

TIGERPATH

ACADEMIES

Discovering Talent, Developing Skills, Building Careers

*TigerPath: A Skills-based Model for HS that Builds the
Economic Sustainability of a Community*

By

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For the past one hundred years, a traditional high school student has been given the choice to take academic classes that “prepare” you for college education, or to take vocational courses that prepare you for workforce or perhaps a 2-year degree. The Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 was passed to give high school students vocational courses for those who were not pursuing college degrees. Famed educational philosopher John Dewey stated this around that time, “The belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative.” As factory life emerged for the American worker in the early 1900’s, an alternative to farm work became America’s new version of “high school”, a system that sorted learners into college or work preparation. One hundred years have passed, yet a stigma still exists, and those hands-on learning opportunities are often perceived as a less respectable career pathway than traditional, college prep classroom courses. This has been a most unfortunate message for the American student. In fact, the type of student most disserved by this approach are students who ultimately do not get as many opportunities to expand their skill set in hands-on courses—the 4 year college student.

Hands-on learning has always been understood as an excellent means to teach someone to produce deep and long-term understanding of subject matter. The ability to generalize learning in unpredictable situations is the hallmark of a well-educated individual. ISD423 is literally building a 21st Century high school around this idea!

Unfortunately, most of this practical reasoning ability is done outside the confines of a formal education. Subsequently, many people rely on the deeply personal experience of being mentored by someone who has valuable skills...usually outside of the school environment. TigerPath aims to pair students with the most relevant community mentors and experiences to create powerful and personal connections necessary for informed career choices.

We believe that traditional high school classroom experiences are not highly predictive of future workplace success. Just being good at Mathematics is not necessarily good enough for the effective engineering student. Just being good at Science is not necessarily enough for the nursing student. Excellent classroom experiences need to be coupled with critical hands-on learning opportunities to create the ultimate workforce readiness.

This applies to occupations across the entire workforce spectrum. Ultimately, the ability to communicate and collaborate with others, to solve problems, to think critically and to create in our economy have never been more valuable than today. In fact, these 21st Century skills are nearly essential to the continued edge that the American economy has held for so long. We do this by promoting learning environments where these skills are clearly present. This edge is as necessary in Hutchinson as it is in our country.

The Model—Tiger Path Academies

Over the past five years, Hutchinson High School has been working to build “career academies” that integrate career pathways and hands-on learning into all curricular areas. We have been working on balancing this premise by offering hands-on opportunities for all students. This initiative is called TigerPath Academies. One unique effort that we employed to achieve this was by having a goal to *minimize* our state requirements in order to *maximize* opportunities to develop real-world skills, as well as to create the most personalized academic experience.

As part of this, we screened eight years’ worth of recent graduates to find out where their post-high school experiences led them. We divided their occupations into four large, workplace sectors that include STREAM (manufacturing/ technical); Sci HI (healthcare/science); Business and

Human Services. Each of these sectors employs between 20% and 30% of the workforce, so these are pertinent to our students as any predictor could be.

Hands On Learning

TigerPath Academies emphasizes hands-on, workforce-based skills courses that begin in the early years of high school. We believe that deep understanding occurs more naturally by learning real concepts and then applying them to increasingly more abstract situations. From the moment a student starts their four-year plan in 8th grade, we are focused on skills gained as a function of their high school education, not outside of it. Current educational practices from middle school through colleges leave a student with a high imbalance of too much theory and little to no practice. We want our students to be gaining workforce skillsets at the same time they are gaining the maturity and experience to make career decisions about those skills.

Skills Education as a Core Subject

TigerPath Academies emphasizes the existence of a “5th Core” discipline--real world skills and application courses. A line we’ve used from the beginning is that a Manufacturing course has the same value as a core subject, such as Mathematics. We have explicitly created opportunities for students at all grade levels to have similar opportunities to gain entry level into all subjects, including those departments that have historically been “vocational” in nature. Further, we profess that these classes have equal importance for all students, not as a dumping ground only for those that are disengaged with the schooling process. These early, democratic learning experiences are not tracked by ability level. In fact, these powerful shared learning experiences reward real conceptual understanding over traditional skills such as reading ability.

Dual Enrollment and On the Job Learning

TigerPath Academies seeks to infuse post-secondary (college) credit in each pathway. We believe that all students are college- and skill-bound and will be frequently going back to school during their working lifetimes. By hosting these gateway experiences to higher learning, we promote the idea that all students are directed towards future success as a student and a productive member of the workforce. These post-secondary experiences are offered through Advanced Placement, PSEO, concurrent and articulated coursework. This coursework leads to two- and four-year degrees, as

well as certificated programs, not to mention better preparedness for life. High school is no longer a place where you get ready for post-secondary education, but a place where you begin it.

TigerPath Academies places embedded career internships, work-based learning and apprenticeships in each pathway. We need to have strong community partnerships that allow students, the school and the community to share in their learning. This external focus promotes learning from a widely skilled and eclectic set of expertise rooted in the community. This is a highly untapped resource for the traditional high school. Our students are the most likely people to return to Hutchinson as employees. What connections and skills do we want them to have on their potential return?

Learning Environments that Support Learning

We embrace a robustly supportive educational environment where open space, collaborative furniture arrangements, wireless technologies and flexible meeting areas are the rule, and not the exception. Movement, activity and active communication are aspects that are looked at with favor, and not disdain. We strongly promote instruction that gets students out of the “90 degree” sitting position.

Hutchinson High School is the place where we educate our students; TigerPath is how we educate students. TigerPath is as much a local economic imperative as it is a careers program for high school students. We lead with TigerPath with our 8th graders as incoming students and continue to build on this philosophy as our students travel through high school and beyond. We believe in learning experiences where teachers elicit high engagement through purposeful instruction designed to meet the needs of individuals and/or smaller groups of students. The new HS building is the product of a changing vision of how formal educational facilities look. Our challenge is to make sure our methods of teaching teenage students is equally transforming.

We are challenged to create these learning environments that address massive, disruptive changes to the way we work, and consequently, the way we learn. Our students need an educational system that will prepare them for jobs that IBM CEO Ginny Rometty recently tabbed as “*new collar*”

jobs--such as virtual reality, artificial intelligence and cybersecurity. To modernize our learning environments, we need to consider the ways in which our institutions and traditions have changed, but also, by the rapid rate that they will continue to do so.