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## Designing High Schools that Work for the 21st Century

In recent years, educators and business leaders have clamored for major changes in American high schools. Mounting evidence demonstrates that too few students are graduating from high schools, and many of those who do are under-prepared for college and ill-equipped for 21<sup>st</sup> century work and citizenship.

The Gates Foundation, the world's wealthiest philanthropy, has allocated nearly \$700 million to states, school districts and non-profits to transform large, impersonal high schools into small, redesigned ones. Many reformers have taken up this banner and reiterated the belief that high schools need to go small to get better, and emerging data are supporting this reform thrust.

Recent studies have shown that students from small high schools are more likely to perform better on tests, fail fewer classes and attend college more frequently than their counterparts in large schools. And these outcomes tend to be even more profound for poor students and those of color.<sup>1</sup> With rigor, relevance and relationships serving as the core of the Gates Foundation reforms, all students are expected to master a challenging college-preparatory curriculum that clearly relates to their own lives. Perhaps most importantly, reformed high schools strive for an environment where all students have a number of adults in their schools who know them and their families well.

But how do educators create the kinds of positive relationships that can truly improve teaching and learning? Thomas Toch's influential *High Schools on a Human Scale* offers case studies of schools that have ventured onto this path through small school structures, but his ex-

amples also offer cautionary tales that size alone is not enough to truly establish effective relationships within schools. For example, New York City's much-studied Julia Richman Education Complex has in many ways reconstituted a large, dysfunctional high school into specialized, smaller learning environments, but not without first battling the pull to recreate the same distanced relationships between teachers and students and teachers and school leaders that can plague larger schools.

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The challenges of the Julia Richman Education Complex demonstrate that small school size alone is simply not enough, and for many school districts, this reconstitution of traditional high schools is not immediately or practically applicable. What is needed in every high school environment, large and small, is the right kind of working conditions for administrators, teachers and students.

In the last 12 months, the Center for Teaching Quality has seen this conclusion borne out through conducting comprehensive survey initiatives to assess teacher working conditions in Arizona, Kansas, Ohio, Mississippi, Nevada and North Carolina. In North Carolina, we worked with state partners to conduct two related studies specifically designed to isolate and analyze working conditions that facilitate effective high school reform.

This issue of *BestTQ* reports on how working conditions can improve trust and relationships in high school communities. CTQ specifically considers:

- 1) How a group of traditional North Carolina high schools with high student achievement levels are implementing spe-

cific strategies to build trust regardless of school size; and

- 2) How teaching and learning environments in North Carolina's redesigned and early college high schools help facilitate meaningful relationships that lead to improve student learning.

## Creating an Atmosphere of Trust: Lessons from Exemplary High Schools

According to analysis of the 2006 North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey data, an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect strongly correlates with overall student performance at the elementary, middle and high school levels. Trust also was strongly correlated with teachers' decisions to remain in teaching.<sup>2</sup> Consider the following:

- Sixty-six percent of North Carolina educators who intend to stay at their school agreed that there was an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect. Conversely, only 22 percent of educators planning to move schools and 44 percent of those planning to leave the profession agreed that such an atmosphere exists in their school.
- Approximately 20 percent more educators in the state's highest-achieving schools agreed there was trust and mutual respect in their school than their counterparts in the lowest-achieving schools. This gap on the issue of trust constituted the survey's largest discrepancy for school level teacher retention and the second greatest difference between lower and higher achieving high schools.

Knowing that trust matters, CTQ set out to learn more about how high school reformers can create the requisite conditions and practices that foster a trusting school environment. In collaboration with the North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards Commission and with generous support from the Karen and Christopher Payne Family Foundation, CTQ conducted focus groups with principals and teachers from 11 high schools to learn more about how they created an atmosphere of trust at their respective schools. Schools were selected based on their teachers' overwhelmingly positive responses to the trust and mutual respect-related items on the *2006 Teacher Working Conditions* survey. To learn more about the process for selecting these schools and the demographics of

students served, please visit [http://www.teachingquality.org/pdfs/brief\\_trust2007.pdf](http://www.teachingquality.org/pdfs/brief_trust2007.pdf).

The analysis revealed as many different recipes for creating trust in schools as there were types of school leaders and educators, and each reflected differences in local context. While the methods of implementation vary across school settings, all successful schools find ways to 1) create a shared vision; 2) provide an effective group decision-making and problem-solving process; and 3) ensure that school leaders consistently support teachers and teacher leadership.

## Create a Shared Vision

While most schools articulate a mission related to student success, schools with high levels of trust and mutual respect can point to examples of how that mission is reflected in school policies, group decision-making and teaching practices.

Each of the high school teachers and principals described a similar student-focused vision or mission. Teachers knew that vision was shared throughout the school because there was continuous communication about how decisions were being made and why. It is clear that students were front and center on every major decision.

In many of these high schools, the focus on students played out by ensuring that teachers' time focused on planning, instruction and developing relationships with students, rather than non-instructional duties. As a teacher from Alexander Central High School explained, "There is a design plan to make sure that we are not dealing with things that take us away from teaching. Our administration and counselors are very concerned about the time we have with our students."

In another school, the student-centered mission and vision are furthered by treating teachers as the knowledgeable professionals they are. In her first year at East Davidson High School, the principal asked faculty and staff to identify their most pressing concerns and then dealt with the most commonly identified issues. The result, the principal explained, was that teachers felt heard and valued. The principal summed up her philosophy this way: "We want to be the example of how you treat people. If you want people to treat kids right, you better treat your teach-

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ers right. That's the basis of everything. Let them know that you are in there with them."

### *Provide an Effective Group Decision-Making and Problem-Solving Process*

At these trusting high schools, teachers are centrally involved in decision-making. A number of principals explicitly stated that an underlying goal of involving teachers in decision-making was to build consensus among those most closely tied to student learning.

Teachers and principals at all eleven schools described the structure of their schools as non-hierarchical. As a teacher from Croatan High School said, "Where you fit in the hierarchy has a lot to do with trust. A good principal will have the teachers elevated to be at least equal with [administration and others in the school]."

The primary mechanism for creating this kind of shared leadership is the School Improvement Team (SIT). In these high schools, large school-level decisions were made through the SIT with broad input from faculty and staff. The decisions teachers made—like choosing the literacy model practiced at one school and the in-service professional development offerings at another—had meaning for their teaching practice. Teachers in no way believed they were merely rubber-stamping an administrator's decision.

Principals' explicit involvement with the SIT differed among the schools. Some principals attended all meetings but did not run the meeting. The principal of Croatan High School described his role in SIT meetings: "I'm a member, but I will try not to make any comment. I intentionally don't give input unless information is needed. I don't vote." At Alexander Central, the principal did not attend all SIT meetings: "I oftentimes stay away so they feel free to say what they want to say. The SIT chair person will share information that I need to hear."

### *School Leadership Consistently Supports Teachers*

Teachers in schools with high levels of trust described principals who are supportive and respectful. Teachers explained that they are free to make professional choices that are best for themselves, their students and the entire school community.

The importance of showing respect for all staff was emphasized by the principals. As they explained, all schools have teachers at different skill levels. But all staff deserve

respect, no matter their position or skill level. The principals described a commitment to working with all teachers and making an effort to help every educator succeed. Teachers and principals in these schools said that while some of their colleagues are recognized as exemplary, all are treated with respect.

Principals and teachers also reported that part of supporting educators meant communicating positive messages whenever possible. Educators in schools with high levels of trust often described a culture that consistently celebrates the successes of educators and students. Teachers at these schools said that everyone avoids the "gotcha" mentality where individuals are blamed for problems in the school. Instead, leadership understands and plays to the greatest strengths of educators in the school.

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Principals recognized that what teachers see from leadership is just as important as what they hear. These principals emphasized the importance of being visible and approachable, while also encouraging and expecting teachers to lead. The actions they described were meant to communicate to staff that "we are all in this together" and that all staff are working hard toward the same goals. As the principal of Alexander Central High School said, "You can't talk about it. They have to see it in your actions."

### *High School Environments Redesigned for Success*

The schools described in the previous section are traditional comprehensive high schools that are thriving with extremely high levels of trust and mutual respect in their school communities. Unfortunately, data from working conditions initiatives across the country clearly indicate that these levels of trust are not the norm for many traditional high schools. The question for the high school reform movement is whether redesigning schools can increase the likelihood of achieving optimal conditions for teaching and learning—including the efforts to build trust and improve relationships, along with other critical factors for successful schools.

With support from the North Carolina Business Committee for Education (NCBCE) and the Center for 21st Century Skills, CTQ recently evaluated teaching and learning environments in redesigned and early college high schools across the state.

The resulting report, *Teaching and Learning Conditions Improve High School Reform Efforts*, indicates that rede-

signed and early college high schools in North Carolina vary in terms of design, organization and instructional practices. However, each school is fundamentally committed to a common vision of creating meaningful relationships with students to help them excel in college and the workforce. Although the schools' organizational structure and size are quite different than traditional high schools, the final outcomes in developing positive working conditions are strikingly similar.

While the pillars of the high school reform movement are rigor, relevance and relationships, many educators in these schools believe the relationship piece of the equation is the most essential building block for achieving meaningful reform. As one principal at a North Carolina redesigned high school stated, "You have got to have that relationship and trust before other things are going to come ... You have to work together as a team. You have got to build that trust."

#### *School Leaders' Commitment to Building Trust Contributed to Positive Relationships in Schools and Communities*

Approximately 87 percent of teachers in redesigned and early college high schools (compared to 63 percent of teachers in all North Carolina high schools) agreed that "there is an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect within the school." Teachers reported that the principals' willingness to discuss problems, to encourage teachers to take active leadership roles, and to foster awareness and attention to building trust were important factors contributing to this finding. In focus groups, teachers routinely described their principals as "democratic," "approachable," and "collaborative." In most of the study schools, the faculty meets once a week to discuss issues they consider significant. At one school, these meetings take the form of Professional Learning Communities, and the principal works through these groups to make school level decisions.

School leaders were also working to foster more trusting and meaningful relationships with higher education institutions and the broader community. Community college liaisons and, in the case of the comprehensive high school undergoing full conversion, a site coordinator served important roles to foster more consistent communication with higher education partners and more effective use of their resources. Redesigned and early college high schools are working to develop partnerships for student work-studies, internships and field trips. The career-themed high schools were more likely to develop these

kinds of external partnerships. One of the career-themed high schools included community members on their advisory council. Another school brought in parents and community members to help monitor and evaluate the progress of students. The local business council came to watch students present the results of their project. When working effectively, these partnerships succeed because businesses and schools trust and understand how they can contribute to each other's success.

#### *The Small Size of Redesigned and Early College High Schools Promoted Collaboration Among Faculty and Staff*

Physical proximity based on the size and layout of the schools was a facilitating factor for interaction among teachers and students in many of the redesigned and early college high schools. Schools participating in the study oftentimes created shared office space for teachers. As one principal described, "Their offices are designed so that there are four teachers in an office at a time. Collaboration occurs naturally ... It forces collaboration." Concerted effort is made to explicitly facilitate collaboration as well. For example, three of the early college high schools created time each week specifically for faculty to convene around professional learning objectives. Even without organized efforts, teachers in a small school with a small staff see more of one another and have more opportunities to interact with colleagues and students.

Teachers in redesigned and early college high schools expressed satisfaction with their scheduled planning time much more frequently than colleagues in other high schools, but they also communicated strategies for using planned time more effectively.

On the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey, 71 percent of teachers in redesigned and early college high schools across the state agreed they have sufficient time available to collaborate with colleagues, compared to only 50 percent of teachers in all North Carolina high schools. The findings also indicate that quality of non-instructional time available is oftentimes as significant as the quantity of overall non-instructional time.

The structure of the scheduled time in redesigned and early college high schools is much more conducive to quality collaboration. Teachers at one redesigned high school explained that block scheduling and their use of project-based learning provided opportunities for quality collaboration. Compared to traditional high schools,

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the longer class periods and more intensive independent learning opportunities organized around project-based learning created more quality time for teachers to collaborate with colleagues while students worked on their projects. Redesigned and early college high schools without block scheduling created opportunities before, during or after the school day for staff to gather and discuss instructional strategies. As one teacher in a redesigned high school noted, “I have enough time here to actually build relationships with other educators, and that is not always true at other schools.”

Teachers in redesigned and early college high schools also reclaimed valuable time through targeted, collaborative professional development activities. In these schools, professional development was a shared undertaking where educators consistently learned from one another and were able to apply their learning to the classroom.

Through the North Carolina New Schools Project, a private-public partnership that supports the creation of small schools, educators in redesigned and early college high schools took advantage of opportunities to share strategies and experiences with other schools implementing similar reform models across the state. There was an expectation that teachers share professional development learning with colleagues, both within their own schools and beyond their schools’ borders. This cross-school sharing represents a significant shift in traditional school cultures, where instructional expertise is often confined within the walls of individual schools, or even individual classrooms.

## Conclusion

For any school, small or otherwise, to create the type of trusting relationships which promote meaningful student learning, teachers must become involved in school decision-making and must have sustained collaboration with colleagues, students and parents. But recognizing a need for these changes is much easier than dramatically reforming instructional practices and organizational structures to fundamentally change the way educators teach, students learn and relationships grow to allow both activities to happen.

The traditional and redesigned high schools described here have made necessary adjustments to conditions of work and teaching practices. The schools are fundamentally similar on many measures of leadership and collaboration, even while their organization and size are very different. These successful schools should serve as mod-

**Expectations Early College High School (EECHS)** is representative of the efforts undertaken in these schools to build meaningful relationships that allow students and educators to fulfill their school’s mission. Teachers at EECHS described strong, positive relationships among faculty, staff, students and community. The relationships at EECHS are created by a number of strategies that impact the daily lives of teachers and their students.

- Teachers shared office space (four to an office), and school leaders were in the process of developing plans for creating a single large group office.
- Fridays were used for student enrichment activities and staff meetings for faculty. During these staff meetings, teachers discussed issues, shared experiences and received feedback from one another.
- Teachers embraced the expectation to share their professional development experiences with the rest of the faculty.
- Student application interviews included not only students and principals, but also parents and teachers.
- Teachers had the cell phone number of all their students and vice-versa.
- Students participated in service-learning projects to integrate curriculum with opportunities to improve the local community.

els of reform for traditional and redesigned high schools alike.

CTQ offers the following recommendations for building trust and strengthening relationships in all high schools:

- 1) The empowerment of teachers serves as the core strength of many of these high schools. These teachers’ ability to influence and take ownership of many critical instructional decisions, not only in their own classrooms, but also in the broader schools where they work, has contributed significantly to student success. However empowerment is an often amorphous and elusive concept. *Administrators and teacher leaders need to better define what empowerment actually means, how it can be enacted, and what new skills administrators and teachers both must possess to be successful in a distributed leadership environment.*
- 2) These successful high schools do not necessarily provide teachers with much more non-instructional time than traditional high schools, but teachers feel the time that is available is more conducive to meaningful planning and collaboration. *Administrators and teacher leaders should collaboratively create structures*

which help ensure that available planning time is used effectively. The structures might focus on:

- the overlap of planning periods for team teachers and mentor-mentee teachers,
  - protocols and agendas for using meeting time efficiently, and/or
  - tools for measuring progress toward goals for planning time.
- 3) These high schools have school leadership that consistently supports teachers. Teachers in schools with high levels of trust and mutual respect commonly describe approachable leaders capable of creating and maintaining relationships with them. *Teachers and administrators should use the Teacher Working Conditions Survey information and other data points to inform constructive conversations about the interaction between leadership and teachers.*
- 4) Teachers and administrators in schools with high levels of trust and mutual respect can point to examples of how their mission influences the way policies are developed and decisions are made. *Schools should regularly assess the clarity of their mission and vision, the way that mission and vision are communicated to everyone in the school community, and the extent to which school operations reflect the stated vision.*

## Notes

1. For a fuller discussion of the impact of redesigned schools on students of color, see the American Legislative Exchange Council (1994) *Report Card on American Education*. Washington, D.C.: Author; McMullan, B. J., Sipe, C. L., & Wolfe, W. C. (1994). *Charter and student achievement: Early evidence from school restructuring in Philadelphia*. Philadelphia: Center for Assessment and Policy Development; Crain, R.L. & Strauss, J.K. (1986). *Are smaller high schools more or less effective?* Baltimore: Center for Organization of School, Johns Hopkins University.
2. Hirsch, E. and Emerick S. (2006) *Teacher Working Conditions are Student Learning Conditions: A Report on the 2006 North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey*. Hillsborough N.C.: Center for Teaching Quality.

*Teaching Quality Across the Nation: Best Practices & Policies* is a bi-monthly publication of The Center for Teaching Quality. For more information, send an e-mail to [Contact\\_BestTQ@teachingquality.org](mailto:Contact_BestTQ@teachingquality.org), or visit our website at <http://www.teachingquality.org>.

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