

Admitted

ACCESS, COLLEGE READINESS

SUPPORTIVE SCHOOL COMMUNITIES PROMOTE COLLEGE READINESS: REFLECTIONS FROM A PUBLIC SCHOOL EDUCATOR

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School year 2021-22 will be a watershed return to the classroom for all school communities. For a sense of context, think back to your own college application journey. Compare that to what high school students will experience this fall.

In spring of 1985, I'd failed the on-the-road driver's license test for the second time and was homebound. Madonna and Tears for Fears played in a loop on MTV, and my older sister terrorized and hazed me at every opportunity. I was a junior in high school who needed to interview a family member for an assignment about potential careers.

I opened the door to my father's den. "Dad, I need to interview a family member for homework." "Ok," he said sitting at his desk. "What career do you think would be good for me?" I asked. He thought about it and resolutely said, "Shopping. Something with shopping." I winced. As a bookish A and B student with a small circle of artsy, awkward friends my dad's response confirmed he was clueless. "Why do you say that?" I followed up. Encircled by bookshelves and work-league baseball and bowling trophies, my dad smiled and responded: "You're good at it."

I share this information because it was the first time I had a direct conversation about college aspirations with either parent. Looking back, shopping may have been one of the few things that came to mind for my dad about me or any of his daughters. I grew up with a father who traveled to Washington, D.C. two to three weeks a month. My mom, an elementary principal in the 1960s with a master's degree, had emotionally checked out while I was in middle school. For long periods of time, she'd stay in her room 24/7. After emerging from a stretch of depression, she started part-time job managing a plus-size clothing store at the mall during my junior year of high school. She'd put a \$10 bill on the kitchen table to order pizza for dinner. None of us ever had friends or company over. The debit card in a kitchen drawer was how we took care of ourselves and the house.

I've since become aware that I had minimal access to what's known in counseling as college preparedness knowledge (CKP). As a second-generation college student, there had always been tension within my family. On my father's side, once a year we went to Oregon where I had a direct look at pregnant 13-year-old cousins and physical and verbal abuse. Everyone smoked and drank heavily at breakfast. There, dropping out of high school to be a welder or truck driver was considered a good move. Yet I was ready for college due to the high-quality public school I attended and the college-going culture in my community. This privilege is not lost on me.

My school community played a pivotal role in my path to higher education in '80s. And for the millions of students across the country who have been separated (at least physically) from their schools due to the pandemic, the stakes are high this fall. The unprecedented return to the classroom coincides with a national mental health crisis. At the New Visions Charter High School for the Humanities IV in Far Rockaway, Queens, I work with students who are entirely different from me demographically, making it imperative that I listen closely for interests, needs, values, and preferences. This is critical given the 18-month period of educational disruption. Identifying existing resources within the school community can provide immediate support during re-entry into classrooms.

Student and staff may have stressors that are not apparent on the surface. It takes time to develop trusting and positive relationships following a traumatic event. Leveraging my roles as a special education integrated co-teaching instructor and case manager, for example, allows me to more relevantly assist instructionally while helping students obtain college preparedness knowledge. School staff will likely have to draw from the deep well of evidence-based practices in this challenging year. For instance, transition planning as a special educator may connect with more hands-on college advising. Whether a student is energetic about work, supporting family, music, cars, or eager for pre-college or college-level curriculum, my role is to support that path.

Personally, I had no such advocate looking out for me in the 1980s, but didn't really need one. Pre-internet, a high school student could do most of the work. The counselor's office had a library of college brochures and paper applications to peruse and photocopy.

Looking back, I wish I knew more about financial aid and opportunities such as ballroom dance club and student government. My dad couldn't manage money and my parents were often in a precarious situation. Every semester, my \$900 tuition bill was paid with my mom's earnings from her part-time job. Otherwise my sisters and I had to self-support. The upside is that, in addition to waitressing, I became a reporter then editor at the daily school newspaper for \$80 a week. This is where I connected with friends who were writers and interested in the arts.

Financial aid is a huge consideration for the students I serve. Whether working with intact immigrant families from the Caribbean, Latin America, and Southeast Asia or those students who are in foster care, homeless, or undocumented, I will have to finesse difficult, but important conversations: How will the student or family pay for college? Will the student live at home? Are there barriers in the home that are not apparent? It would have been less stressful if an adult at my school confidentially knew that my mother was reclusive and my dad, a Ph.D., was not engaged.

This circles back to trust and relationships. I am a white woman from a different culture and region of America than the families in my school community. As such, there is an ongoing need for me to continuously gather insight into the nuances of the families I serve. Interpersonal connections go far. Heading into the 2021-22 school year, I urge my colleagues to reflect on their own high school years. What would the adolescent you stress about going into the fall? Evidence-based research for re-entering school following a global pandemic doesn't exist. A seismic professional and interpersonal attitude shift awaits.

I plan to use this year to continue to build cultural and communication competency. I will continue to listen and collaborate with students, staff, and parents from countries such as Haiti, India, Russia, Israel, and the Dominican Republic, many of whom have a multitude of identities. And I'll also look for opportunities to share my unique experiences and knowledge about the American higher education system and workforce opportunities.

In addition to transition planning as a special educator, I'm also a ninth-grade advisory teacher. In the fall, I will likely have a larger role in college advising. Deliberate and delicate collaboration with the lone school counselor and principal will be critical. Already, we have discussed collaborating on college and career readiness lesson plans, college nights, and one-on-one support for applications and essays.

College and career readiness initiatives must coalesce with core high school academics. Access cannot and should not be a priority for only traditionally identified achievers. Every person has gifts and interests. Millions of individuals have thrived after high school. It is not acceptable for only a portion of students to have access to critical resources for a productive adulthood. This is a matter of educational policy, the US Constitution's Equal Protection Clause, and a national security imperative reminiscent of the post-WWII Space Race.

Students can and should see themselves having a future after graduation. At under-resourced public schools like mine, typically 40 percent of the student body is focused on "passing" with D's to earn a standard diploma. Survival mode. As a school community, we have to disrupt this cycle. It's not just the high-achievers who need a postsecondary plan. Struggling students, as much as anyone, need to explore and find direction. In the fall, content teachers who embed college and career readiness elements into lessons plans will find themselves rewarded. Motivation deepens when a student makes the connection between what is learned in class and his or her potential for a self-supporting and creative life.

C.J. Lake is a special education teacher/case manager and ninth grade advisory teacher at New Visions Charter High School for the Humanities IV in Rockaway Park, New York.