen and sophomores at the Met started to develop both their public and private voices. Most of them made a point of contrasting their former “shy” selves (at least shy in public) with their current ability to stand up and deliver.

Maya sees her transformation as beginning in the first semester, as the new freshmen ventured forth to find internships:

Everybody here goes on job shadows and informational interviews to see if they want internships there. Last year I was so afraid to talk with people, to sit there and like talk. Now I've been to 3 or 4 informational interviews. I interviewed them, and it's like helping me out. I speak well in front of people now.

Other students credit their newfound ability to speak up to community activities in the Met itself, as well as the opportunities arising to explain this unusual school to others. As Leah recalls,

When I came to this school, I didn't know anyone so I was all shy. . . I never liked to speak in front of any people. I started with a Pick Me Up [a morning meeting ritual at the Met] and then I went to Florida. We spoke a little bit in front of 30 people, then we had a table, and people would come, and then we had to talk with them. That was fun.

Nadia started out the year as someone who described herself as “talkative”—a quality that she knew sometimes got her in trouble. By the end of the year, she saw more

clearly that her facility with words was a talent to take seriously and develop, not just for her own personal advancement, but for causes she believes in.

Her internships with a youth advocacy organization gave her multiple opportunities to hone her skills at public presentation--from describing to her team at work the results of a survey of teens she conducted to speaking at a meeting in Washington about incorporating community service into school. By June of freshman year, she was clear that public speaking would be a serious goal for her, and had begun to reflect on what is involved in this skill, noting for example, "I believe that a public speaker should not be reading from note cards."

She also made the journey from finding her own voice to realizing that she could use her voice to advocate for her peers and their right to participate in the decisions and programs that affect them. Attending an open conference in Providence on AIDS and other issues, she decided to step up to the microphone:

So I spoke there too because I also felt very strongly about people that have the power, have the money to do something just sit there and talk about it and they don't go out actually in their communities. . . That was something I thought that would be good to say there. Also to encourage teens to do that too, because many of us could do a lot, but we're not encouraged to. We feel like we're not useful for anything. . . So that's why I talked about it. . . We need to speak out about it. We need to be encouraged to do that because we don't think we could.

But perhaps the most surprising result for students of finding their voices in their first year at the Met was not in the public sphere, but rather, in the very private sphere of their own families. Most of the students brought up spontaneously how much their relationship with their parents had improved.

For example, Leah's difficulties with school used to be a major source of tension in her family:

My conferences in my old school, those were always bad. 'Well, Leah's not doing this and this.' I used to never tell my parents anything about school. They'd say, 'How's school?' and I'd say, 'fine,' because I really didn't want to talk about it because I hated it. Now I talk about school a lot. . .

Although Nadia had not experienced the same tension in her household about her performance in school, she also felt that because of her experiences at the Met: "Now you have more things to talk about (at home)." Again, Freddie offered some of the most dramatic testimony:

Now I find it easier to speak to my parents. I never talked to them. I talk to them now, but at one point in time I hated to talk to them, especially anything about school. It was like the worst thing you could do, to say something back. When I'd get mad, my mouth starts to go, I don't even realize what I say--bad things. Since I was always holding it in, now it feels good to release all that. So now I'm like, 'Wow, I can talk. I can take a stand now, especially at my house. I have voice now. It's real good.'

A New Meaning to "College Prep"

From the moment Met students meet the requirements for entrance into the Senior Institute (which for most students occurs at the completion of their second year) they are encouraged to focus on preparing for college. On one level this may seem a surprising

choice. The Met's emphasis on project-based and work-based learning, as well as its origins as a career and technical school, would lead one to expect somewhat more attention to career pathways and skill standards and less to college choices and SAT's.

But the students see the Met's focus on college as very consistent with the school's insistence that the purpose of an internship is not to train for a specific job, but rather to help students achieve the Met Learning Goals and fulfill their personal learning plan. The Met is trying through the Senior Institute to redefine "college preparatory" in a way that not only ensures access to college and eventually to high skill careers, but also helps students to build the skills, habits of mind and work, and personal qualities that will allow them to survive and thrive in a high performance environment—whether it is school or the work world.

Although the majority of high school students in the U.S. today enter some form of post-secondary education when they graduate, about twenty-five percent still do not, and many (about half) of those who do enter do not stay long enough to earn a credential. The Met wants to do better.

In their junior and senior years, my conversations with students began to center more and more around the experiences they were having in applying to, visiting, and preparing for college. As one student put it, "This year, college *is* my internship." It became clear in the interviews that students were beginning to view college as a reality, not just a distant dream. In a related theme that emerges, most speak of how prepared they feel, both psychologically and academically, for college. They enumerate skills and personal qualities acquired at the Met that they think will help them succeed in college and beyond.

Finally, students describe two key lessons they have learned from their years at the Met. The first is that the standards that matter most are the ones they hold for themselves and these are dynamic, not static. The second lesson is how important it is to be part of a strong, supportive peer group and how such a group helps to make it possible to change and grow and still be oneself. If students can hold onto these lessons—if they can continue to believe in and challenge themselves and can find ways to build community—their chances of succeeding in college and beyond seem great indeed.

Making College a Possibility

Students at the Met are rightfully proud of the fact that all 43 of them applied to and got into college. As Maya explained to me, she and many of her peers were not the most likely college prospects coming into high school:

When I first started I came from middle school not caring about high school, I just wanted to finish high school maybe, that's it. I know a lot of students that, if they were to come here I know their minds would be changed somehow. There are some people that are here that two years ago were like, 'I don't want to go to college, I just want to graduate, that's it.' Now they're all applying to college.

Many of the students at the Met are also the first generation in their families to go to college. While their families are generally very supportive and excited to have them apply, the newness of this aspiration and the lack of experience with the many hurdles that exist, both in getting into college and doing well there, can create particular challenges for them.

Both Maya and Nadia talked with me at length about their families' ambivalence about them leaving home. For years, Nadia has served as the translator for her extended, Spanish-speaking family. A number of other students talked about how much their family depended on them, for example, in caring for younger brothers and sisters.

Coming into the Met, most students have never traveled far from home, or left their families for more than a day at a time. One of the reasons that the Met staff work so hard to build travel into their program (e.g., advisory groups go on trips; individual students win scholarships for summer travel and adventure experiences; students accompany staff to conferences around the country) is to give students and their families the experience of being apart.

Still, staff at the school are concerned that when problems come up, as they inevitably do in a student's first few months or year in college, the ambivalence will lead to a tendency to give up or withdraw. If you or your family aren't sure you really belong at college, then feeling homesick or failing a test may seem reason enough to drop out and get a job. And, of course, there is also the matter of getting and keeping enough financial aid.

One key strategy the Met uses is to try to ensure that every student completes at least one college course while they are still in high school (at no cost). Within a month or two of entering the Senior Institute, all of the students I interviewed were able to identify college courses they were thinking of taking that spring or summer or the following fall. By the time they graduated, most had completed at least one course, and a few as many as seven. In the 1999-2000 school year, Met students completed a total of 43 college classes.

These experiences are not always entirely successful. Several students have opted to drop classes or become auditors in classes that it looked like they would fail, or learned how to plead for incompletes so that they could finish the course. Nadia talks about this as a valuable lesson:

I was taking this math course that was just. . . I didn't pass it so, how can I explain it. . . I didn't get a grade for the course, which was good, because it would have been a really bad grade. . .and since I had this other work from this other class I was taking, I decided to just get an incomplete and just finish it this semester, which is what I'm doing now. So, it didn't go as I would like because I would like to do better in those courses, but I learned a lot. You could say it's self-awareness.

For Sando, succeeding in a college class represented a turning point in his education and aspirations for the future:

Well I didn't really have anything that I thought I was good at in school, except for sports, and I didn't really have any goals for work or anything. I took a class in children's literature [at a local college]. I wanted to be independent, wanted to go on my own and do something that I knew would give me a challenge, because I'm not used to doing work like that. And I love children, and that's what pushed me into that. So I took this class and it came out really good. My tests were pretty good and at the end of the class you had to write your own book and so I did that and it came out really good. I never did anything like that before and it was just crazy! Boom! I found my passion then. That was when I first managed to find out what I was good at.

After her first experience taking a college class as a junior, Leah became the first Met student to enroll full-time in an associates degree program (at Johnson and Wales

college) instead of attending the Met as a senior. She worked out with the Met how she would fulfill her high school graduation requirements simultaneously with embarking on college.

College exploration goes beyond the opportunity to take a few classes. Students informed me that it's a Senior Institute requirement for them to "go on line" and find at least a couple of colleges that interest them and then to select at least one to which they apply. Most students also get a chance to visit their "top picks"—usually as part of an advisory trip.

Students are very clear on how much support—and pushing—they get from the school, and especially from their advisors, during this somewhat stressful process. As Maya told me:

It's 'cause of the motivation. They won't let you slide. . . You've got even the principal in your face--Did you apply yet? People want you to go to college, and you see a future for yourself.

Because she has a twin sister at another high school, Maya is able to see how fortunate she is to have so much support:

I compare myself to my sister for example. We wanted to go to the same college, but I just noticed that my little folder of applications and things were already sent out, everything was just prepared, all done. Hers is still sitting on the kitchen table, half filled out, some letters returned back saying you missed this and this and that, 'cause she had no help, you know.

But perhaps the most important factor in making college a reality for these students is less tangible than the "principal in your face" or Senior Institute requirements. What comes through in their interviews is that these students have a sense of direction and purposefulness—a function primarily of the Met's emphasis on figuring out one's personal goals and interests through being engaged in the world. For example, Leah explains her decision to enter college a year early this way:

I think internships have been very important for me; I had no idea what I wanted when I first came here. I tried different things. . . . Most people my age don't know what they want to do. They're thinking what they might do. I'm more like set. . . I could always change my mind, definitely, but for now it's what I want to do.

At the same time, as Leah indicates in her aside—"I could always change my mind"—they seem to understand that you don't have to decide what you want to "be" once and for all. It is enough to have an interim goal. As Nadia told me:

I haven't necessarily known what I want to do from when we met for my whole life, but I basically have known what I wanted to do for next year and the next year. . . .

Maya talks directly about how becoming engaged in things at the Met has energized and sustained her:

I'm surprised that I've gotten this far. It was back and forth, whether I didn't want to go to college or maybe I should. But I'm so engaged that I really want to work my butt off for the next four years again. And do the same cycle and get somewhere after that. 'Cause after that there's no more school! After I graduate and get my masters or whatever, no more school, so I want to enjoy it now.

Compared to other kids, I'm more involved I guess. I'm more aware of what I want. I always compare myself to my twin sister. We're completely different people. I used to be like her. We were just messy people, don't keep ourselves organized. Now I can't live without my calendar, I can't live without my journal. I just can't go without it. Her, it's like, 'I'll remember.' I say, 'trust me, you're not gonna remember.' The Met has changed me it really has. My god it has. If I had gone to a regular school, I would not be like this, no way, no how. I'd have dropped out. I'm the type of person if I want to, I'll do it, if I don't I don't. That's the end of it.

Ready to Go: Developing the Skills and Personal Qualities for College

One of the surprises for Met juniors and seniors taking their first college course is the realization that the Met is "a lot like college." In particular they point to the ways they have learned to take responsibility for their own learning, a posture that they can see is necessary in college. A number of students make observations very similar to this comment from Maya:

This [the Met] is almost like a college setting. Like you're responsible for your own things. If you don't get it done, it's your butt on the line. You're paying for college. If you don't go to the classes, that's your money. The professors could care less. You take more responsibility for what you do. Obviously, if you don't do it, it'll show.

In learning to take responsibility for their own projects, Met students develop a number of skills that students have been finding quite useful in their college classes. For example, Nadia points to both research and communication skills:

One thing that I think is helpful is how we learn to seek for resources, since when we're doing projects we ask, 'will you help me obtain this for my project or for my exhibition? . . . I don't think that a lot of high school students have that, because they haven't had the opportunity, or they didn't need to ask or to search and like we've learned, just get the information, get whatever you need from anyplace that you can—the Library, Internet, wherever . . .

That helps a lot because when you are in college, you don't have a teacher making sure you have everything you need. Or you don't have a teacher making sure you're understanding everything that he's explaining. I mean sometimes they do try but it's not the same. So knowing how to seek for resources and how to basically get what I need to get out of the course and raise my hand if I have a question and not be shy to attend any study groups or even organize any, I think that's something that has helped me a lot and is something that we practice here at the Met a lot.

For Leah, who is actually a full-time college student this year, communication skills are proving to be important to her ability to handle college. She has talked in her interviews about her enhanced ability both to talk and to write.

Like this year and last year, sometimes mentors fall through and it's a communication thing. Its weird because what do you say to your mentor: 'you told me you were going to do this.' They are like somebody you're supposed to look up to. You ask for advice. I think a lot of that is very important in college too. Because if you're not communicating with your professor and you don't get something in or don't understand something. . . I think it's similar to a mentor. [Because of the Met] I'm much more into talking with people. We did a lot of things like that—job interviews, informational interviews, just going down the street talking to people. That's really helpful.

I've also learned how to start a paper. Learned a lot about introductions. That's been very helpful. I end up usually in the first paragraph asking questions. As opposed to just telling you what I wrote about or what I researched, which could be boring."

Maya helped me to understand a more subtle kind of learning that occurs during the many hours Met students spend talking with advisors, with Littky and Washor, and with their mentors. As she reminded me in our last interview of senior year, when she entered the Met: "I was a hard ass. I thought I was the biggest shit around." The Met has helped her to get her feelings under control so that they do not interfere with her productivity:

Every year at the Met, it's like, oh, I realized something new about myself. It's not always peaches 'n cream I have to go through. This year, every year I go through this low point, but that's also related to out of school issues and that's what kind of affects you at school. And I talked to my mentor about it—I don't want it to affect my school things because I know it can happen and I'll probably give up and I don't want that to happen. My mentor is there for me a lot. If I didn't have him, I don't know. My mentor, my advisor and me. The team. . . keeps the dream together.

Despite all of the ways in which they feel the Met has prepared them for college, a number of students admit to learning some lessons the hard way, by "messing up" in their first college courses. Students tell stories about making all the classic mistakes of first semester college freshmen: thinking a course was really easy and hence blowing it off and then finding they couldn't catch up; leaving the reading until the last minute; not talking to the professor after a bad grade on the first test.

But because these high school students still had their support system intact they were able to learn from these experiences and go on. After nearly failing her first course, Maya, for example, was able to be much more successful in the next one:

If I get a really good grade on my final, I can drop my lowest test grade, which was a 52 on the first one. I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't get into the study habits. And after he told us what to do—a way to study—the chapter is like 50 pages and you have to read it and thoroughly write notes—I've been getting 80's and above.

I'm organizing myself. I have my own calendar, I prioritize, what to do first, what is due first, what's the most important. And if it's like a reading assignment, I have to read like 100 pages, I'll do 20 pages a night or something like that, till I reach that point where I have to turn it in.

On the whole, students have been surprised by how well they as high school students could keep up with the much older people they encounter in their college courses. Nadia, as always, explains well what she and many of her peers were finding:

I haven't felt like I had to finish high school to be totally ready for college. Which is amazing I think, because when it comes to the regular school system, they think that you're supposed to have some—how can I phrase this—knowledge from the past. Like it's something that you work up. And it hasn't felt like that to me, and I've seen people who finished high school struggle with some of the things I've been struggling with. So it's not necessarily because I'm a high school student that sometimes I have to work hard, and overall I feel good about my courses, my GPA is good, and it's not like I feel like it's too difficult or impossible.

But perhaps the most surprised students have been those who did not do well in their school experiences prior to the Met. Only two years after being told by his former school that he would have to repeat ninth grade, Sando was a Met junior, taking a college

course in children's literature. Much to his surprise and joy, he "got a good grade." And that, he told me, "was when I first managed to find out what I was good at."

Good, Better, Best: Students Learn That Quality Evolves

For almost a decade, Milbrey McLaughlin and Shirley Brice Heath of Stanford University have been studying youth-based organizations that young adults identify as having made a major difference in their life. In her writings about the characteristics of these organizations, McLaughlin highlights key lessons that youth seem to learn from their participation in such groups. Central among these is the sense the young people develop that, as McLaughlin puts it, "quality evolves."

In other words, young people emerge from these organizations seeing standards as dynamic rather than static and understanding how their own efforts can lead them from good enough to better to best. As was evident in the interviews during the first few months and years, this lesson is learned early by Met students. As Freddie told me in the spring of his freshman year:

You should see some of my first drafts, from my first papers. You'd be like, 'hmm, all right,' then you'd move on to my next draft, next draft, next draft. You'd see I improved. Sometimes I just skim through them and I read them.

If students get a sense of personal satisfaction just from looking at successive drafts of one paper, they begin to see how they can eventually achieve professional standards, as they compare their work from one quarter and year to the next. As Nadia described this process in the beginning of her junior year:

We're constantly comparing ourselves now to ourselves a few months ago: Looking at my first paper to now how do I think about a professional paper, how do I sit down and organize it? I think that has improved a lot. Before I thought this was good; now I think it's just okay and this is better. The standards that our teachers have for us are definitely getting higher. We're going on to more complex things; really proving it with evidence.

And again at the mid-point of her senior year:

At the Met, standards have always been high, but now—for example I remember at the beginning we had to write essays, we had to present, we had to do things—and it's like you look at it, and you thought you were just, you know, excelling, or just going about what you can do at that point, but then again what you could have done then is not the same now. You could do better, it's higher. So every year they do raise the standards because we are able to do more, and it's always to have standards above and not below so that way you're not doing any mediocre work, you're doing the best that you can. And I've always set standards for myself that were higher, I try to do that because if you don't then you're not always going to try your best.

One structural way that the Met creates this feeling is through the Senior Institute. As students indicated in their sophomore interviews the entrance requirements set a standard for their work, helping them to focus and deepen their work. Once they become juniors, the identity of being part of the Senior Institute and preparing for college helps them hold themselves to an even higher standard. As Maya reported:

They refer to us as the Senior Institute people and you have to live up to that. The work hasn't gotten harder, but it's more in depth, there's more of it. . . Now we have to start thinking about senior thesis projects. You can't just make a sugar castle. I used to do

that. But these are like something is yours and everybody knows about it. It's not just any project.

Another important way that the Met helps students understand how quality evolves is through the constant documentation of and reflection on their own work. Students have told me that this takes place on an everyday level in their journals and in conversations with their advisor and advisory group, as well as in the more formal occasions, such as their quarterly meetings with their learning teams and their presentation of accomplishments in the final exhibitions of sophomore and senior years.

Making It: An Individual and Collective Concept

During the week leading up to graduation, each senior had a half-hour in which to present his/her senior thesis work and make a valedictory speech. Before reading his speech, Kenny told the story of how it had come to pass that the Met would have 44 valedictorians.

It all started, he explained, when he noticed that the college he most wanted to go to accepted a lot of valedictorians. To better his chances of getting in, he approached Littky with the request of making him the Met valedictorian. "Doc said, 'I'll have to think about it and get back to you,'" reported Kenny. "The next day he told me, all right, I'll make you the valedictorian, along with everyone else in your class."

In saying what they like about the culture of the Met students talk both about feeling recognized as individuals with particular interests and skills and feeling as though the Met, and especially their advisory, has become their "second family."

In my final interview with Nadia, I asked her to explain to me why so many students felt that way. Her answer elucidates an important aspect of the Met that it is easy for a visitor to miss. Although the Met in one sense is truly about "one student at a time" it is also about being part of a small learning group within a supportive learning community.

It [advisory] was essential to my success here; how I've done well. It's essential to have these people who are like your family. To go back to whenever things are not going well in your internships or whatever. We've laughed, we've cried, we've argued. It's just been so great because we're able to understand each other so well that it's just amazing.

It's funny because now we are all talking about the advisory; now it's like, 'wow, it's been a great thing'. It was there and we didn't realize what a great thing it was that we had 13 people we were so close to; other people who could help us with our work and could understand what we were going through and always be there to talk about anything. We've had our fun times and our fights, you know.

I remember times where we would come in and we would have tons and tons of work to get done and some of us could just be stuck and we couldn't do anything. And those times are just so funny; we would just sit there and talk. We had so much work that we had to get done . . . And we would say, okay we've got to do our work now and we would still come back and share some of our experiences, although we were very independent and doing different things. We always seemed to find the time where we could relate and talk about stuff.

I think that being in my advisory has changed some of my perspectives as a person because now I think I'm more open to different people, different views, different perspectives on stuff. . . We've come together and understood each other, but it hasn't

been easy. It wasn't impossible because we all made it and we were all able to relate to one another in many different areas, not just schoolwork."

When Nadia said this to me, she amended the "we" in the "we all made it" to "all of us who came into the Senior Institute together." It is an important distinction, because the Met did lose a number of students along the way. As in all urban schools, students left for a variety of reasons, including the transiency of their families. But for at least two or three students, the decision to withdraw seemed to have more to do with the difficulty they felt reconciling the changes they were going through in school with their street.

After a spectacular first year, Freddie rejoined his neighborhood friends for the summer and succumbed to the temptation to take what his friends assured him was an easier route.

He withdrew from the Met and signed up for another school that offers a form of work-study in which the student is paid a salary and the job is disconnected from the school. Sometime during that year his street life got him in serious trouble. Recovering from a serious knife wound, he lost several months of school and didn't end up getting credit for that year in school. When I last saw Freddie, during the winter of what would have been his senior year at the Met, he had stopped by the school to see his girlfriend, with whom he'd had a baby. He seemed genuinely proud of her for keeping up her schoolwork at the Met. And, as always, he was insightful about himself:

I know. I scheme a lot. I always try to find the easy way out of things. . . It might hurt me in the long run, I realize that, but I still do it anyways. Force of habit.

For Freddie and several other students (all male), it was just too hard to separate from their former peer group and to change the habits they had developed during years of being disengaged in school. Fortunately, most Met students were successful in feeling part of a new peer group at the Met in which changing and growing was accepted as a positive thing.

On their last days in the school, students repeatedly talked about how much it meant to them that everyone in their class, every student who had entered the Senior Institute two years ago, was graduating. Their pride in themselves seemed to be enhanced by their pride in the group:

I'm proud of myself for coming a long way in these four years, maturing and all that; I'm proud of my senior class for being the first class to ever graduate from the Met and I also want to be proud of the next class coming up. I know a lot of the eleventh graders; when they heard me say that their eyes just opened up a little bit like yeah, I'm going to make it too. That's what I really wanted—for them to hang in there. The met is sort of like changing the path for them. It's a great opportunity. (Maya)

We're all the success story. . . I think that what I will remember most is just the ups and downs that we all went through, the highs and the lows and how we all came together to make this one last high. I mean we all graduated, from the last two years all of us graduated. And it's just wonderful to see that, it's a great feeling to know that we succeeded together. (Nadia)

Learning Some Lessons from the Met

Recently, a professor of education who writes extensively about progressive educational models and knows of my study of the Met took me aside at a conference to ask me a

question: "Tell me honestly," he said, "if I went to visit the Met, would I see a lot of kids just sitting around?"

The truth is that sometimes students at the Met *are* sitting around. But after four years of interviews and observation, I have come to realize that there is a crucial difference between sitting around waiting for someone to make you do something (the posture of many young people in high school classrooms) and sitting around knowing full well that other people are depending on you and understanding what you need to get done.

When teenagers sit chatting with one another in the back of a classroom, or hanging out in the halls or on the grounds of large high schools, they are usually doing so without or in spite of the adults. Deborah Meier, herself the founder of several small schools, often points out in her presentations that young people deal with the anonymity of large schools by identifying with a group of friends and often a particular sub-population of students (the jocks, the burn-outs, the artsy ones, etc.) But as Meier also emphasizes, most of these "small schools" that students informally create for themselves are lacking in adults and decidedly nonacademic in focus.

At the Met, "sitting around" and talking is a central part of the curriculum and hence the role of the teacher. As the students point out repeatedly, the Met is like a family. What makes it that way is the range of interactions that take place among adults and young people. Many of the conversations resemble those that some families have at the dinner-table—everything from discussions of a book, play, or a topic in the news to soul-searching about why certain important family tasks aren't getting done, or why schoolwork is suffering from a lack of attention. Even the arguments in advisory resemble the ones siblings often have. As one senior remembered nostalgically, "there we were, at 15 and 16 arguing over whose seat it was, or yelling at someone not to hog Rachel [the advisor]."

The depth of the alliance that students feel with their advisors became very evident during students' final exhibitions when virtually every student described his/her advisor as being "the best." As Nadia said: "She has won a place in my heart. I'll never forget her and all the great things she has done for me."

Over and over again, students indicate how critical conversations with their advisors have been to their ability to focus and get down to work at the Met, and perhaps, most important, to their ability to understand, accept, and even feel good about themselves. The Met has literally turned the curriculum of high school inside out, pulling to the center the experiences, conversations, ethical dilemmas, life lessons, personal qualities, and work habits that are usually left to the student to learn at home or in the community.

Blowing Open the Schedule

After many years running a middle school and then a high school where they tried to make room for both the traditional curriculum and the central developmental tasks of adolescence, Littky and Washor decided to approach the Met differently. They decided to try to give each student the support and opportunity only the luckiest and most privileged get at home. To do so, they blew open the school day and the school building, creating time and opportunities for each student to develop a web of adult relationships both inside and outside the school. They guaranteed even the poorest students an opportunity to learn the skills and life lessons and gain the connections they will need in their transition to adulthood.

At the Met, students have time to do internships under the tutelage of a mentor in the community. Over the past 4 years, nearly 500 adults have served Met students in that capacity. Students also have time to get help at school from peers or an advisor in carrying out a project co-designed by student, advisor and mentor; for writing, revising and revising again the papers required as part of a project (e.g. proposals, reports, and reflections on their learning); for working through personal issues getting in the way of school or work; for presenting their work at quarterly exhibitions or participating in learning plan meetings with their advisor, parent and mentor. And still there is time for going to plays and other cultural events, for outdoor adventures, for working together on school activities or doing service projects in the community, for visiting colleges and completing applications and financial aid forms.

As the first cohort of students heads off to college, their experiences at the Met raise an extremely provocative question: What if students were to spend *less* time than most currently do attending classes for formal academic study and much *more* time than they normally get in the company of peers and adults who help them to develop their interests, their intellectual curiosity, and a sense of what it takes to produce high quality work? Is it possible that the current balance does not work for students, especially low-income and minority students? At best, some young people get the kinds of informal learning experiences described here in a well-run summer program or extracurricular activity. But many do not get it at all.

Turning the Model of Secondary School on Its Head

For almost fifty years, researchers associated with the University of Chicago have studied the lives of adolescents, from James Coleman's and Robert Havighurst's landmark community studies of adolescents in the 1950's to the more recent studies of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and the team of researchers working on the Alfred P. Sloan Study of Youth and Social Development, a longitudinal study encompassing the daily lives and plans for the future of more than a thousand adolescents around the country.

A consistent theme across these studies is the how much success later in life seems linked to the experience of concentrated, productive activity as a teenager. Yet, most high schools are not organized to give students opportunities to participate in such activities.

At the Met, students get this experience as early as their freshmen year when they begin working on challenging real world projects in their internships. For students who have not been successful in school, the opportunity to engage in challenging tasks seems to restore their faith in themselves as intelligent problem-solvers.

To make this possible, Littky and Washor had to turn the traditional model of education on its head. The structure of the school allows students to use their intelligence even as they work on filling critical gaps in their skills and their knowledge. As Washor puts it, "Most people say you have to know before you can do. But lots of us need to do in order to know."

With the first group of students, this approach seems to have paid off. As they advanced through the school, they became more motivated to develop their skills. By the second half of junior year, most were taking or planning to enroll in college courses—in everything from English 101 to more specialized subjects such as anatomy or computer science.

One student succinctly described in her graduation speech the trajectory that has resulted in her decision to go to college and become a social worker: “I went from hair care to human repair.” Allowed to pursue her interest in cosmetology, she came to realize how much she enjoyed the social aspects of the work, and the degree to which many people use their hair care appointments therapeutically. By her senior year, she was doing an internship with a social worker and committed to pursuing that course of study in college. As her mother commented gratefully at graduation, “Finally, my daughter’s head is stuck to the rest of her body.”

The experience of these Met students also raises a second critical question: What if disengaged learners did not have to spend so many years moving step by step through subject matter that does not seem relevant to them and which they feel discouraged about learning?

If schools were more inventive and flexible in playing with the sequencing of learning experiences, disengaged learners might develop more of a “need to know” and become more motivated to engage in academic work.

Each time I visited the Met, other visitors were in the building: reporters, teams from other schools who had heard about the Met, staff members of the state education agency, college admissions officers, researchers, and prospective students or families. From having sat in on some sessions with visiting school teams, I know that they often struggle with what they can take back with them from the Met into much more traditional settings.

The two “What if” questions articulated above are offered in the spirit of providing those who visit and read about the Met with a useful starting place for thinking about, and ultimately for reinventing, their own schools.