A Day in the Life at a Texas School

What might a school look like, that followed the premises of Creating a New Vision for Public Education in Texas? What would the students and teachers be doing? How would it be different from the schools of today?

These questions have many possible answers. To help provide one interpretation of the document, a group of Texas principals and superintendents met in December to imagine this New Texas School through the eyes of a student. Here is the 2010 version of their work, presented as a Day in the Life, as told by Rose, a student at the school
My name is Rose, and I am a student at New Texas School. I am proud of our school -- it was redesigned recently along the lines of the New Vision for Texas Schools published by the Texas Association of School Administrators. There goes our administrator, the principal, right now, walking through the building with her tablet in her hand. She's always in view, talking with students, working with the teachers…right now she seems to be talking and tapping on the tablet. Let's see what's on the screen…
This is what's called a *walkthrough* -- as she walks through the school, she records certain things she sees happening -- or missing. The walkthrough is part of a school improvement kit provided by TASA in its *Field Guide* to the new vision. Our school is trying to reach Level 4 -- the highest stage of transformation in the *Texas Vision*. We are doing pretty well on our growth plan, but still have a way to go to reach the level of learning that we want. Let's follow the principal as she walks and watches...
Real-Time Data
Turbine #7
Our curriculum here at New Texas School follows a common cycle. It always starts with an interesting problem to solve -- this time it's whether or not to invest in a wind turbine to provide electricity to our community. In order to understand and solve this problem, we need to draw on knowledge of math, physics, civics, economics, all those subjects in the common core of learning. And you must read quite a bit, and read quickly, to learn what you need to figure out the best course of action.

As we work through the cycle, we first gather information from a variety of sources, some provided by our teachers, others we find ourselves. Next we work together -- our principal calls this collaboration -- to share what we've learned, see what's missing, and divide up the work. Our teachers are close at hand as we do this, but they don't do it for us. The final phase of the project is always a public presentation -- for this one, our group will present its findings and recommendation to the Municipal Power Authority next Wednesday. Our evaluations will include ratings from the board members as well as from our teachers. As soon as this problem is finished, I'll be put into a different group and choose a new problem.

Our principal calls this profound learning. What she means is that it's based on real-life issues, things that people are working on out in the world today; and that it requires ideas from many subject areas in order to make sense out of it. Our teachers tell us that this is the kind of stuff we'll be working on in college and in the workplace.
Now here is the place we call the think tank. Those are the teachers up at the table, and they're videoconferencing with the forensic lab in Austin. They are in the midst of developing a new curriculum unit for the senior high. In those outside seats are students, who are encouraged to observe and participate in these planning sessions. Let's peek onto the display of one of the teachers' laptops…
Looks interesting -- I can't wait until this unit is ready, so I can sign up for it. They let us choose half our projects; the rest are required of everybody. Let's ask this teacher about how this new unit got started...

(Teacher's voice) It began with a student -- he posted the idea in the online Curriculum Suggestion Box -- and the faculty curriculum design team endorsed it, and now we're building it. We start by going through the state standards, to see how many of them we can include in the unit. Right now we're online with the chemist in Austin, to better understand which of the science standards are most relevant to this DNA-tracing exercise. Later today the police chief will stop by to advise us on how to make the story realistic.
Eventually when we publish this unit, we will embed into it along the way what we call CFUs -- Checks for Understanding. These are little quizzes, in the same format as the questions on the new STAR exams, that are drawn directly from the material in the problem. This is useful in passing the state tests, but it's not the most important way to measure what students have learned -- so for each unit we also design a capstone. This is a piece of work built by a student, or a small group, that proves they have learned the comprehensive array of knowledge and skills that we built into the unit. Sometimes its a publication, sometimes a presentation, sometimes a work of art or a play or a composition, depending on the nature of the project and the student's choice. No matter which format, the work is closely critiqued and evaluated according to a rigorous rubric. And stored in the students online academic profile for accountability purposes.
(Teacher's voice) The hardest part for us is developing the rubric by which to judge the capstone. We're right now on the cutting edge nationally of developing these new forms of assessment. For instance, in the last unit we developed, focusing on American history and oral communication, the students could choose between three capstones: composing the script of a roast-and-toast dinner for Thomas Jefferson given by the signers of the Declaration; conducting a videoconference debate on the Bill of Rights with a school in Philadelphia; or authoring a narrated comic book on the ratification of the Constitution. So our rubric for evaluating each of these often includes more than a dozen of the Power Standards that our principal has helped us develop.
(Rose’s voice) As you can see, we all work hard here at New Texas School, the teachers as well as the students. Here we see students at work on one of those capstone projects -- they’re writing the script for a play, a murder mystery -- with DNA twists -- that will be performed at a dinner theater fundraiser for the school. On the big screen they use videoconferencing to talk with a home-bound student who’s an important part of their team.
Monday February 7, 2011
Little Sister
Teacher:
Mr. Longo
Path to Graduation: Rose of Texas

American History: Online Course at U. Texas
  ❌ Standard Course at NTHS
  🔴 Internship at Texas History Museum

Chemistry: Online Course at TVHS
  ❌ Standard Course at NTHS
  🔴 Internship at Bayer Plant

Counselor: Mrs. Houston

Email IM Schedule Appointment
Virtual History
Class Meeting:
Telepresence Session with
American Historian
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Comments to Jim Lengel, jim@lengel.net
Contributors:
- Tabitha Branum, Coppell ISD
- Reilly Braun, Coppell ISD
- Rose Brenner, Norhtwest ISD
- Cathy Bryce, Principal’s Institute
- Roshanda Clayton-Brown, Dallas ISD
- Denise Collier, Consultant, TASA
- Susan Holley, Project Coordinator, TASA
- Kate Jenkins, Coppell ISD
- Konrad Judd, SHW Group
- Ellis Heitzke Kirkdorffer, CS
- Rachel Rife, Weatherford, ISD
- Dawn Smith, Duncanville ISD
- Carie Spannagel, Coppell ISD
- Keith Sockwell, Cambridge Strategies
- Brad Wirht, Eanes ISD

Consultants: Jim Lengel, Hunter College; Cynthia Temesi

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Thank you.