

How to Transform the American High School



Interview with Dr. Sarah Fine

Vicki Davis: Today we're talking with Dr. Sarah Fine, author of *In Search of Deeper Learning, The Quest to Remake the American High School*. Now I know a lot of my listeners could rant about this, but Sarah, where are the areas where the American high school needs to be remade?

Dr. Sarah Fine: That's a great question. I would say pretty much all of the areas unfortunately in our book. So my coauthor and I, we started a project about eight years ago where we were setting out to look at really innovative high schools, which we saw as serving a wide range of kids really well. And we looked and we looked and we looked and uh, we found some schools where there were pockets of really amazing work happening, but we found very few schools, which as whole schools were really working well for all kids. And so what we ended up doing was kind of piecing together and glimmers and pockets, uh, what we thought are really amazing high school might be.

Sarah: Also, we really spent some time digging into why we thought so few high schools were doing well as whole schools. And it really comes down to kind of the historical way high schools have been designed in America. So high schools were set up for all students in the early 20th century. Before then they were really available only to elite students and it was a moment in time when large swaths of immigrants were coming and flooding to the cities in the US and there was this scramble to figure out how do we serve all of these kids who speak all of these different languages. And so what you got was kind of this batch processing model where you have high schools that are sorting kids, tracking kids based on very shallow perceptions of who they are and what they might become. You have separations of subjects from each other and from the real world.

Sarah: You have quote unquote college preparatory curriculum being separated from technical and vocational and career track curriculum. You have teachers who are separated from each other and who are given really strict guidelines about how much they have to get through. You have colleges which are asking kids to earn credentials, which really don't mean very much in terms of learning. So if you look, for example, at advanced placement, there's just, there's just an enormous array to get through and not a lot of depth in what kids need. And so you just have this huge constellation of competing forces that mean that high school just isn't a very rich place for many kids, either intellectually or social emotionally for them. And the one bright spot we found was that around the periphery of high school. So the places that very few policymakers and educators spend a lot of time talking about, so extra curriculars, clubs, elective courses, sports teams, theater, newspaper debate, green engineering, all the kinds of things that we don't think of when we think of high schools are really the places that we saw the most powerful learning happening.

Sarah: And so a big piece of what we came away thinking was at high schools really need to start paying attention to what's happening at that periphery. And using that as a way to think about sort of in core academic courses, which are so broken.

Vicki: Yes. And you know, so much of the periphery is free teacherpreneur worship or innovation.

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Vicki: And you know, just to add this, I'm always thinking about this topic. I was talking to some folks and one person was talking about her high school at that they had constructed while she was in high school and she said that they were not allowed to go outside and there was no external light, no windows because they had taken the plan of a prison to build the school and that that was a big trend in the late eighties and nineties so we literally have some school buildings that were designed, like prisons and adapted to be schools.

Vicki: I mean we've kind of made a mess. So how do we get out, where do we go next so that we can have exciting schools where kids are excited to come and learn Well,

Sarah: just to pick up on that line,

I do think schools really are quasi judicial, you know, we have metal detectors and some schools and elaborate systems of kids getting passes to go places. We kind of manage their bodies, we policed their bodies. But also their mind.

– Dr. Sarah Fine, episode 484 of the 10-Minute Teacher Podcast

So absolutely. I think the first place to start is really kind of a standard shift on that front, right Like adolescence are capable of so much. They are almost adults, right Intellectually we know that their brains are fairly mature. Their decision making may not be quite as far along, but they are capable of a lot of obstruction in their thought. They're capable of a lot of physical prowess, right

Sarah: Like fine motor, they can do really interesting things with their hands. And so if we could lean into that and really treat kids as the capable almost adults that they are, I think that's a place to start. And then obviously we have to structure curriculum and classrooms instead of around those assumptions rather than around assumptions that have to do is sort of control and micromanagement credentialing. And so I think that's why some of those spaces that are sort of at the periphery of schools are so exciting is because they're afraid of some of that logic where we're trying to control. The assumption is like kids can do the work and kids can do really interesting work. You know, that's a whole lot more promising place to start.

Vicki: Well, and I teach digital film. I'm I one of those elective teachers. I teach a lot of electives and you know, as the kids are making the movie, it's their movie.

Vicki: You know, they'll say, well, why are we doing this And I'm like, I don't know. Why are you doing this Because you know, our goal is that they're the ones producing. I guess one of the things that drives me crazy is when people say they "deliver content." I don't think you deliver content. I think that kids connect with prior knowledge to learn. So give us some examples of some things that you and your book said. We

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Sarah: have one chapter in her book where we follow a couple of extra curriculums really closely and one as a theater production. And one was a, a debate team and they were in very different contexts. That theater production was that a fairly affluent resource, suburban public school. And the debate team was at a high poverty urban district public school.

Sarah: And we found both had a really, like to your point, there was a sense that kids were making something, they were producing something, they had a lot of choice and agency over what they were doing. There were true differentiated roles, right So in most classrooms it's like every person for themselves, we have this kind of like very sort of independent individualist sense of you know, so and so might be sitting at a table with so and so. But really each of them is responsible for mastering the content, as you say.

Sarah: you if you look at it debate or if you look at theater, there are truly different roles that kids take on as they're ready for them and that are based on what their actual assets and strengths and interests are. And they're actually working toward making something that is original, right In debate.

Sarah: It's not a tangible something, it's an argument, I'm sort of under pressure. But

there's this sense of momentum and a sense of kind of purpose and purposefulness that comes when you're trying to create something for a real audience.

— Dr. Sarah Fine *episode 484 of the 10-Minute Teacher Podcast*

And we don't see it that often. And our classes. But when we do it, it's strikingly similar to what I'm describing. So like for example, I spent a bunch of time in a project based school where the best work really felt like you were in one of those peripherals spaces, but you were actually in a core academic class. So there was one project I followed where kids were creating documentary Philips, to your point, it was a humanities class. They were studying the Cold War, they were starting Marxism and the red scare and, uh, the paranoid style rhetoric that was so prevalent in the 50s and their assignment was not just to kind of understand what was happening during the McCarthy era, but then to create films where they were using sort of fear based logic themselves to make some kind of argument to their school community about something.

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Sarah: So it was real like, you know, if you think about Bloom's taxonomy for example, they were literally creating something which require them to have some deep understanding of not just the what of what happened in the 50s but kind of how this sort of social forces and the sort of rhetorical arguments that folks were drawing on back then. The one I followed really closely where some kids who are making an argument that high school should have condom distribution mechanisms in the bathrooms as well as a nurse as offices. And they were trying to activate everybody's fear around teen pregnancy and around transmitted diseases and right. So they were drawing on the same kind of rhetoric the McCarthy was using to try to get their, activate their community around a change that they really felt was important in their school. And so had had this sense that they were making something and doing something and they had a lot of ownership over what they were doing and it was connected to content that mattered.

Sarah: It wasn't just in the abstract. There was some real sort of mastery of historical and conventional social studies content that was in there.

Vicki: You know, the struggle, Sarah, is that systemic problems, which is much of what you're uncovering requires systemic change. You know, there's so many struggles. I mean many of my colleagues around the world are scripted in really find that they are in a straight jacket, that they cannot emerge from an, it really makes it difficult for them to connect with kids and create the exciting projects. Now I'll tell you, if somebody tried to script me, I would quit teaching. I wouldn't do it. But are you seeing any states or any districts or any locations that are changing the system and freeing their teachers up to be able to teach again?

Sarah: Uh, yeah. Well I'm going to speak from experience here, but my actual job is I work for a network of charter schools in San Diego called high tech high.

Sarah: And so we have 16 schools. They're all fully project based and we have a graduate school of Education. So I run a teacher prep program out of that graduate school. I think what's so different here is that it's not just about like liberating teachers from constraints, but it's also support.

I don't think, I believe that if you just took away all the constraints that we would immediately have amazing teachers everywhere.

— Sarah episode 484 of the 10-Minute Teacher Podcast

And so there's a real sense here that what teachers need is also opportunities to themselves experience powerful learning and then sort of reflective moments to unpack what that means and what the dimensions are and then to think about transferring that back to the design of their own classrooms. And so there's a lot of really rich professional development here. There's a lot of collaboration and mutual support and there's a lot of just learning from examples.

Sarah: Like

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when you have a really transparent system and somebody next door is doing incredible work and you have the chance to spend time in their classroom, it's inspiring.

— Sarah episode 484 of the 10-Minute Teacher Podcast

But if you're a real teacher, you're also walking away with some tools in your pocket from the experience of seeing that. So one of the things here is that there's just a huge amount of transparency. Literally, walls are generally made out of glass. There's an open door policy. There's a lot of spending time in colleagues' classrooms and opening up the movable walls between classrooms so that you can be coteaching. So that in and of itself as a whole lot more powerful place to start.

Vicki: The book is [In Search of Deeper Learning, The Quest to Remake the American High School](#). Dr Sarah Fine has been sharing with us today and Sarah, you've given us a lot to think about. Thank you, Sarah for the book and the conversation. Thank you so much. Great to talk with you.