

# Special Interview with Tom McMorran, Joel Barlow High School (JBHS) Principal

August 27, 2009

*Prior to the "Fare for Education" Event at the Concert on the Green (August 31, 2009) sponsored by the Redding Education Foundation*

*A YouTube video link will appear on our website at a later date.*

*The construct of the conversation was as follows:*

**Tom McMorran tackled three (3) questions:**

- 1) Describe the structure of our current educational model..
- 2) What is the future educational model that reflects growing global competition and 21st Century learning model?...
- 3) Finally, what's the community's role and responsibility toward making this model a success?

*The interviewer was Zachary Smith, JBHS senior.. Introductions were made...and the conversation began.*

**Tom McMorran (TM):**

We are going to talk about Joel Barlow High School....the relationship Barlow wants to have with community and our vision for education in the future. So we should start with you Zach. You are going into your 4th year. What has Barlow done for you?

**Zach Smith (ZS):**

What has Barlow done for me? That is a fantastic question. The first thing Barlow has done for me: It's helped me wrap my head around "community"...the idea of living with other people, interacting with others, really understanding how things work together---people, systems. The second thing: It's exposed me to the world outside of Redding & how we effect & influence other areas.

**TM:**

So we know you will most certainly graduate with the class of 2010. So by 2020, you will have graduated from college and either been in graduate school or working for about 6 years. But we don't know much about 2020 other than that we are certain that what we *think it is going to be like* AND *what it's actually going to be like*, we know is different. We are a working institution organized more than 100 years ago. It's greatest strength, as so often the case, is its greatest flaw. High Schools are INCREDIBLY STABLE STRUCTURES. Your [grandparents] can walk in tomorrow and be just as comfortable with the way we use time, the way we students and teachers interact....when they went here. We think we are doing a tremendous job preparing students for the CURRENT world...and we need to think about the future world.

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When you are 10 years older than you are now, how will community, technology, economy, be different than it is now????

Any idea?

**ZS:**

Well, there will be a very, very big focus concerning infrastructure, energy, the environment. There will probably be a lot more focus on basic things like food and water. There's going to be a lot, a LOT of change. Also technology will be so rapidly advanced. There will obviously be schools but the way we use computers, iPods, cell phones...I probably am not going to recognize our current school system if we help the new system emerge...(otherwise it's the same as today).

**TM:**

I think that in 10 years time, we will be in an even more globally competitive market. When I graduated from high school in 1981, my future field of competition for my career were Americans in CT, those who wanted to be a teacher here. The graduate today or 10 years from now will need to have the skills, the knowledge and the ability to compete with people all over the world...and this is great because it is going to drive us to be creative. If you are one in a million in India or China, there are more than 1000 people just like you. If you take the school aged population in China & the population in India and you look at emerging market school children globally and compare each...the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China), you can take just the upper 1/3rd in terms of performance of those countries (and that's a bigger population than our entire student population in the U.S.) so we can't any longer just say, "here's some basic skill sets...here's how to read or how to do math"...we need to engender creativity because the engine of America's future is going to be our ability, through students such as yourself, to be creative.

Which means that HOW we work

within our schools and within the community has to evolve. In this school we have to give students more opportunity for self-directed, inquiry based learning, which now that you are a senior, you may be looking at some of our options...our Capstone projects, senior experience....what are you hoping to do???

ZS:

***“And you have all this opposition...Us vs. Them... You vs. Us. We know that in the collaborative future, if there are only 330 million of us and we’re in a global economy that is tapping into say 3 billion or 4 billion of our brothers and sisters on the planet, we’ve got to learn how to work together.”***

Yes... initially, I had a lot of different ideas. My original idea was to take a look at my carbon footprint...I thought I want to get into that [environmental]

field when I’m older. I took another look and thought that I could improve the school’s gardens in our courtyard. “How can I leave my mark on that?” And then I looked at another idea that could be fun...because I’m an actor...as part of my senior experience...Why not try my hand in a TV show, video editing, work with a group of people, try to get director/producer skills in there.? Those are three ideas....

TM:

All those ideas...YOU are in the driver seat. In traditional education says that the teacher should be driving the bus all the time. But we know if your senior year looks like your freshman year for the 4th time, where all the decisions made by the adults then, then your capacity to grow, expand your horizons, and be creative will be constricted. So, as we look to educating, we realize now that we need to adopt a new philosophy where we stop an approach that’s:

**Either / Or...**

I’m either going to take this OR I’m going to take that...

I’m either going to study English right now OR I’m going to study Calculus right now And that’s what traditional HS has done...it divides everything into different chunks...But we know in the future...with the internet. Focusing how we view the world, it’s got to be:

**Not only BUT also...**

Or another way to say it is...

In the 20th century, the real way to move forward was to learn how to be analytical-how to divide things into bits. But in the 21st century it’s how to be synthetic...how to add things together...

So our program here needs to provide opportunities...for students... to grow, to try things on their own, to be self-directed, and to make connections among the different courses they take. It also means that our relationship with the community has to change.

Most Americans think: “It’s my job: I drop my kids off, pick my kid up, and I kind of make sure my kid does his homework”.

We know that the community itself is a rich potential location for learning and we have to build these relationships. The old

model of parent, teacher and student was that any two of those ganged up on the third. The parent & the teacher would say to the student “you’ve got to do a better job”, the student & parent would say “we’re not happy with your teaching”...and the teacher and the student would sometimes say “parents, be more involved.”

And you have all this opposition...**Us vs. Them...You vs. Us.**

We know that in the collaborative future, if there are only 330 million of us and we’re in a global economy that is tapping into say 3 billion or 4 billion of our brothers and sisters on the planet, we’ve got to learn how to work together.

So we’ve got to give you more than just science labs as opportunities to experiment how to be socially intelligent with other people...thus your being in drama club or the student council...

ZS:

Exactly...

TM:

So what can families do to help us as we try to grope our way forward to this more student centered, more active learning???

ZS:

Well I definitely think families need to be more open to these ideas. I think sometimes, these kind of ideas, (it’s not necessarily too radical ) but it’s such a difference from traditional [thinking]. A lot of parents might think, well, “I was raised this way, I was taught to learn this way, why does my kid have to be so much more student focused...maybe I want a teacher in between my student and ummm...[his learning]...”?

TM:

Well let me pick up on that...

From the time that the apple dropped on Newton’s head to the American Revolution there were about 2/10ths of 1 percent of the population whom we considered to be well educated. And even into the late 1950s, if the bulk of the population had a basic education---

could read, could write, could do basic math--- then there were good jobs for people. You could work in factories, you could assemble things, you could work with your

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hands. Now I think we made a mistake when we got away from people working with their hands because a lot of us learn by doing. But now we are in an economy where far more than 80 percent need to really have what we call 21st century skills: numeracy, literacy, social skills, the ability to think creatively, technological competencies, just to keep in place. Everybody’s got to move forward.

For instance, in the 1940s when the SAT was introduced, about 1/2 of 1 percent of students took the test; it was a way to see who was going to go to college. Now, here at Barlow, 90 per-

cent of the students today take the [SAT] same test. And we've got to make this commitment to every child to be well educated! The reason we say there's "no child left behind" is that the U.S. needs our greatest asset which is our student to be fully prepared for we don't know what kind of future...all we know is you need to know how to learn which is different from "memorizing this list". So it's an exciting time for you to be a senior!

What's the course that you're going to hope you'll be more actively engaged by the teacher???

**ZS:**

I really hope this year, it will probably be my honors Physics course. This year I kind of cut back on my academics. Instead of taking 5 academic classes (not taking social studies and language)...I decided to focus on my Math, my English, and Science. In sciences, I've always done very well in. But this year, I think physics...I've heard a lot...it will be more difficult, more math oriented...I'm a little intimidated. But I really hope that when I come into class I can visualize the formulas in my head, I can really connect with Mr. Ecsedy...I really hope that I can click and be engrossed in what physics is.

**TM:**

That's a great response. And I'm just going to put it in the language that we in the faculty talk about. We say that in decades past, there's the old school song that "You can read and write and 'rithmetic sung to the song of a hickory stick" ...that teacher's going to beat that knowledge into you...you're GOING to READ, WRITE and DO ARITHMETIC!!!

The new "Rs" of the modern world, in the 21st century are "Rigor, Relevance and Relationship". So when I ask you about that, you tell me about Honors Physics. You might be interested to know that some studies indicate that a graduate from a school such as Barlow, holds as much knowledge, today, as a sophomore in college 50 years ago. Just because of the expanse of the availability of information. You know every 18 months the amount of information available to us doubles and the cost of doing it is cut in half.

So if we move that forward 50 years, eventually we won't have laptops...we'll have probably in our glasses. just projectors to show us ready access to all the information of the ages. So Physics is a tough course no matter if it's Aristotle doing it or yourself. And because of advances in cognitive research, like brain scan capacities, MRI's, things like that, we know a lot more about How people learn than they did in the past.

And we know that in order for you to get to the Grey Matter, where all your thinking is going to take place, it's got to go through your emotional centers. And if you don't feel confident

***"The new 'Rs' of the modern world, in the 21st century are 'Rigor, Relevance and Relationship'.... And we know that in order for you to get to the Grey Matter, where all your thinking is going to take place, it's got to go through your emotional centers. And if you don't feel confident that your relationship with the teacher and the other students is trusting, is supported, is collegial, then you won't take the risks you need to really go farthest. But what we do know is that everywhere we build positive relationships, we build a capacity for rigorous expectations."***

that your relationship with the teacher and the other students is trusting, is supported, is collegial, then you won't take the risks you need to really go farthest. But what we do know is that everywhere we build positive relationships, we build a capacity for rigorous expectations. And when students are performing at a rigorous level they suddenly see the relevance of what's being asked of them.

I mean how often when in your cafeteria do you hear students say "I just don't know why I am being asked to do all this advanced math...I don't see the relevance."

**ZS:**

I hear some people, definitely, it's like "Why are we studying this in Geometry?...it's like we should just go outside and build something...it might make a little bit more sense" ...Or Why do we have to write all these essays all the time?...I don't see where I will use this in the real world"...

**TM:**

So we see that if we improve relationships, we improve rigor and that improves relevance which improves relationships... it's this little positive spiral. So the reason we are so excited about the REF venture [the Redding Education Foundation's "Fare for Education"]...is just as important to us at the high school that we are building our friend's net as we are building our potential to seek grants and funding.

Because that community orientation...where we stop the notion of "I drop my kids off" and then the "school does something to them and then I pick them up later" is now more interpenetrating than the "I have 2 teen age girls and I want them to be rigorously challenged, so I want to be involved and build relationships that are positive"...and the more trusting relationships are, the more we can have parents, teachers and students all honestly looking at the strengths and shortcomings of students and address them.

Overcoming some old notions of what school is like is a big step. A lot of what people need to talk about is:

Gee...How is today's education different from the one I got???

Because what we often find is that people are projecting their education from the '60s and the '70s and the '80s onto what they want their kids to do today and we are saying that will get us only so far. We've got to put kids more into responsibility and relationships and by doing that help them grow their social skills muscles.

So Zach, I am glad to hear that you are balancing your academic with your social interests and personal self-directed learning So as is almost is always the case, all these conversations come down to: With improved communication, there's better understanding and more alignment of resources.