

H-B Woodlawn Program

ASSESSMENT REPORT

May 2003

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. Review of Process

The Woodlawn Program (grades 10-12) opened in the fall of 1971, based on a proposal written that spring by Arlington teachers, students and parents to create a school which empowered students to accept the primary responsibility for their own educations. That initial proposal guided Woodlawn through June 1978.

The Hoffman-Boston Program (grades 7-9) opened in the fall of 1972, based on a community-initiated proposal to create a school focused on the special needs of the younger adolescent.

During the 1977-78 school year, the Arlington School Board decided to move all 9th-grade students into the 10-12th-grade high schools, and retain 4 of the 6 junior high schools as "intermediate schools." As part of that process the Board requested that Hoffman-Boston and Woodlawn merge into a single school for grades 7-12 and relocate to one of the two closed junior high school buildings (Stratford and Gunston). We requested and were approved to move into the Stratford building, effective in July of 1978.

As part of the "merger" of the two schools a "Merger Report" was prepared after a year-long collaboration. The Merger Report was submitted to the School Board for approval, and then became the founding document for the H-B Woodlawn Program.

In 1990, after a year of planning, the School Board adopted a report on the creation of "middle schools," and moved the 6th grade from the elementary to the intermediate schools for the 1990-1991 school year. At that time, H-B Woodlawn also added a 6th grade to its 7-12 program, and created a more defined middle school program following the County's middle school model.

By the late 1990's, questions came from the School Board about the on-going design for H-B Woodlawn, especially because we did not participate in the self-study and school-renewal processes required of the certified middle and high schools. In addition, there was a recognition that the original staffs of Hoffman-Boston and Woodlawn were approaching retirement age, and that therefore major changes in personnel at H-B Woodlawn were imminent.

In response to these questions H-B Woodlawn adopted the following goal as part of the School Management Plan for 1998-1999: "Initiate Study of the Current Status and Future Direction of the H-B Woodlawn Program."

The first year of the process was to engage in the National Education Association "KEYS" Program. Keys to Excellence for Your Schools (KEYS) is a survey instrument containing 35 factors essential to the development and maintenance of a quality education program in a school.

We administered the KEYS survey to students, teachers, and parents during the spring of 1999. When we received the KEYS assessment we were surprised to find that we did not receive the ratings we expected from our anecdotal evidence.

So for the Management Plan for 1999-2000 we started over again. Our goal was to "continue study of the current status and future direction of the H-B Woodlawn Program" by approving a study methodology and holding committee meetings on the components of the H-B Woodlawn Program.

For 2000-2001 we continued to hold committee meetings (15 committees met over 200 times over the two-year period) and approved the draft charter at a special Night Town Meeting on April 25, 2001.

While committees finished writing up their full reports during the 2001-2002 school year, we also began implementation of committee recommendations. Where it was deemed appropriate, recommendations were taken before the Town Meeting during the school year. In other cases recommendations were directly implemented. Perhaps the most involved set was that from the New Staff Committee, as we experienced the resignation or retirement of eight teachers.

The final report will provide guidance for the H-B Woodlawn Program for the rest of this decade. Undoubtedly, this cycle of study and reporting will occur again in our future.

B. Some Broad Conclusions

The dual impulses which created H-B Woodlawn (student-empowerment and attention to the needs of early adolescents) continue to guide us today. Our current operational practices still find their foundation in those central ideals. We retain the Town Meeting as our policy-making body precisely because in doing so we seek accomplish our original goals.

We re-affirm our commitment to student-directed learning. We try to provide options in academic content and also in methods of learning. We wish to continue providing community-based choices for learning as well.

Our proposal for neighborhood school district quotas was adopted by the School Board as the method to create the entering 6th-grade class.

We see the need to continue and expand our system of internal communications.

Our review of our internal community tells us that on the one hand it is a hallmark of our school, and yet on the other hand we could do many things to enhance it.

Our Teacher-Advisor system is another special program in comparison to the neighborhood schools. Some challenges for our TA system in the future include creating a training and mentoring program for new TA's, developing a reference document for TA's, and creating partnerships between middle school and high school TA's.

We carefully examined the current system of assessing student learning. We seek new ways of doing so without disrupting the currently successful practices of our teachers.

The H-B Woodlawn Philosophy Committee

Mandate:

To develop an updated philosophy statement for H-B Woodlawn.

Method:

A survey of students and extended committee meetings.

Findings: The H-B Philosophy

Students can learn to be responsible for themselves and their own education. To that end, the HBW program fosters:

- **Self-directed learning**
Every student is an individual and therefore possesses individual needs and abilities. Students that play an active role in their own education will experience learning in its highest form, building confidence, independence, and responsibility.
- **A caring community**
Because every student is unique, differences are accepted and valued. This respect for individuals leads to trust, which is the foundation of the school. HBW places trust in the individual's ability to make choices and take responsibility for his or her self and for the community. This trust includes an expectation of success, but also allows for students to make mistakes and learn from them. Respect and trust is mutual between teachers and students.
- **Self-governance**
Administrative and whenever possible educational decisions are made within the school community through a Town Meeting system that is egalitarian and democratic.

Recommendations:

1. Offer an elective on the school's philosophy and alternative education.
2. Provide more thorough orientation for prospective 6th-grade students:
 - aim at students, rather than parents
 - focus on alternative education and the school's philosophy
3. Require an orientation for all rising 9th graders:
 - encourage participation as an active choice
 - recognize transition from middle school to high school

4. Require a reflective statement of recommitment each year
5. Encourage experiential learning:
 - allow for more activity blocks
 - encourage more field trips, guest speakers, and other nontraditional educational opportunities
6. Encourage more selective choice of AP classes:
 - increase double block APs
 - eliminate GPA extra point
7. Recognize students who embody the values of HBW at graduation.

Town Meeting Committee

Mandate:

This committee was formed to address the H-B Woodlawn town meeting. Town Meeting is the cornerstone of H-B Woodlawn. It is the decision-making body of the school. Town Meetings created Woodlawn, facilitated its merger with H-B and have allowed the school to grow and evolve with the times. Town meeting is what sets H-B Woodlawn apart from other schools. However, it is contingent upon the participation of its community.

Method:

This committee used general discussion and a survey.

Recommendations and Findings:

1. **Town Meeting rules of conduct** should be assembled and distributed to all students at the beginning of the school year.
2. **A Town Meeting Facilitator Committee** should be established to monitor and publicize Town Meeting. The Committee's goal would be to ensure that Town meeting continues to evolve and meet the needs of both teachers and students.
3. **Town Meeting Minutes should be widely publicized** on the board outside the office and in a Town Meeting Binder. The purpose of this recommendation is to ensure that students know what issues have been discussed and what motions have passed and to eliminate repetitious discussions and motions.
4. **A mandatory class should be taught on H-B's philosophy.** An aspect of this class would be curriculum that focuses on the rules and philosophy of Town Meeting. This committee noted that there is a direct relationship between respecting and understanding the philosophy of Town Meeting and attendance at Town Meeting.
5. **A new draft or official replacement to the Merger Document should be created.** This new merger document would be approved by Town Meeting and would address, among other things, Town Meeting specifics.
6. **A Student's Bill of Rights** should be developed to address the student's position at H-B in a clear and concise manner. The committee thought that if students were fully aware of their rights, they could understand their place in the governing system of the School, and would be more motivated to participate in the process.
7. **Town Meetings should be held on a weekly basis. The ban on any mandatory meetings during Town Meeting time should be enforced.**

8. A **Judicial Review Board** should be created in order to ensure that the balance of power between students, teachers, parents, and administrators reflects H-B Woodlawn philosophy. The Judicial Review Board would consist of three parents, three students (representing a wide age range), and three teachers (at least one of which is an administrator). The purpose of the Judicial Review Board would be to ensure that Town Meeting continues to preside over all community issues.

Admissions and Recruitment Committee

Mandate:

To discuss the desirability for diversity in the student body. Review the current admissions policy. Develop new recruitment techniques to bring more diversity to the student body.

Method:

The committee conducted meetings for two years, developed and implemented recruitment techniques and recommended a new admissions policy to the School Board.

Findings and Recommendations:

1. An expansion of diversity is desirable for the H-B Woodlawn student body.
2. Expand use of traveling troupe.
3. Create a voice mail system so parents of prospective parents can contact current parents for information.
4. Introduce a regional quota system for places in the H-B Woodlawn 6th grade.

Assessment of Students Committee

Mandate:

To review the various methods used by teachers to assess student performance and how these methods impact the accepted philosophy of learning at H-B Woodlawn.

Method:

Surveys and interview of H-B Woodlawn staff/teachers.

Recommendations and Findings:

- Student should assess teachers and administrators at least once a year.
- New staff to H-B Woodlawn should be given a mentor. They should also have a manual on assessment strategies, guidelines and other resources.
- Teachers should publicize their system for determining grades.
- Teachers using rubrics should develop them in collaboration with students.
 - Teachers should analyze the effects of Easy Grade Pro (EGP) on assessment.
 - The School Board should appropriate adequate funds to pay for training of teachers in the use of Easy Grade Pro (EGP).
 - Teacher should be allowed to use a “+/-“ system in reporting student grades.
 - SOL testing should contain item analysis for teachers to use to improve instruction.

Instruction Committee

Mandate:

To determine student satisfaction with the H-B Woodlawn instructional program.

Method:

This committee designed a survey that evaluated fifteen areas of instruction: library, computer access, software, art supplies, science equipment, photography equipment, subject matter, student involvement, teacher enthusiasm, teacher fairness, grades, homework, student-directed learning, encouragement to shape education and instruction learning methods. Completed surveys were received from 80% of the student body. Individual interviews were conducted with a number of teachers in a variety of disciplines. Questions were asked concerning curriculum, resources, methods assessment and student role/teacher role.

Recommendations and Findings:

- HBW promotes student-centered learning, therefore, the committee recommends that students regularly evaluate the effectiveness of classes.
- That HBW conduct an annual survey to track the change in outlook toward each class and assess the effectiveness of classes over time.
- The committee recommends a moratorium on tests except when used as a diagnostic tool. The committee advanced the idea that in lieu of tests, innovative assessments should be explored to foster a love of learning.

Internal Communication Committee

Mandate:

To evaluate the state of communications within H-B Woodlawn.

Method:

Questionnaire distributed to students, teachers, other staff, and parents.

Recommendations and Findings:

- The most constant and highest ratings for communication between students and teachers occurred in the areas of academic life and TA (Middle school 3.8 and high school 3.5)
- The message boards are used increasingly as the students progress through the grades, where they have highest use in upper grades of high school. (3.9).
- One uniquely informal manner of communication – “word of mouth” – had an efficiency rating of from 3.0 to 3.5, with 3.0 being the rating for high school. It seems that middle school students rely a great deal on information that has its source as “word of mouth.”
- Town Meeting had its highest ratings recorded by those in high school.
 - The staff indicated that staff and team/departmental meetings are effective means of communication.
 - Parents are apt to use hotline, newsletter, website, and H-B talk when they know that these means of communication are available.
 - Parents of sixth grade and new ninth-grade students feel a “disconnect” during their child’s first semester at H-B.

Findings and Recommendations:

- Continue efforts to communicate importance of Town Meeting: have Town Meeting at night once a quarter; have a mini Town Meeting go “on the road” to the 6th & 7th grades.
- Form a panel of students, parents, and staff to investigate and promote the communication process which makes the academic program and TA programs successful.
- Continue to treat safety concerns as quickly as possible. Especially in 6th grade, pursue topics that will help students to identify and appreciate the uniqueness of the individual and how to live effectively well with other students.

- Initiate a communication process/program that would help the parents through the transitional phase of their child's beginnings at H-B (i.e., the first semester).
- Have a school-wide calendar printed and distributed monthly and weekly to staff.
- Keep and use an e-mail list of all parents.
- Keep website updated.
- Continue to use "walls and doors," bulletin boards, and the message boards.

Internal Community Committee

Mandate:

This committee was formed to review four general areas of the H-B Woodlawn community for examination and improvement:

1. Connections within grades.
2. Connections across grades.
3. ENTIRE SCHOOL connections – i.e., teachers, staff, students, and parents.
4. H-B Community apathy.

Methods:

This committee used general discussion and a survey from which they could extrapolate information about the status quo and need for improvements in the internal community at H-B. The survey was distributed to students.

Findings and Recommendations:

1. **Custodial friendliness program.** H-B would reach out to involve the custodians more actively in the community.
2. **Students/Teachers clean the school days.** This program would build a stronger sense of community responsibility.
3. **Cross-grade electives** should be offered to all students from different grades to mingle with each other.
4. **A community-wide after-school life** should be developed to foster community spirit. The offerings should include more actively run clubs, sports teams and community service groups and be organized with help from older students, parents and teachers.
5. **Reforms of the Big Brother/Big Sister Program.** This program would provide some type of formal recognition for graduating students who helped foster a sense of community.
6. **Community recognition for active H-B'ers.** This program would provide some type of formal recognition for graduating students who helped foster a sense of community.
7. **More field trips** (both day and overnight) should be held for community bonding and for educational purposes. This recommendation was overwhelmingly apparent in the student surveys.
8. **More fun days** (e.g., the Physics Fair and the day before winter break) should be held to create a sense of H-B solidarity.

New Staff Committee

Mandate:

To review and evaluate the process by which new staff is recruited, hired and mentored.

Method:

The New Staff Committee met frequently and debated the issues relating to recruitment, hiring and mentoring of new staff at H-B Woodlawn.

Recommendations and Findings:

- Encouragement the recruitment of H-B Woodlawn graduates or others who have had experience in alternative education.
- Encouragement the recruitment of long-term hires who will commit themselves to at least 7 years of service to H-B Woodlawn.
- Hiring committees should always be composed of students, parents and staff to interview all candidates for all positions at H-B.
 - All new staff should be assigned both a staff mentor and a student consultant.

Assessment Committee – TA Subcommittee

Mandate:

To review the TA system to determine the need to rejuvenate the system and prepare for training new TA's in the next few years.

Method:

Conduct a survey of current students. Interview teachers to gain their perspectives on the TA system.

Findings and Recommendations:

- **A training and mentoring program for new TAs should be created.** This is in order to address the issue of acquainting new TAs with the current TA system. It would be open to anyone who feels they need a refresher course. This mentoring program would pair the new TA/teachers with a current TA and the training program would address issues such as college advising, working with parents, etc.
- **A reference document on TAs should be written.** This would serve as a way to acquaint the new TAs with the current system. The teachers' manual section on TAs should be reviewed annually to make sure that the TA portion is accurate, up-to-date, etc., to serve as an additional document to which the TA can refer when he or she needs assistance.
- **A TA activity sheet should be created.** The purpose of this document would be to encourage more TA activities (within the middle school TAs especially.) It would be compiled from a survey) and would include other helpful information.
- **The "blurbs" should be revised.** We recommend the continuation of the blurbs system, however with revisions. Each teacher should list a few students in their current TA who could advise prospective TA members on whether that TA would be a good fit for them. We also recommend the inclusion of a percentage grade-level distribution.
- **TAs cannot put a limit on the grade level that they have in their TA.** This is in order to encourage TAs to stay with students over many years and to encourage students to stay with the same TA (especially in the junior to senior year period). For example, a student cannot be expelled from their current TA because the student has entered a grade that the TA does not take. This is designed to foster a blending of the lower and upper grades in order to make a tighter community, an idea that we have recognized to be important. This system can be paired with the big brother/sister program – the siblings can be matched up within TAs.
- **A partnership should be created between TAs with predominantly middle school students and TAs with predominantly high school students.** In this way partnerships can be made to strengthen the big brother/sister program.