

The Most Important Goals of American (and Japanese) High School Education

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A number of year ago while living in Japan and working at the Osaka International School, I wrote an article in which I asked my colleagues to consider what they believed to be the goals of American high school education. Among the questions I asked were:

How many goals are there?

Are we trying to do too much?

Can our list of goals be ranked in order of importance?

How do our goals compare with what we believe are the goals of education in Japan?

Should either country try to emulate the other?

To help us along, I created a list of possible goals of American high school education for us to consider. Here is my list of eight possible goals in random order:

A THINKING

The goal is to develop in our students the ability to think rationally, creatively and critically — to use their minds to analyze, evaluate and synthesize and to become proficient problem solvers and decision makers.

B TECHNOLOGY

The goal is to produce students who are capable of dealing with the explosion of knowledge in today's technological world. Students must be able to use technology both personally and professionally to access information and learn to evaluate that information and use it productively.

C BEHAVIOR / SOCIALIZATION

The goal is to teach our students a set of behaviors that will enable them to become productive and contributing members of society. Their behaviors may include a strong work ethic and certain responsibilities of citizenship in the United States.

D THE BASICS

The goal is to provide every student with a sound basic education in fundamental knowledge and skills we all believe are important. There might include basic literacy skills and basic facts and principles from math, science, social studies, literature, etc.

E WELL-ROUNDED

The goal is to educate the whole person — body, mind and spirit. We can accomplish this goal by providing a wide range of options and experiences for every student, offering a broad, liberal arts curriculum and requiring/encouraging participation in sports/physical education, chapel, extra-curricular activities, etc.

F PREPARATION

The goal is simply to prepare students for what comes next. If our students are successful in securing good jobs in the workplace or in gaining admission to fine colleges and universities, we have done our job.

G LEARNING TO LEARN

The goal is to ensure that our students will want to continue to learn after they leave high school. We want to equip our students with the proper learning-to-learn skills, including a healthy curiosity and a love of learning so they will become life-long learners.

H CHARACTER

The goal is to instill in students the attitudes and habits displayed by people of high character. These may include traits such as integrity, responsibility, respect, empathy and other ethical traits we agree are important.

As you might imagine, most of the questions posed at the beginning of this article are very difficult to answer. Most would agree that all good American schools value every goal listed above and they all try to address each one in some manner. We might also agree that there is some overlap and we could perhaps shorten the list. However, trying to rank any list of goals is an exercise in which we may never reach agreement.

Ironically, the fourth question from above: “How do our goals compare with what we believe are the goals of education in Japan?” was the simplest question to answer. After only limited experience with Japanese education, there was strong agreement about the goals of Japanese education. The list of eight goals from above could be shortened to two: Goals C and D.

Japanese education is grounded in producing productive citizens who have a strong set of very basic skills and information — nothing more. My Japanese colleagues were often bewildered at what seemed to them to be a very long and confusing list of goals of American education. We understood them very well; they had great difficulty understanding us.

And finally, should we try to emulate each other? Or, phrased another way: “Who has it right?” Again, this question was easy to answer: “For the most part, we both have it right.”

Educational goals across cultures can be aligned only if there is cultural alignment. We can try to emulate each other only to the extent that our cultural and societal values coincide. In short, both cultures were relatively satisfied with their list of goals — Japanese goals that were relatively simple and straightforward and American goals that were more complicated and comprehensive.