

On Track Academy: Helping Students Create Their What's Next

by Lisa Mattson-Coleman
and Molly Johnson

Abbie wasn't successful at her comprehensive high school. She quietly moved from class to class. But, at On Track Academy (OTA) in Spokane, she has found a home. She is not just getting by but leading, not just complying with learning tasks but asking high-level questions, collaborating with others and connecting in the community. She is on fire!

A decade ago the numbers of students "leaving" Spokane Public Schools prompted action from secondary program leaders. The data were clear and stories from our students and families even clearer. The *One Size Fits All* model was not meeting the needs of all our kids—a group of students was disappearing from our classrooms. We were left asking questions: How can students meet high academic standards when they do not believe in their ability to do so? If there is a disconnect between agency and confidence, how can motivation exist? What is the blueprint a student envisions to build her future? If the learning tasks presented hold little or no value at the outset, how can a student engage? How can a student see the light at the end of the tunnel and recognize its relevance for his future?

Enter *Disruptive Innovation*, Harvard Business School Dr. Clayton Christensen's description of the process by which a product or service initially takes root (Christensen, Raynor, & McDonald, 2015). First, in simple applications at the bottom of the market—typically being less expensive and more accessible, and then relentlessly moving up the market, eventually displacing established competitors. Instead of *breakthrough technologies* that make products better, Christensen's process emphasizes *innovations* that make products and services more accessible and affordable, more available to a larger population. Bingo! The stars aligned. We saw a need for education that suited our youth, especially those wanting to leave their schools.

By innovatively leveraging technology opportunities through online learning to create a different school design, each OTA student could *Create What's Next*, a phrase that became our On Track Academy motto, for her/his future.

What Personalized Learning at OTA Looks Like

1. Curriculum is created around a clear, comprehensive set of standards for the knowledge, skills, behaviors, and characteristics each student needs in order to be a self-directed learner ready for college and life success.
2. Each student's progress, grounded in the Written Student Learning Plan (WSLP), is based on a demonstration of Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) competency.
3. Each student demonstrates ownership of his/her learning through goal setting, specific paced plans to reach goals, acquisition of knowledge and enduring understandings, application of learning, and reflection that shows self-awareness and growth.
4. Technology is accessed for learning; Blackboard and Summit Learning platforms support digital delivery in a blended learning environment where student choice is increased over time, place, path, and/or pace of learning.

5. Demonstration of learning and competency falls into four categories that predict successful transition to career and college: Think, Know, Act, Go (Conley, 2008; 2010) Bill Daggett, Chairman of International Center for Leadership in Education, challenges education to address relationships, relevance, and rigor for ALL students. On Track Academy wove this challenge into our initial design and continues to iterate through continuous improvement a decade later.

On Track Academy Restores with Relationships

Dr. Chris Blodgett of WSU's CLEAR Trauma Center, in his evaluation of the *Readiness to Learn* program, found that relationship is evidence-based practice. The conscientious, explicit, and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the care of the individual provides the foundation for day-to-day teaching moves (Sackett, Rosenberg, Gray, Haynes, & Richardson, 1996). This practice creates a climate of care at On Track Academy. Relationships are at the core of our work.

In a review of the literature on the "best companies to work for" those that make the top of the list usually offer something more than a strong financial base for their employees. Described as "humane," with a climate that provides support, employees are encouraged to innovate, advocate for self, and "connect to the goals, mission, and values of the organization." These characteristics are warranted in schools. On Track Academy embraces these humane values and applies them to staff, students, and the families we serve. Twice a year at student-led exhibitions, families share the difference that our school makes in not only their student's lives but in the lives of their families. "She likes school! I no longer have to fight in the morning to get her to school on time. She is often the first one up," one parent shared.

Students want to be known. They speak of staff being more than teachers, but also friends, coaches, mentors, and guides. Young people long to use their voices and be heard. "We must not underestimate the sheer power of relationship in making our schools more effective" (McNulty & Quaglia, 2007). Is school a good place to be? Do our students maintain a sense of belonging? Are there at least a few adults who are interested in their success and well-being? How safe do our students feel? Are they recognized as individuals?

On Track Academy operationalizes relationship by creating intentional structures. Co-teachers that support STEM and humanities learning lead each classroom. Two teachers in each classroom creates the synergy that supports students socially and emotionally, as well as the opportunity to coach and mentor. Teachers describe their roles in ways that are not content specific. Elbow-to-elbow, all OTA teachers teach kids. On any given day it is visible that teachers are guiding learning in interdisciplinary ways. English teachers dust off math concepts and procedural skills. Science teachers are giving feedback on research papers. Math teachers are deciphering primary sources and marking the text.

On Track Academy Retools with Relevance

We look at content and standards through the lens of individualizations. Students desire alignment of what they are learning today while they *Create Their What's Next*. Content knowledge is ubiquitous. Information is merely a swipe of the thumb away for our digital innate youth. Empowering learners to drive their learning plan in ways that offers deeper learning, not just coverage, equates to relevance and commensurate engagement. Real world issues that warrant project-based learning develop in concert with students and are executed throughout the year. For example, five students produced the "Science Hour" for KYRS, a non-profit, non-commercial, full-power community radio station in Spokane, after researching topics like nuclear energy, travelling to the nuclear plant at WSU and interviewing experts in the field.

On Track Academy Renovates with Rigor

"Playlists" customize learning to align curricular choices with skill development and mastery attainment. "In essence, students need to know what to do when they do not *know what to do*" (McNulty & Quaglia, 2007). Based on a personal and academic summary of their strengths, interests, dreams, and needs, renovation of student learning takes place to suit not who they are but who they will become. Hannah loves animals. Her dream is to be a veterinary technician. Having completed all electives by the start of her senior year, she was able to intern with a local vet. Accepted into the only program in Washington State, Yakima Valley Community College, which is a very competitive program, Hannah is on her way. Through each customized plan, services are brokered by advisors—aided by our structure—to provide high engagement and achievement, creating what's next for each student.

Community Impact

In 2008 only six of 10 students graduated from Spokane Public Schools. On Track Academy was part of the systemic collaboration to increase the graduation rate, currently 85.6%. "By helping students get a diploma, they are helping each of those individuals live longer, healthier lives," said Marjorie Paloma, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation director (Lawrence-Turner, 2014). On Track Academy students are enrolling in college, trade programs, and universities. Graduates are joining the military and contributing to the local economy as part of the work force and as citizens. More importantly, On Track Academy students care. They are grateful for the chance to earn their diploma and want to express their appreciation by giving back. OTA leadership students won the Chase Youth Award for Community involvement this March. Students mentor elementary students at several area schools. They donate blood, make blankets for the homeless and foster youth, and they join with staff to create a compassionate community.

At On Track Academy, students think about *whom* they want to become as often as they think about what they want to be. And we co-create a plan for both.

References

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Lisa Mattson-Coleman

Lisa Mattson-Coleman is the founding principal of On Track Academy. A former high-school counselor, Lisa believes that education must focus on the whole child. Lisa is proud to represent On Track Academy as the 2017 Washington Association of Learning Alternatives (WALA) High School Administrator of the Year, 2011 Chase Youth Adult Asset Builder, 2011 YWCA Woman of Achievement for Education, and the 2008 James Chase Champion of Youth award.



Molly Johnson

Molly Johnson currently teaches at On Track Academy as a lead facilitator of the Summit Learning community and at Whitworth University preparing pre-service teachers to teach English to middle and high school students. She enjoys innovative pedagogy, developing hands-on curriculum, and taking students into the community to serve.