1. What Does This School Really Stand For?

*How to move from endless initiatives to a unifying framework?*

My first year of teaching I worked for a school that had a guiding philosophy called “Focus on Reading.” Posters hung in hallways and in every classroom, store-bought as well as student illustrated, encouraging everyone to read. *Reading Is Fundamental! Reading Is Fun!* Some featured celebrities and sports heroes holding favorite childhood books. Others depicted cartoon characters engrossed in reading: *Garfield loves to read!*

At the opening-day meeting, our principal stood onstage and exhorted the entire faculty—math, science, and music teachers included—to make reading our focus. “Each and every one of you needs to make time in your lessons to make sure your students are reading,” he said. “There is no reason why our scores are some of the lowest in the district. We’re going to change that. We’re going to make sure that all of our students pass the citywide reading test this spring. Let’s move to the top of this list.” The curriculum coordinator followed, explaining that she would make individual appointments with each of us to see how we “did reading” in our content areas and how she could help us do more and better. The meeting had a bit of a pep-rally feeling to it and I felt swept up in the excitement. But I noticed many veteran faculty shuffling papers, glancing at newspapers, and yawning indiscreetly. “What is it this year?” their body language
seemed to say. "No reason to get worked up. We'll wait out this new initiative, just like all the others."

Their cynicism wasn't entirely without cause, as I was soon to discover. Come spring, reading exams taken and results in, the faculty assembled again, this time with coffee and doughnuts waiting for us in the assembly hall, and the principal and his administrative team in a celebratory mood. I'd thrown myself into the new initiative and was excited to hear the results.

"We've moved to the top third of the list!" the principal announced with a broad smile, waving his data sheets. "We're no longer a failure in the district. I am so proud that all of you could keep such a sustained focus on reading. Clearly our students have benefited from your efforts."

Our students—my students!—had done well on the test. I was elated that all of our hard work had paid off. But I was also left with a nagging, sinking feeling. When it came right down to it, what did these positive test scores actually measure? While I felt confident that my students had grown as readers, I doubted that these scores were evidence that they were better thinkers and learners in any fundamental or holistic way. Nor was I sure my students had actually learned to transfer the material from one format to another. I was passionate about how my students were developing, but they—and I and my school as well—were being measured and ranked by their performance on one standardized reading test. I worried aloud to some of my colleagues whether our students would do as well if they were given a different kind of reading test, a test that asked them to analyze, or to predict, or to think critically, as opposed to answering questions that required literal comprehension.

"Just wait," a colleague told me glumly. "This too shall pass."

He was right. When we assembled in the fall, the principal announced that this year's focus would be math. "Of course, don't give up your terrific work on reading, but the district has purchased brand-new textbooks and is implementing a new math program at all grade levels." I wanted to be happy; I was a math teacher, after all. But it seemed ludicrous that we were on to something else. We'd just gotten started and I wanted more time to flesh out the reading initiative and make it my own. I caught my colleague's eye as he mouthed the words, "I told you so."

Don't get me wrong—there's nothing wrong with a new initiative. New initiatives can bring needed energy, focus, training, and technical skills to a faculty. And often they are based on sound educational thinking. But while "sloganeering" each year about a different curricular area might provide focus and boost scores for the short term, it doesn't necessarily create a community where everyone—teachers, students, administrators, and parents—feels a sense of ownership in developing students' intellectual potential. Yes, the principal successfully met the district mandates: raise reading scores and improve math scores.

While vital goals, these are much too limited and lead to a limited set of questions with limited answers. Ultimately, these kinds of slogans, masked as goals, don't take into account a broad approach to teaching and learning that will raise student achievement for the long haul. These initiatives are short-term "fixes" that meet the current mandates, even successfully, but rarely provide a school community the kind of power that a unifying philosophy might. It is not wrong to raise test scores, but without an expanded set of questions about what we are about as a school community, test scores will just rise and fall with whatever criteria the current test agenda has put forth. None of the initiatives will have led to lasting fundamental changes in teaching and learning in a school. It would have been better to have found a way to make our reading or math initiatives the basis of more complicated discussions about teaching and learning,
about the ways in which we were developing a vibrant school community, and about the ways we did or did not work as a faculty. But that didn’t happen.

TURNING AWAY FROM THE ENDLESS INITIATIVES; TURNING TOWARD ASKING QUESTIONS

Larry Myatt opened Fenway High School in 1983. It began as an alternative school-within-a-school in a large, comprehensive Boston high school to meet the needs of students alienated from traditional studies. When I had the chance, in the second year of operation, to join Fenway High School, first as the assistant director and later as codirector, I knew that without an overarching philosophy—a clearly defined way of approaching learning, or what I have come to call a unifying framework—we would do no better than the teachers in my first school had done. We would, perhaps, raise scores on the now “new and improved” district test and spend lots of time (and money we didn’t have) ensuring that we were all implementing the same test-prep material in the same manner so that our classrooms would be “teacher proof.” In fact, if our students didn’t do well on the tests, since we were all in sync in every classroom in the school, we could easily blame it on the students for not paying attention, since we knew we were all paying attention and doing exactly what our administrators told us to do. Ultimately, though, as I had seen before, we would wind up depleted and demoralized. I knew that to succeed as a pedagogical community, we needed to have the power of a unifying framework.

At Fenway, a unifying framework meant that we developed a shared vocabulary for describing learning that all students and teachers (and parents) used. Teachers would also use similar terms or criteria for evaluating student work. Teachers would move from simply being providers of information to acting as coaches, and stressing personalization—both in making the curriculum connect to students’ experiences and in how teachers embraced students—would be an important feature.

ASKING QUESTIONS ABOUT WHAT’S MOST IMPORTANT CAN CREATE A SCHOOL

How to create this essential unifying framework? My experience teaches me that the only way to start is to ask the right set of questions.

In a single school day, let alone over the course of an academic year, scores upon scores of questions arise—questions about scheduling, lunch, discipline, pedagogy, seating arrangements, curriculum, rules, after-school activities, testing, college preparation, mentoring, student support, tracking, and so on. These are all important, but there are so many of them, and so many decisions to be made, that we can easily lose sight of what’s most important of all. Questions must move from a singular thrust about the way things are to multiple stories about what could be, from symptoms to causes, from the work of adults to the learning and experiences of students.

During my first year as assistant director of the fledging Fenway High School, I met periodically with Vito, my educational mentor, who knew how to listen and push me to discuss the school’s progress by gently and firmly asking hard questions. My conversations with Vito ran a predictable course. I’d lead off by venting: I’m not doing enough. I’m not doing a good enough job at what I am doing. The faculty is frustrated by how the students never seem to care enough about school to do a really good job. When I finished my litany of frustrations and mea culpas, the two of us would discuss what evidence I had to prove that my students didn’t care. One week my mentor’s response took me by surprise. “But, Linda,” he said with a glint in his eye, “the questions you are posing as a faculty are getting so much better!” Huh? He pointed out that, at the start of the year, most of our
questions were managerial in nature, about "law enforcement." How
to get kids to behave and take off their headphones in the lunch-
room. How to get kids to do their homework. How to get parents to
come to school events.

Our focus in the fall was squarely on blame: blaming the parents,
blaming the kids, blaming ourselves as failing rule enforcers. And, as
I see looking back on that time, I was right there with them, blaming
myself for failing the teachers. As you might imagine, there was
a palpable feeling of failure and its partner, resentment, in faculty
meetings as we got all tripped up about homework compliance and
asked whether we should fail kids who didn't or couldn't get their
homework done. Our de facto unifying philosophy was: "We're fail-
ing: Let's get together and blame!" (Imagine that one on a poster!)

But now, just a few months later, we'd gotten to the point as a
faculty where we were asking different kinds of questions altogether:
Why do we give homework in the first place? Why is it important to
us that parents come to school events? Are these events even engag-
ing for parents? What are we trying to accomplish by asking students
to take off their headphones? This last question, for instance, led us
in a completely different direction, because we realized that in part
we were trying to orchestrate a way for kids to socialize across the
boundaries of race and class, but headphones set up a scenario where
no one had to interact.

The questions teachers and principals ask determine the di-
rection we take and the depth of dialogue we have. What I'll call
the "first-level" questions typically concern what they, the kids or the
parents, are and aren't doing, and especially about what they're doing
"wrong." Even tired teachers can play the awful game of "name that
failure" for hours. As leaders and principals know, groups of teachers
seem inexorably drawn to this kind of talk, and it is often our difficult
job to steer the conversation away from the failure spiral and toward
second-level questions.

This second, deeper level of questioning concerns what we (the
adults in the school) are or aren't doing and why. Ultimately, this kind
of questioning leads us to ask what we do or don't stand for. "Second-
level" questions dig deeper; they get to the heart of our values and
grapple with the bigger ideas in play, the ideas that led most of us
into this profession in the first place. Most of us didn't enter teaching
because we love to harp on rules. We became educators because we
love kids and we love ideas and wanted to transfer this love to chil-
dren. Many of us went into teaching because we believe that educa-
tion is the key lever for changing the status quo—especially in terms
of equity and access.

The shift from first- to second-level discourse allows us the op-
portunity to step back, view an issue from a wider perspective, and
begin to articulate what is important and why. Take our case of home-
work compliance. When the faculty at Fenway moved to second-level
questioning, we asked ourselves: is homework meaningful? Yes, we
initially decided, because we want kids to practice outside of school.
But, the questioning continued: What if there is no space and time
for many kids to do homework outside of school? What if many of our
kids have to work a second job or babysit siblings? We had to discuss
whether we thought it was fair to fail our kids because they weren't
doing their homework. We had to grapple with one another through
lengthy and difficult discussions and ask: what is our ultimate goal,
anyhow? By asking this set of broader questions, we discovered that
what we were really after was the discipline of "practice." Then our
questioning proceeded on a different tack: Does it really matter
where homework or practice work happens? Why don't we create an
enrichment block where kids can practice in school? Given the cir-
cumstances of many of our students, don't we have an obligation to
do so? This line of questioning revived our energy to confront the
true problems in front of us and reinforced the reasons we went into
education in the first place. This was the beginning stage for us of the
development of a unifying framework. We were naming and then deciding on a common set of agreements or understandings about our approaches to teaching and learning, and to our students.

I love to ask new principals, “What questions are you and your faculty asking every day? Take a step back and consider: What do you want your graduates to know and be able to do? And, perhaps most important, what has been denied to your students previously because of issues of race, class, gender, or language?” Mostly, I want principals to truly consider both when they find themselves knocking their heads against the wall, and then when they know how to turn that around into asking “what do we all care about together as a school community?” If we as leaders don’t take the time to ask ourselves and each other questions like these, questions that give us a through line and unifying framework that everyone can work toward, we are likely to wind up where the Fenway faculty was at the start of the year, chasing our tails through the failure spiral and running ourselves ragged all over the map.

**THE POWER OF A UNIFYING FRAMEWORK**

I first experienced the power of a unifying framework at Fenway High School. The school was built on the philosophy of putting student engagement first. At Fenway, we called our unifying framework “Habits of Mind.” We wanted students and staff to practice certain ways of thinking in all of their classes. The term “habits of mind” didn’t start with us; it was first coined by the philosopher John Dewey in the nineteenth century and later popularized in the mid-1980s by educators such as Deborah Meier, then director of Central Park East Secondary School (CPRESS) in New York City.

The ways of thinking we wanted to focus on are captured in the acronym PERCS: perspective, evidence, relevance, connection, and supposition. At Fenway, we asked a particular set of questions: What is my perspective on this? What evidence do I have? What is the relation? What other connections can I make? And suppose that…? Students had to apply a Habits of Mind framework to school projects and exhibitions, even to homework. The PERCS framework we devised worked well at Fenway.

I had first seen this framework in operation during visits to CPRESS. Sitting in on students’ portfolio presentations in fourteen different subject areas (including math, science, humanities, arts, and service learning) I had been struck by the facility with which faculty and students (and parents) used a common vocabulary for discussing work and asking questions. As we adopted the framework and made it ours at Fenway, we insisted that students use each aspect of PERCS in their approach to all of their subjects. We reduced the number of presentations or exhibitions from fourteen to five (math, science, world languages, humanities, and Senior Project).

For each graduation exhibition, students spoke with confidence about their perspective on a given topic, and how and why they had arrived at this perspective. Students had to show evidence or proof for their statements, and in discussions teachers and peers would ask about relevance and connections. The Senior Project, which involved a six-week-long internship, was a powerful opportunity to discuss relevance and connections. A student placed in a legal aid office could begin to develop her passion for youth advocacy. The connection to her own life and experiences was immediate, particularly because so many of her friends were already involved in the court system. Supposition was always the most difficult habit. Teachers asked questions like: “Suppose that the author had ended the book differently?” and “Suppose that history had taken another course?” Even though some of the habits didn’t feel as authentic or comfortable to use, Fenway has been using this framework to guide teaching and learning for over twenty-five years now.

When I had the chance to start BAA, I assumed we could adopt PERCS outright. I was wrong. The BAA faculty rejected the termi-
nology—not because they didn’t passionately believe in the power and importance of a unifying framework, but because the term “habits of mind” was too constricting for an arts school: we needed a framework that captured both intellectual and creative work. This debate over semantics, which may sound esoteric or technical, was essential to our development as a faculty and our commitment to the framework. Further, faculty insisted that our habits had to have their genesis in arts terminology and the processes used by artists.

Disappointed but undaunted, I brought the faculty a new list of terms, this time borrowed from the Harvard Graduate School of Education’s Project Zero: collaboration, discipline, passion, risk-taking, context, reflection, and foundation. Since Project Zero is a renowned research center that studies learning in arts classrooms, I was certain that these terms would meet my faculty’s criteria. Once again, I struck out. My teachers rejected the Project Zero list. It wasn’t that these words were wrong or bad, but that they weren’t ours. We needed to go through our own lengthy process of constructing a framework before we came up with a set of words we could all sign onto. We didn’t want a checklist of empty slogans that would wind up hanging unnoticed on classroom bulletin boards. We wanted a framework that would give meaning and living direction to our entire school community. We knew that the terms we chose would help shape the kind of intellectual and artistic community to which we wanted to belong. At the end of two years, after hours of faculty debate and discussion, we decided on the habits of RICO: refine, invent, connect, and own.

So what do these terms mean, exactly? And, more importantly, how do they get lived out in practice? We attached questions to each term to help clarify for students—and for ourselves—how to approach teaching and learning. After inviting student input and brainstorming more than a dozen questions for each term, we honed the list to two key questions per habit.

Refine. Have I conveyed my message? What are my strengths and weaknesses?
Invent. What makes this work inventive? Do I take risks and push myself?
Connect. Who is the audience and how does the work connect? What is the context?
Own. Am I proud of the work I am doing? What do I need to be successful?

The order of the terms was not critical, but the faculty liked the acronym RICO and so did our students. It is a useful mnemonic device. As we began to apply our new habits, we noticed that a schoolwide conversation about learning was beginning. The habits crept into classrooms. Teachers decided, in the spirit of refine, to give students the chance to rewrite papers and retake tests as many times as needed to “get it right.” Often, a high-level math assignment requires students to invent a unique problem that used concepts from class work. In order to connect, students link their arguments to evidence from other sources. Students practice owning their work when teachers routinely ask them to describe what they are proud of and where their work needs to be better. Of course, it was difficult for students to analyze what they needed to do to be more successful, especially when “work harder” was not a sufficient answer! But as they practice the habit of ownership, students often articulate insights about their own work that no teacher could provide for them.

HOW CAN A UNIFYING FRAMEWORK BE PUT INTO PRACTICE?

Now that we had defined the terms of our unifying framework, we had to begin the hard work of actually applying it. At first, every teacher in every class assigned RICO portfolios, which were a collec-
tion of assignments that illustrated one or more of the habits (refine, invent, connect, or own). Assignments might be a final project in math with a written reflection that described the process of doing the problems, or a research paper with multiple drafts, or a test a student had revised in order to improve a grade. Usually portfolios included projects that students had worked on over a period of time, or that the student felt demonstrated significant learning. As a result, students accumulated reams of documents demonstrating their RICO habits. It sounded great, but by the end of four years we were drowning in paperwork, and I wasn’t sure that students paid any more attention to their RICO portfolios than they had to my weekly math tests, which I always found tossed in the trash after I handed them back.

The staff was not disenchanted with RICO as a framework, but we were frustrated with our cumbersome way of implementing it. We couldn’t figure out what to do with all the RICO portfolios from each distinct classroom and subject area. Math or science teachers could end up with four years’ worth of a student’s portfolio sitting in boxes or file folders somewhere in their rooms, collecting dust. We wanted RICO to live in our school and not just be a slogan, without becoming a beast that burdened us. After some discussions, we decided to introduce midyear and end-of-year RICO portfolios to replace the subject-based portfolios. Students had to select assignments from a variety of classes, which they believed best represented their developing abilities to refine, invent, connect, and own their work. The midyear and end-of-year portfolios would culminate in a RICO review conducted with the student, her advisor, another faculty member as an observer, and often a parent.

Later in our school’s development, we also introduced another kind of review process called the Sophomore Benchmark, modeled on a traditional “critique” used by arts colleges. We wanted students to experience an intense artistic review midway through their high school career for two reasons. First, faculty wanted students to commit to being an artist and a scholar at BAA. Second, if students had not met the required standard, they and their teachers and parents would have a chance to map out what additional arts classes the student needed to take in the summer, or to figure out together what other supports the school could offer.

The faculty also decided that our capstone graduation experience would be the Senior Project. All students, beginning in their junior year, develop a proposal that demonstrates their academic and artistic training over their four years and also addresses a community need. The project directs their knowledge and passion toward a practical cause and delivers experience as independent artists. Their final presentations must demonstrate artistic rigor, feasibility, and mutual benefit, as well as writing technique and presentation skills. In a Senior Project Fair, representatives from the community, universities, organizations, and artists review the proposals. They allocate funding for those who score in the top 20 percent. Some projects have included original choreography on the theme of eating disorders for young girls, a publicly designed mural project, a monologue performed to raise awareness of homeless teens, a steel-drum workshop at a local hospital, and a film on the effects of rape.

The next vignettes demonstrate how RICO, the Sophomore Benchmark, and the Senior Project work as a unifying framework at BAA and have become synonymous with what the school stands for.

**HOW DO REAL LIVE STUDENTS AND THEIR TEACHERS USE THE UNIFYING FRAMEWORK?**

1. Christina’s RICO review

Bruno Rodriguez sits with his advisee, eleventh-grade music major Christina Nguyen, for her end-of-year review. Wearing a suit, a crisply ironed blouse, and dress shoes, Christina has heeded her ad-
visor's instructions that these reviews are formal occasions. Her long hair, dyed red a few months ago and returning now to its original jet-black color, falls across the side of her face, partially obscuring one eye. Christina shuffles her folders in front of her and looks up at Mr. Rodriguez and another teacher, Anne Clark, whose job it is to take notes during the review.

These notes will be part of Christina’s assessment folder and will be used as a basis for checking her progress in her senior year. I am also an observer. I try to sit in on different advisors’ reviews each year. Since RICO is our “final exam,” I want firsthand knowledge of how different teachers (and students and parents) experience this yearly exit requirement. I want to have a good sense of where we need to improve.

When Christina’s mother arrives, Mr. Rodriguez directs her to a seat and extends a warm welcome. “Mrs. Nguyen, we are so glad you are here.”

Mr. Rodriguez explains the purpose of the RICO review process required of all ninth-, tenth-, and eleventh-graders. This is a formal opportunity for Christina to be specific and honest about her progress throughout the academic year, and about how she hopes to improve in the future. All adults present, including Mrs. Nyugen, may comment and ask questions.

Mr. Rodriguez adds two crucial points: “Christina cannot fail this review. A student only fails by not showing up or not being prepared. And I want to remind everyone that this is not a time to criticize Christina or be upset with her for what she hasn’t done, but rather to reflect on what she has done.”

Mrs. Nguyen nods her head, but looks nervous. She twists her pocketbook strap, her eyes focused on the floor. Although she sits next to her daughter, there seems to be a great distance between them.

Mr. Rodriguez turns his attention to Christina and the review begins. “What have you brought to show us, Christina, that demonstrates the habit refine?” Christina immediately opens her purple folder and spreads out ten different pages of music, peppered with time signatures, sharps, flats, and notes.

“This is my first stab at a composition,” she says, pointing to the first sheet. “It’s really basic. The melody is simple and it stays within four-four time. As I got more comfortable, you can see how I refined this piece, even changing the key and time signature.” Christina points to another sheet. “On this other version, I experimented more with the melody and added more accidentals, sharps, and flats. Then, in this last version, I add other instrumentation. I’m a pianist, but I added a flute here since I can hear this played with a wind instrument, too.”

Mr. Rodriguez reviews the sheets and hands them to Ms. Clark. “Impressive, Christina.” Ms. Clark smiles. “Clearly your work with Ms. Lundberg has paid off. I remember that two years ago you didn’t even read music.”

“Perhaps when we finish here,” Mr. Rodriguez suggests to Christina, “we can go next door and you can play this composition?”

“That would be fine, but it would just be the piano part.” Christina smiles shyly.

“I have a question about this work,” Mr. Rodriguez continues. “I’m curious why you have this composition to demonstrate refine as opposed to invent? You have so clearly pushed yourself with this score, which is the way we describe invent. To me refine is more about how you convey your message and show your understanding of your strengths and weaknesses, too.”

“To me this is refine,” says Christina. “I’ve always been inventing music, but refining takes more discipline for me. I can stay up till one or two in the morning inventing, but refining is something I have to really work at.”

The review continues. Christina pulls out her invent folder and displays her Math 3 project in which she has demonstrated knowl-
edge of quadratic equations by comparing prices and profit margins from three local stores that sell CDs.

"Was this the assignment from the class?" Mr. Rodriguez asks.

"No, no," Christina explains. "We were studying quadratics and profit margins in class. But I came up with this scenario about the stores."

To demonstrate connect, Christina discusses the poetry she wrote in writing seminar and explains how her poems connect with the haikus and sonnets she studied in class. "I loved writing the haikus," Christina explains with confidence. "I liked the rigidity of the style. It was kind of like writing music for me."

For the fourth and final habit, own, the discussion shifts to Christine's difficulties in Spanish class. In this case, she talks less about owning her work than owning her lack of it. She displays her final, incomplete Spanish project on the writer Rubén Darío. "I just can't write well in Spanish, even though I liked learning about this poet. I've failed for the second year in a row. I know it's a graduation requirement and I'm a junior, but I just don't like the class." Christina resorts to complete honesty: "I end up skipping more than I go, and that's why I failed."

Mr. Rodriguez nods. In her midyear RICO conference, Christina had signed a formal contract, along with her mother and the Spanish teacher, stipulating steps for improvement, including a promise to attend daily classes.

"I know the contract was supposed to help me," Christina says. "I just didn't feel like going all semester."

"Let me ask you a question, Christina." Mr. Rodriguez pauses. "What are you doing right in your piano and composition class that might help you out in Spanish?"

Christina thinks for a moment before replying. "Well, I know that I am always willing to put in the effort in music to make the piece better."

Mr. Rodriguez then maps out a consequence. Christina will have to attend summer school for Spanish, an outcome that may create a conflict with her desire to attend a summer program at the renowned Berklee College of Music.

Mr. Rodriguez asks Christine one final question about her goals for senior year. Christine responds carefully, while Ms. Clark transcribes. "Well, I certainly need to learn to go to class, especially Spanish. I want to graduate next June. I know I'm smart enough to pass all my classes if I just go. So I guess what I have to learn is to make myself do stuff even when I don't like it. Otherwise, I pay for it later."

"I would say that's true," Mr. Rodriguez says, and then asks Christine's mother if she'd like to make any comments.

In halting English Mrs. Nguyen thanks him for taking care of her daughter and looking out for her all year. "I know she will do better in Spanish," she says. "I am sorry for that." Then she comments on her daughter's music. "I don't ever understand. She shuts her door. She has earphones on. She is playing on the keyboard all the time. I tell her to go to bed so she is not so tired. But she doesn't listen. I didn't realize she writes music. I didn't know she was so good. I don't play. Her grandfather, in Vietnam, played. I am proud." She pats Christine's arm. "This will give her a scholarship to college? This is good."

"She is very good," Mr. Rodriguez agrees. "And I feel that she understands her challenges for next year. You should be very proud of her, Mrs. Nguyen. Let's go listen to this composition."

The original music, at once forceful and eerie, sounds both Western and Asian in origin. When Christine concludes, she seems almost out of breath. She sits quietly.

Ms. Clark is the first to speak. "Christina, it makes me want to practice my flute so I can play it with you!"

Christina smiles. "When we come back to school, okay? I'll give you a copy of the music so you can learn it."

Mrs. Nguyen turns to her daughter. "Maybe now I won't yell at
you for all the time you spend in your room. Now I understand what
you do there. Your grandfather, he would be so proud.”

Christina gathers up her music. The review is over.

In Christina’s review, while I saw that she generally understood the
terms and was very persuasive discussing her skills at refining her
composition, I was perplexed that she, now an eleventh-grader fa-
miliar with RICO reviews, chose a rather simple extension of a math
problem. She claimed that her scenario about the store showed in-
vention, but I didn’t feel it demonstrated an extension or deepening
of her math skills in any significant way. I wondered how good a job
we were really doing with implementing RICO assignments in all
classes.

Still, in the area of own, I was pleased that Christina recognized
how the habits she had learned through her music studies could
transfer to her Spanish class. In the review she began to own the fact
that passing Spanish was under her control, and that she must pass
the class if she wanted to achieve her dream of going to Berklee Col-
lege of Music. This showed me that for Christina, the student-school
relationship had shifted from one of mutual blame to one of alliance
for success. Of course it doesn’t always work like that, and it is not
always so seamless. Even though Christina did demonstrate some
significant ownership of her own learning, she still had not demonstrat-
ized positive results in Spanish. Her proficiency was not at the
level that teachers would have wished, even though her ability to be
reflective about her roadblocks was impressive.

Later, when I had the chance to debrief the review with Mr. Ro-
driguez and Ms. Clark, we agreed that we were only semi-successful
with Christina. We want students to demonstrate mastery in all sub-
ject areas, not to merely throw a math extension together and use the
RICO words. Our goal is for students to articulate actions that can
change their behaviors. But we are not always successful in the mo-
ment. (Christina, in fact, had to forfeit her place in the Berklee sum-
mer program to attend summer school for Spanish.) RICO reviews
may help with reflection but they cannot create miracles.

Nevertheless, I feel that the time we spend on the reviews is well
worth it. It gives us a way to talk about student work and ultimately
become better teachers. It gives us a method to discuss and recommit
to our core beliefs—our overarching framework. Yes, it requires
endless hours of meetings, and leads to many disagreements, but ul-
timately I believe that our students learn more.

2. Gerry’s Sophomore Benchmark

Gerry perches on a stool in front of his assembled work, waiting for
his review panel to begin. Kathleen Marsh, the head of the depart-
ment; Beth Balliro, another visual arts teacher; Marcos, an eleventh-
grade student; and I take our seats in the small classroom. Ms. Marsh
frames the session: “So, Gerry, this is your Sophomore Benchmark.
We are going to review how you feel you have demonstrated ‘serious-
ness of purpose’ in your work—how you bring your whole self to
a project with honesty and integrity.” With that introduction, Ms.
Marsh pulls up her tall frame, adjusts her glasses, and extends her
arms widely to take in the work, all of us, and especially Gerry. “Let’s
begin by looking at the two self-portraits you’ve brought.”

Gerry sits completely still, listening intently. He looks at his two
self-portraits—one from ninth grade and one from tenth grade—that
rest on the easels in the room. Describing the work, Gerry notes his
improvement with proportion from one year to the next, and his use of
shading, light, and texture.

Ms. Marsh pushes him to be even more specific. She picks up one
of the portraits. “What about the use of value and color of your skin?
How do you show how the light hits your face? What happens to the
places the light hits and the places the light doesn’t hit?”
Gerry hesitates. "I tried to make my cheeks lighter because they are smooth and more light hits them. I knew that my nostrils and top of my lips should be darker cause not as much light gets there. I tried to do that," Gerry replies.

"What about inside your nostrils? What is happening there?" Ms. Marsh persists.

Gerry doesn't answer. He just looks more keenly at the portrait. Ms. Marsh tries to help. "What can you say about light or darkness inside the nostril?"

Gerry seems to get her point. "Not enough light gets there so it's supposed to be very dark. I didn't really do it dark enough, though. I could've done better. I didn't work at refining enough times. And, I'm not sure I was being too inventive. Portraits really aren't my thing," he says dismissively.

The review then turns to an examination of the three-dimensional object Gerry has brought—his Batman sculpture. Ms. Marsh asks him to talk about what he would have done differently, technically.

Gerry is more at ease here. "I really worked hard on this, but I would have hollowed it out more so it wouldn't have fallen in. See how the head caved in a bit? If I'd have hollowed it out, I don't think that would've happened when it was fired. This was also the first time we worked with high fire glazes."

Ms. Marsh and Ms. Balliro both agree that they can see he tried hard and is successful in communicating to the viewer that he thinks Batman is cool.

"It is really cool," Marcos, the student participant, interjects. "I wish I could work with clay like that. I think you'll get better with portraits, too, after you practice more. You do Batman's nose really well and you can learn to do that on a two-dimensional drawing."

"I don't know," Gerry says somewhat glumly. "My hands know what to do when I'm working with clay, but when I have a pencil or charcoal I have to work too hard and there's too much to think about it. I know I'm not as good as everyone else in the class."

As the review of the actual artwork finishes up, Ms. Marsh transitions to the goal setting part of the session.

"So what do you want to get better at for next year?" Ms. Marsh asks.

"I need to get my work in on time. I need to have more motivation. I've always had a problem with that, especially when I think it's a waste of time or I don't like it," he says.

Ms. Balliro counters, "But you'll never like everything you do in school. How do you get motivated when you don't like something? What do you do when you are not excited about something? How do you find excitement?"

Gerry looks at them. He sighs quietly, maybe a bit sadly. "I don't know. I've had a hard time with that for a long time."

"Well," Ms. Marsh prods, "what have you learned from your growth in visual arts that you could apply to your academic classes?"

Gerry shifts uncomfortably.

Marcos speaks up, breaking the tension. "I know for me, I had a big breakthrough when I started sketching on the train. You have a long commute, too, right? I'd just put my headphones on and I'd zone out and zone in to doing the homework exercises. Pretty soon, even I could see improvements. And then, somehow, that helped me shift into a better place in class. I just felt more confident."

"Yeah, that's what it is—confidence and practice. They sort of go together. Hard to have one without the other. I'm seeing that more now. I know I'd be more motivated if I did the work. Kind of obvious I guess," Gerry says quietly.

"So that's great, Gerry," Ms. Marsh sums up. "Let's see if we can begin to make that recognition into some goals and action steps for next semester." She pulls out a paper that is divided into sections—semester one and two with headings of Goals and Action Steps. To-
together they begin to fill out the sheet. "Here we'd put, 'daily practice in sketchbook,' right?"

"Yeah, I like Marcos's idea. I can do that on the T."

"Let's put under Action Steps 'sketch on T.'" Ms. Marsh writes as Gerry talks through his goals and action steps for the following year.

By the time the official Sophomore Benchmark ends, Gerry has been pushed and prodded by teachers and peers to look closely at his own progress and to set achievable goals. He has been asked to think about specific examples of where he's been successful and where he still feels frustrated. It is easy to set a broad goal like, "Pass all my classes," but it's harder to set a specific goal like, "Sketch for forty-five minutes on the T." The skills of self-reflection, self-assessment, and goal setting that Gerry is learning will help him in both his arts and academic classes at BAA, as well as in college and throughout his life.

After both Gerry and Marcos had left the room, Ms. Marsh and Ms. Balliro conferred and agreed that Gerry's skills were not strong enough to move on to the eleventh-grade level. He would need to repeat the sophomore year in visual arts. They would schedule another meeting with him and a parent to break this news.

Perhaps at another high school, Gerry might have gone mindlessly through the motions of school, hoping to just get by. He might have been secretly grateful for the chaos, confusion, and disconnect edness of his high school experiences because they would have enabled him to remain anonymous and unnoticed. But Gerry would be the first to say that while his Sophomore Benchmark sometimes made him squirm, it also made him think hard about what he wants to accomplish during the next two years of high school and even beyond. Although he was very disappointed when he learned that he would need to repeat the year in arts class, he also knew that his skills were not up to par compared to those of his classmates. He knew that this meant that he would not be able to graduate on time, and although he tried to negotiate to take an arts class in summer school, his department stood firm: he would repeat the year in his arts major.

The results of Gerry's benchmark reflect hard choices that teachers, parents, students, and I have made about the importance of really understanding material and being "good enough." As a school that specializes in the arts, we have decided that we must draw this kind of clear line in the sand. It has not been easy, but it has taught me the importance of asking the questions: Do the minimum standards at my school truly measure what we want them to measure? And, if a student is not meeting them, what are the ways in which we support his learning? The Sophomore Benchmark, in particular, makes it impossible for a capricious decision to be made about a student's future since there must be departmental consensus.

I believe it was worth it for Gerry to hang in there and learn the requisite skills. There was no failure attached to Gerry's work, but rather an acknowledgment that for some students it will take longer to graduate and include summer school, night school, or an extra year.

3. "Love of My Life": Melanie's Senior Project

The Senior Project, which is BAA's capstone experience, helps students develop an idea all the way to its implementation stage. Although not all students actually implement their project during high school, many do so after they start college. RICO is the organizing framework for the project. Students begin project development in their junior year and then refine their ideas through a carefully structured process until presentation in the fall of the senior year. Each project is also judged on its inventiveness, the degree to which students connect to their proposed ideas, and, of course, how they demonstrate ownership.

Melanie is hoping her project, "Love of My Life," will be funded. She describes how her project builds a bridge for her back to her
community. “Teens need a place where they can be themselves, and also figure out who they are—their identities.” Melanie stands barely five feet tall. She is wearing elegant high heels, two-toned red shoes that match her suit, and a ribbon in her hair. Her dark skin glows against her outfit. She explains to the reviewers how she will work in an after-school program in a very under-resourced section of the city to give teens the opportunity to take vocal technique and theater improvisation classes that culminate in a short musical. She stands before her display board that is complete with lesson plans, a timeline, and a budget, and speaks with passion about her proposal:

“I have learned over my four years here a lot about technique and how to use the body and the face to communicate that technique. I did a few musical scenes from Gilbert and Sullivan; I also learned some Broadway numbers, and I’m working on an Italian aria now. We’ve also done some popular music over the years. I will be able to teach young people the connection between the voice and the body. The students will keep a journal that will contain different prompts that elaborate on their experiences.

“Students will also choose songs that relate to those experiences. Everyone listens to performers like Alicia Keys, and rappers speak to many life experiences. I’ve learned that people like Gustav Mahler, who most kids have never heard of, also wrote about pain and suffering the same way that Kanye West or Billie Holiday did. We will spend part of each class also learning about different music.

“Students will write monologues based on writing prompts. Then they develop characters through improvisation and through song. Then we will rehearse how students will express themselves through their monologues and the songs they have chosen. We will perform these scenes at the local community center or the church.”

Finally Melanie explains the rationale for her project. “Young adolescents need the opportunity to be a positive asset to their community. I know firsthand how easy it is to be brought down by the bad things going on around you or in your family or your community. The goal of this program is to give the youth a place of refuge from the negativity of society and also to teach them how to safely express themselves.”

Melanie recognizes what so many school or policy officials seem to forget—the arts are a powerful force to help change our world, and most young people can make an immediate connection between the arts and popular culture. Melanie’s project is also helping her develop academic skills in reading, writing, oral presentation, and even basic mathematics. She had to develop a budget and figure out what resources can be considered “in-kind,” since she is learning early on the lesson that there is never enough money. And she had to revise her proposal at least four times until she got it up to the required standard. She had to read her proposal aloud and commit much of it to memory or note cards in order to stand before outsiders who will determine if she is deserving of funding. RICO, the unifying framework of the school, is evident in every aspect of her proposal.

WHAT HAS THE RICO FRAMEWORK DONE FOR OUR SCHOOL IN A LARGER SENSE?

The RICO habits, the Sophomore Benchmark, and the Senior Project at BAA have become a practical way for teachers, students, and parents to define our standards for passing work. These opportunities for students and teachers, and often parents, to be vulnerable and
reflective with one another create the possibilities for a school community to go beyond slogans to become an intellectual and creative community.

Both Christina and Gerry’s reviews show that at BAA we have “put our money where our mouth is,” so to speak. It is much more costly, in terms of both time and money to do these individual student-advisor or student-department reviews. Our schedule accommodates RICO reviews, Sophomore Benchmarks, and Senior Projects. Additionally, students need opportunities to present to literally hundreds of adults for their Senior Projects, and this requires extensive organization on the part of the faculty. We have had to allocate time for advisors to contact parents, and time for teachers to talk about how the reviews or Senior Project went and what we can improve for the following year. There is no point in involving outsiders to critique our student work if their comments aren’t taken seriously. The effort is worth it in terms of how our students truly “own” their learning and how all of us know what our school stands for. We are clear, all of us, that mastery is neither a random act nor an innate gift. Rather, it is the result of well-disciplined habits. Those habits define who we are, as well as our aspirations for who our students will become.

Although the faculty at BAA is still searching for a more streamlined approach to implementing the reviews, we are confident of their value. Because the invention of RICO reviews and the benchmark developed out of our original ideas about what mattered to us as a school, we don’t need to throw them away and go running off after the next hot idea presented at a conference, hoping that this one will work. We are clear about what we want to do and why. How is a question we can tackle again and again without having to question our sense of direction.

And with the Senior Project we see the power of our students being taken seriously by an adult world where they soon will par-
ticipate. Melanie, and others like her, embodies the best of what a unifying framework offers in a school: she has shown us how education can connect to a young person’s life and experiences and be completely engaging.

Am I arguing that every successful school has to have in place a set of “Habits of the Graduate,” such as RICO, or a review process like the Sophomore Benchmark, or a Senior Project? Of course not. I have visited schools that have no acronym like RICO or PERCS, but excel at making learning and assessment transparent to everyone. Leaders in many schools, hoping to address these problems and change the way their students experience school, may have initiated programs, such as an advisory system, a block schedule, portfolio assessment, or small learning communities. One such school, which I’ll call Central Middle School, requires all students to do an eighth-grade Graduation Exhibition in which students discuss their learning and growth throughout their three years by reading an excerpt from their autobiography, sharing their science fair project, and doing an extension of a math problem. Younger students, other classroom teachers, adult community members, and often a parent sit in as jury members to assess whether a student is qualified to graduate. In addition, each student is prepared to answer questions. It is often in this question and answer period that a student’s true comprehension of the work shines forth. This exhibition is their unifying framework.

Everyone at Central can talk about the importance of the Graduation Exhibition. Students are given multiple chances to redo it, and there have only been a few cases where students have had to go to summer school to finish up requirements. The Graduation Exhibition is part of the lived fabric of Central. All students, parents, teachers, and administrators work toward this final right of passage. The exhibition is introduced as soon as students begin in sixth grade, and all classes and grades work on it. The Graduation Exhibition stands
in stark contrast to schools where students experience school as a race to pass a series of fairly meaningless classes or, worse, a succession of lessons in “what I did wrong today in school” or “what I didn’t finish.” At Central, teachers have found that mapping out ideals of thinking and learning as well as models of behavior, for both students and faculty, gives them a unity from which to talk about their practices and results.

Think about the school you work in, attend, or send your children to. These places are vital to us, no matter which role we are in. What learning and thinking habits are expected of this school’s graduates? Are these habits expressed as a unifying framework? If not, what are the gaps between what the school purports to believe and actual lived practice? If your school has a framework, something like “High Expectations for All,” how is that expressed as part of the school’s mission and in daily classroom practices? How do you know as a teacher, a principal, a parent, or a student that this framework is practiced everywhere? If you find yourself unable to answer these questions, or notice that you are groping for the “right” answers, it is probably a sign that the school isn’t succeeding at its mission, no matter how high its average SAT or state scores, which prizes its graduates have won, how large its library is, or how many of its students go to prestigious colleges.

I am suspicious of statements that begin with “All schools should...” But this is one I truly stand behind: all schools should develop and use a unifying framework. The “new initiative every year” model doesn’t work. Teachers need to be involved in articulating the framework, and a school must be willing to commit to the implementation of the framework over the long haul. Finally, I would argue that schools without a unifying framework still have an unspoken one—a de facto assumption of what this school is about. If it were expressed in posters on the wall, these frameworks might be “We Are Failing: Who Should We Blame?” or “High Scores and College Admissions—Everything Else Be Damned!” To honestly answer the question “What does your school stand for?” takes a willingness to ask again and again how your practices are improving, what students know and can do, and how day-to-day realities in the classroom match the ideals you have articulated.