

Governor Easley's Teacher Working Conditions Initiative

Teaching and Learning Conditions

Improve High School Reform Efforts



There are new demands on North Carolina high schools to provide students with the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in the 21st century. With the exponential growth of knowledge in many fields (especially in science and mathematics), the 21st century worker faces new intellectual challenges. For students to compete in a global economy, they need to produce, analyze and communicate knowledge, not just learn it. Unfortunately, mounting evidence demonstrates that the majority of United States students leave high school unprepared for college and ill-equipped for 21st century work and citizenship.

In recent years, North Carolina and Governor Easley have created momentum toward reinventing the high school experience. The high school reform movement in North Carolina is built on the premise that helping students compete in the 21st century requires high schools to offer challenging curriculum to all students, create courses relevant to the lives and goals of today's students, and surround these students with adults who know and care about them. This brief describes how redesigned and early college high schools provide working conditions that promote rigor, relevance and relationships to ensure that all students develop skills for critical thinking, problem solving, communication and collaboration.

Data collected and analyzed by CTQ from more than 125,000 educators in North Carolina, Kansas, Arizona, Nevada and Ohio show powerful links between teachers' working conditions and both teacher attrition rates and student achievement levels in elementary, middle and particularly high schools. Nowhere are working condition reforms more critical than in improving high schools and informing high school redesign efforts underway across North Carolina. Teachers in redesigned and early college high schools were significantly more positive about every working condition area than their high schools colleagues across the state. The working conditions where high school teachers are generally the least positive—time, professional development and empowerment—are the same areas where teachers in redesigned and early college high schools were most positive relative to their high school colleagues across the state.

CREATING RELATIONSHIPS IS THE FOUNDATION FOR SUCCESS IN HIGH SCHOOL REFORM

The small size of redesigned and early college high schools facilitates collaboration among faculty and staff. Physical proximity based on the size and layout of the schools was a facilitating factor 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." Directed effort is made to 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.

The size and culture of redesigned and early college high schools helps build relationships with students. The intimacy of the smaller building spaces was also an advantage for building

With support from the North Carolina Business Committee for Education (NCBCE), and the Center for 21st Century Skills, the Center for Teaching Quality (CTQ) evaluated teaching and learning environments in redesigned and early college high schools across the state. The full report findings include considerably more detail regarding research methodology, working conditions in redesigned and early college high schools, and related recommendations. Please access full report findings on-line in mid-February 2007 at www.ncbce.org or www.teachingquality.org

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relationships with students. Teachers reported that small school environments help build meaningful relationships between students and faculty because students feel comfortable interacting with teachers outside of regular class time. Several of the schools made great efforts to ensure that students maintained consistent interactions with the same educators to meet their learning needs. For example, students attend a Personal Learning Period (PLP) with the same teacher during all four years of high school. The PLP teacher is responsible for helping the students with their schedules each year and is responsible for establishing and maintaining relationships with parental guardians.

Teachers in redesigned and early college high schools do not have more scheduled planning time than teachers in other high schools, but they have more communication and collaboration that add value to available time. Teachers at one redesigned high school explained that block scheduling and their use of project-based learning provided opportunities for collaboration. The longer class periods and more intensive independent learning opportunities organized around project-based learning created time for teachers to collaborate while students work on projects. Redesigned and early college high schools without block scheduling created opportunities before, after, or during the school day for staff to gather and discuss instructional strategies.

ESTABLISHING RELEVANT LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Teachers were empowered as instructional leaders in their schools. Teachers in redesigned and early college schools established key roles in making decisions about educational issues. One teacher at an early college high school commented, “We are all leaders in this school ... We have a democratic governance structure and everyone is expected to make instructional decisions.” At case study schools, regular times to meet oftentimes included a clear focus on providing relevant student learning opportunities and promoted continued engagement of teachers.

Principals were strong instructional leaders who helped make learning opportunities relevant. Principals in redesigned and early college high schools took active roles as instructional leaders. In some cases, this took the form of providing what teachers needed for effective instruction and protecting them from disruptions and duties that would detract from their focus on instruction. A principal at one school commented, “We work really hard as an administrative team to keep teachers outside of the daily grind of things.” Principals were also proactive in challenging practices and shaping instruction and related assessment policies to promote student learning. Beyond shaping instructional direction and policies, one principal at a health science redesigned high school took shared leadership a step further, by not only distributing leadership responsibilities, but also taking on the responsibilities of a classroom teacher.

Facilities and resources supported 21st century learning goals. At the redesigned and early college high schools, higher education and community partners provided important resources as well as concrete links to relevant future goals and aspirations of students. Teachers at schools operating on college sites noted the intrinsic value of college surroundings for high school students who were striving for eventual college admittance and success. Being housed on college campuses also opened doors for increased access to technology, laboratories, libraries,

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and college instructors. Not only did early college teachers have access to campus science and computer laboratories for classroom instruction, but they were especially positive about the level of technology support they received at their host college. At one school, a college professor and early college high school teacher were integrating instruction by team-teaching a class. Strong ties to other community resources enhanced the relevance of coursework, as well. Particularly in career-themed high schools, student work-studies and internships with local businesses were a core part of the curriculum.

WORKING TOWARD RIGOR IN HIGH SCHOOL REFORM

Accelerated coursework promoted academic rigor. All of the participating early college and redesigned schools articulated the goal of providing students with accelerated coursework. In the early college high schools, students finish their high school career with both a high school diploma and two years of college credit (the equivalent of an associate's degree). All students in the redesigned schools were enrolled in honors-level classes as a consistent minimum standard. One teacher described the goal of providing rigorous coursework for students to become ready for, "not only college, but for living in this world" by developing "habits of mind and workplace skills."

Parents and community helped promote rigor. Many redesigned and early college high schools have developed ways to engage parents and community members in the pursuit of rigor. The principal at one redesigned high school noted that after the first few weeks of school, a barrage of students found the work load overwhelming and wanted to give up. The principal believed that taking time to help parents understand what to expect in the first few weeks of school was necessary to keep students from leaving the school. After making a detailed explanation of rigor a consistent refrain when meeting with parents, the school did not lose a single student from the 2006-2007 freshman class. Another school used adult business leaders to help ensure rigor in students' project delivery and presentation. A local business council sent representatives to watch and evaluate the presentations and progress of students on project-based learning initiatives. Students received feedback from area business leaders regarding how their presentations would be received in a real-world work environment.

Professional development improved the capacity of educators to provide rigorous learning opportunities for all students. Principals and teachers in redesigned and early college high schools consistently voiced an appreciation for the value and relevance of professional development in their respective schools. The primary professional development opportunities were provided by the NCNSP, with supplementary professional development activities from the school district. One novice teacher defined the value of the professional development, "What we are doing in terms of professional development is highly relevant to our work in this school and very much related to what we need to help kids learn." Specifically, many teachers recognized the "critical friends" element of NCNSP professional development as a particularly useful intervention that was brought back and implemented within their respective schools.

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LESSONS LEARNED AND ISSUES TO CONSIDER

As comprehensive high schools across North Carolina move toward preparing students for the same learning objectives described by the high school reform movement, the successes and challenges of redesigned and early college high schools should inform all high schools.

Focus on Quality of Non-Instructional Time

All high schools across the state should concentrate analysis and efforts to improve not only the quantity, but also the quality of available non-instructional time. Redesigned and early college high schools do not 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 collaborate to create structures which ensure available planning time is used effectively.

Review Current Standards and Assessments to Align with 21st Century Skills

As the state develops measurements to consider the extent to which students have developed skills to succeed in the 21st century, some redesigned and early college high schools can serve as models. Efforts to document and disseminate what works for measuring student gains will dramatically improve the rate at which high schools across the state can pursue and achieve similar learning objectives.

Build Partnerships that can Help Improve Instruction, Make Learning Relevant to the Real World and Improve Access to and Utilization of Technology.

While school communities vary tremendously in access to business and university partners, high schools should fully leverage efforts to engage the community partners that are available. School leaders should consider all community resources—chambers of commerce, community colleges, local businesses, and parents—to assess technology and equipment needs and to obtain funding and other support to address identified needs.

Empower Teachers to Influence More School-Based Decisions

The strengths of many redesigned and early college high schools rests with the empowerment of teachers to influence and take ownership of many critical decisions influencing instruction, not only in their own classrooms, but also in the broader schools where they work. High schools across the state would benefit from creating opportunities, both formal and informal, for teachers to influence, design, create, and implement school and district policies and procedures.

Concentrate on Creating a Common Vision for Success

One of the most important lessons from the high school reform movement is the significance of having a faculty entirely committed to a common mission and vision. Schools that are not undergoing a dramatic reform process can still commit themselves to clearly defining and consistently pursuing a set of agreed upon goals for student learning that guide all school decisions.

Written by the Center for Teaching Quality in February 2007 for the Teacher Working Conditions Advisory Board

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