

*Framework for
Connecticut's High
Schools: A Working Guide
for High School Redesign*

Connecticut State Department of Education

2006

Connecticut is very proud of its successful public education system. Serving almost a half-million students from pre-school through grade 12, schools, school districts, and communities are striving to meet the diverse needs of their student population. Every year however, schools in our state lose hundreds of young men and women who choose to leave school without graduating or without mastering the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in a global economy and life. In addition, thousands of Connecticut high school graduates are leaving our schools without the necessary skills and knowledge to be contributing citizens in our state and local economies.

Although the state's dropout rate has been declining, (figure 1) when we put names and numbers on the percentages, the reality is Connecticut schools are losing too many young men and women. In 2003 there were 169,423 students enrolled in grades 9–12 in our public high schools. Figure 1 shows the cumulative drop out rate was 8% of the student enrolled. This number represents approximately 13,553 young men and women who left our schools.

Figure 1¹

Statewide Cumulative Dropout Rates by ERG							
Year	Class of 1998	Class of 1999	Class of 2000	Class of 2001	Class of 2002	Class of 2003	Class of 2004
ERG A	2.6	2.1	1.6	1.9	2.2	1.5	0.9
ERG B	6.0	6.0	5.1	4.2	4.3	3.6	3.6
ERG C	6.3	6.9	6.8	6.2	5.1	5.9	4.3
ERG D	10.9	9.8	8.1	8.4	7.7	7.7	6.0
ERG E	7.7	8.6	8.4	8.1	8.2	6.5	5.4
ERG F	15.1	13.9	11.8	10.7	10.2	8.4	8.2
ERG G	14.0	14.1	13.6	10.5	13.0	9.1	10.1
ERG H	16.8	15.2	14.6	15.1	13.1	10.9	10.5
ERG I	36.2	34.5	27.0	23.4	24.5	22.2	20.9
VT Schools	5.6	5.0	3.6	3.4	3.6	3.4	2.0
<i>Overall State</i>	<i>15.1</i>	<i>14.3</i>	<i>12.2</i>	<i>11.2</i>	<i>10.8</i>	<i>9.5</i>	<i>8.8</i>

¹ ERG – Economic Reference Group

This loss is a threat to our state's health. The primary focus of Connecticut's high schools must be to ensure Connecticut's high school graduates will be second to none in a global marketplace.

Redefining Connecticut's high schools is critical at this point in time, as our schools were not designed to prepare all of our young people to be successful citizens in today's challenging world. Throughout our state many ask why we need to change. Some note that graduation rates are up, more students are taking the SAT and ACT, or that our school has been successful for generations, why change? *Redefining American High Schools*, published by the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation sites a number of facts addressing the need for high school change:

- Because of today's demanding job market, some kind of education after high school is vital—whether it's a four-year college, community college, technical school, or a formal apprenticeship. Yet most students leave high school without the necessary skills for college or a living wage job.²
- Nearly one out of 10 ERG G & H high school students fail to graduate³
- Nearly 40 percent of high school graduates feel inadequately prepared for college or the workplace.⁴
- The more education a person has, the more likely it is he or she will be employed.⁵
- Among high school dropouts ages 16 to 24, nearly half are jobless and a third receive some type of government assistance.⁶
- High school dropouts will earn more than \$1 million less over a lifetime than college graduates.⁷

Historically

Today's high schools were conceived at the beginning of the 20th century to prepare students to work in an industrial economy that looked very different from the economy we have today. In the early 1900s, large comprehensive high schools were designed to educate all of a community's students efficiently, providing different programs, or tracks, for students based on their perceived academic prowess. Top-performing students were guided through a relatively challenging academic track to prepare them for college. Other students, almost always poor and minority students, regardless of their knowledge and skills were

² Peter D. Hart Research Associates, "Rising to the Challenge: Are High School Graduates Prepared for College and Work," Washington, DC: Achieve, 2005.

³ SDE 2004

³ ibid⁴

⁵ Carnevale, Anthony and Desrochers, Donna, "Standards for What? The Economic Roots of K-16 Reform," Washington, DC: Educational Testing Service, 2004.

⁶ Sum, Andrew; Khatiwada, Ishwar; Pond, Nathan; and Trub'skyy, Mykhaylo, "Left Behind in the Labor Market: Labor Market Problems of the Nation's Out-of-School, Young Adult Populations," prepared for the Alternative Schools Network, Boston: Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University, 2002.

⁷ Baum, Sandy and Payea, Kathleen, "Education Pays: The Benefits of Higher Education for Individuals and Society," NJ: College Board, 2004.

guided into softer academic courses (e.g., business math or general science) or vocational classes (e.g., shop or automotive repair) with the assumption that they were not college material.

In student focus groups recently conducted with Connecticut high school students a majority reported feeling disengaged from school. This state-wide, unscientific, report is confirmed nationally through a non-partisan opinion research organization which found that two-thirds of students said they could do better if they tried, and half of the students considered school boring and too easy.⁸

In a recent study that surveyed more than 80,000 high school students in 19 states, it was reported that 65% of students are unexcited about their classes and 62% don't feel that teachers encourage them to learn more; 47% of students would not select their high school if given a choice again; 50% of students said they don't often receive prompt feedback from teachers; 35% of students believe no adult at their school cares about them and knows them well.⁹

In Connecticut there is a new vision for Connecticut High Schools.

All students entering high school will graduate as contributing citizens in a democratic society and prepared for college and work in a global society.

Therefore, the mission of Connecticut High Schools is to ensure

that all students graduate with post-secondary skills, prepared for life-long learning and success in the global economy as a result of learning in a school culture of high expectations that is safe, personalized, and designed to meet the needs of the individual student.

To this end, Connecticut High Schools will:

- transform their school communities to prepare all graduates for careers in a competitive, global economy;
- develop rigorous literacy- based curricula that encourage authentic, real-life experiences and include performance-based assessments; and
- create a climate where personal and social responsibility is practiced.

We believe graduates of Connecticut High Schools should:

- be independent and collaborative learners who are able to problem solve, draw conclusions, think critically, communicate effectively , and think and act creatively to become productive, responsible citizens;

⁸ Farkas, S. & Johnson, J. (1997). Getting by: What American teenagers really think about their schools. New York: Public Agenda. Available from http://www.publicagenda.org/research/research_reports_details.cfm?list=52 (accessed September 14, 2004...from "High Schools for the New Millineum"

⁹ University of Indiana 2005

- be motivated, responsible, well-prepared with post secondary ready skills and knowledge and ready to continue their learning;
- have an awareness and respect for the diverse world in which they are entering;
- be open-minded and behave ethically in the world in which they live and work; and
- have self-confidence and be self-directed and self-sufficient.

The beginning...

In 2001, the Connecticut Associate Commissioner of Education assembled a committee of dedicated educational leaders to develop Connecticut's first published position on redesigning Connecticut's High Schools. This monograph focused on the re-conceptualization of high schools in Connecticut. The monograph (Appendix A) provided readers:

- a re-conceptualized look at Connecticut High Schools
- a focus on six areas for improvement
 - school culture
 - curriculum
 - instruction
 - professional development
 - assessment
 - leadership
- specific recommendations for improvement

In 2005, a new high school advisory committee was established to develop a new vision and framework for Connecticut's high schools. The committee has determined that using the current research conducted around the country on high schools will provide the committee a clear picture for the development of this framework. The committee also believes that two documents, currently available to schools and communities, provide tremendous support to the development of this framework. The documents are the recently revised New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) Standards for Accreditation and the National Association of Secondary School Principals' (NASSP) "Breaking Ranks II". Practitioners will recognize that both of these documents have been fully integrated into the Connecticut Framework. (Appendix B)

Introduction

The 2005-2006 Connecticut High School Advisory Committee has developed this "Framework for Connecticut's High Schools: A Working Guide for High School Redesign" for school communities. This framework has been developed for practitioners as a guide for conversation and change. The framework is research-based and designed for schools to use as guide for continued improvement.

There are three sections in this guide: “The Framework for Connecticut’s High Schools” sets the expectation for each of Connecticut’s High Schools to begin planning for and implementation of the framework. “The Guide to Planning and Implementation” will provide the school community with specific strategies, steps, and examples of how a school community may implement the framework. It will include specific case studies from *Breaking Ranks II* in support of the framework. “Recommended Policy and Legislative Changes” will provide state and local leaders with specific recommendations to ensure that the framework recommendations will be implemented.

Redesigning today’s high school is not a new concept. Schools and communities have been reading the research for years, yet today’s high school looks much the same as it did when its primary function was to sort and classify future workers. The focus of today’s redesign must be the student...for the student...for the student’s future. If change is going to be successful the student must be at the center of our discussions and planning.

Mike Buckley , Associate Executive Director Connecticut Association of Schools CAS said,

“It is clear that some students see high school as important and some do not. Those that do, more often than not, have a vision for themselves in the future, connect what they are being asked to do in their studies to its fulfillment, and have adults in their lives supporting them in its achievement. The challenge is to provide the same for those that do not. If there’s progress to be made with the Connecticut high school, it will come by providing the latter with the same clear ideas about what is possible in the future, engaging and challenging academics, and adults who believe in them enough to offer the assistance they need to succeed.”

The time has come for dramatic change in our high schools that ensures a more challenging, engaging, and supportive experience for each high school student in Connecticut.

- *Our high schools must provide more and more rigorous choices for our students from the moment they enter the high school up to and including their senior year.*
- *Our high schools must provide a safe, positive environment that supports students’ growth and development, not only academically, but also socially, emotionally and physically.¹⁰*

¹⁰ Re-Conceptualizing Connecticut’s High Schools: A Blueprint for Continuous Change 2002

Connecticut High Schools continue to slowly embrace the fundamental changes needed to ensure all students will be prepared for a successful life after high school. While there is much to be proud of in Connecticut high schools there is still much to be accomplished. The time for action is now!

The Connecticut High School Advisory Committee has reviewed significant literature, high school frameworks from other states, and has heard from hundreds of practitioners and students. In the committee's reading and listening to students and colleagues a common message was heard...high schools must be engaging for all students, expectations must be higher, learning must be personalized and positive, and leadership must be strong.

The Connecticut State Department of Education has provided schools a number of documents that provide guidance to educators in their efforts to increase student achievement. Three of the most important documents are:

- The Connecticut Frameworks K-12 Curricular Goals and Standards
- The Common Core of Learning
- The Common Core of Teaching

This "Framework for Connecticut's High Schools" is designed to set clear expectations for high schools in their continued efforts to increase student achievement. Using this framework in conjunction with Breaking Ranks II and the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) Standards for Accreditation will provide high schools the needed direction for change.

The "Framework for Connecticut's High Schools" has established seven CORE EXPECTATIONS for all high schools. By the year 2010 each high school in Connecticut will have:

- 1. a mission that clearly defines the essence of what the school seeks to achieve**
- 2. curricula that are standards-based, rigorous, and challenging. The emphasis will be on learning that is authentic, relevant, including exploration of post-secondary opportunities**
- 3. strong, educational leaders who have developed the capacity of teachers, parents, and student to enable all stakeholders to achieve the school's mission and expectations for student learning**
- 4. small, safe, personalized, and positive learning communities**

- 5. embedded professional development programs with the single purpose of improving teaching and learning**
- 6. purposeful and regular use of data to form and transform teaching, learning, leadership, and management practices to provide a rationale for educational decisions**
- 7. learning opportunities for all students that extend into the community**

In the following pages each of these expectations is further developed to provide high school leadership teams a definition of each expectation, specific direction, and recommended strategies to assist in planning and implementation.

CORE EXPECTATION ONE

Every high school in Connecticut will have a mission that clearly defines the essence of what the school seeks to achieve.

“The expectations for student learning are based on and drawn from the school’s mission statement. These expectations are the fundamental goals by which the school continually assesses the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process.”¹¹

Connecticut high schools will be mission driven. In a mission driven school all members of the school community will understand and embrace the mission while working toward the implementation of the common expectations and shared responsibility defined in the mission. It is especially important that the leadership and professional staff embrace and implement a mission that is focused around common, measurable expectations for what all students will “know and be able to do” for success in college, workplace environments, civic involvement, and life outside the workplace.

NEASC states “the school shall define school-wide academic, civic, and social learning expectations that:

- are measurable
- reflect the school’s mission. “

In mission driven schools students, parents, and staff, understand the mission and share active responsibility for its implementation and student learning. The school community’s focus is on all students graduating with:

- preparation that goes beyond the standards of the past
- the ability to function in a global society
- preparation in all subject areas for life, work, and the world after high school
- the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in college and the workplace

Expectations:

Connecticut High Schools will develop a clearly focused mission statement which will represent the school community’s values and beliefs about student learning. The mission statement will be:

- collaboratively developed
- concise

¹¹ NEASC High School Accreditation and Restructuring.

- memorable
- written in lay terms
- measurable

Through participation in the development of its mission, the school community will take ownership of that mission and its implementation. The school's faculty and administration will ensure that the mission drives the school's curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices.

Ongoing analysis of the impact of the school's mission is critical to the success of CT high schools. This analysis should include data related to student learning, as well as evidence that the mission is being used to make school improvement decisions.

To ensure the relevance and success of their missions, high schools must continually analyze their effectiveness through individual student and school-wide performance; as well as how their school uses its mission to make decisions about policies, programs, and procedures.

In schools that effectively use their mission to drive school improvement and increase student achievement there will be clear evidence of the mission's presence; such as:

- the mission is visible in every classroom and office
- every member of the school community can paraphrase and explain the mission
- school-wide standards and rubrics reflect the mission
- departments are committed to the implementation of the mission
- curriculum is collaboratively developed
- instructional and assessment practices reflect the mission
- data is continuously used at department and school levels as a basis for feedback and program improvement focused on student learning, as reflected through:
 - policies
 - program
 - procedures
- a plan for annual review and revision of the mission, as needed¹².

A Snapshot of the High School of the Future:

The district superintendent walks into the high school and witnesses a culture where the faculty meeting is being led by the school improvement team, informally known as the "Mission-Keepers." The Mission-Keepers are presenting

¹² NEASC High School Accreditation and Restructuring.

student performance data on the school-wide writing assessment which includes a sub-group of low performing students.

The team reminds the faculty that writing performance is a key component of the school's mission for all students, and is assessed using a single mission-driven, school-wide rubric. The ensuing faculty discussion includes the following:

- various departments make a commitment to review the curriculum
- teachers identify the need for further professional development in the teaching of writing
- teachers agree to greater instructional collaboration across disciplines
- the faculty identifies the need for focusing resources on writing improvement
- a timeline is established for on-going review of writing assessment data in relation to the school mission

CORE EXPECTATION TWO

Every high school in Connecticut will develop curricula that are standards-based, rigorous, and challenging. The emphasis will be on learning that is authentic, relevant, and includes exploration of post-secondary opportunities.

“As many as two in five high school graduates say that there are gaps between the education they received in high school and the overall skills, abilities, and work habits that are expected today in college and in the workforce.”¹³

The current standard for earning a high school diploma in the State of Connecticut is 19 Carnegie credits and a “D” average. Four in five college students (82%) and non-students (80%) say that they would have worked harder if their high schools had demanded more of students, set higher academic standards, and raised expectations of how much course work and studying would be necessary to earn a diploma. In addition, 97% of non-college students say that providing opportunities for real-world learning and making coursework more relevant would improve closing the gap between the education they received and the overall skills, abilities, and work habits that are expected today in college and in the workforce.¹⁴

Closing the gap between the skills of high school graduates and the skills needed in college and the workforce is essential. The high school experience should prepare students for the freedoms, challenges, intellectual demands, opportunities and possibilities that await them. The skills needed are challenging, but students report that they can and would work harder if the expectations were higher and learning was more authentic and relevant.

Authentic and relevant learning provides the connections between the “real” world and the academics typically studied in American high schools. Students involved in authentic learning are engaged in tasks that have significance to their lives and to the lives of others. When students work on real-world problems, they apply the knowledge and skills they are gaining in school to complete meaningful tasks that have an impact on their society.

Providing the level of challenge desired by students and necessary for their future success requires curricula that focus on rigorous content and concepts connected to relevant and authentic experiences (see appendix C on rigorous learning

¹³ Rising to the Challenge: Are High School Graduates Prepared for College and Work? Peter D. Hart Research Associates February 2005.

¹⁴ Rising to the Challenge: Are High School Graduates Prepared for College and Work? Peter D. Hart Research Associates February 2005.

and teaching). Beyond the standards of the past, expand beyond what is familiar to students and give students the ability to function in a global society. Students need to be better prepared in all subject areas and ready for life, work, and the world after high school.

As a result of Connecticut's High Schools developing and implementing more rigorous and authentic learning opportunities students will:

- have higher levels of understanding of content
- be more actively engaged in their own education
- have a broader context of knowledge from which to draw to make connections and think more creatively
- have a better understanding of the connections between their learning and the real world
- have a broader sense of career opportunities

In addition, Connecticut High School students would:

- enter college with a reduced need to take remedial courses
- have greater access to post-secondary opportunities
- have a smoother transition between secondary and post-secondary experiences

Expectations:

Connecticut high schools will develop curricula that are standards-based, rigorous, and challenging. Teachers are expected to differentiate instruction for all of learners, taking into account learning styles, prior knowledge, and/or interest, in each class. Instructional strategies and performance assessments that align with challenging content will be an integral part of the curriculum to provide guidance for engaging students with the subject matter.

The curriculum must have an emphasis on learning that is authentic and relevant and should incorporate experiences related to post-secondary options. All subject area curricula should reflect the connections between numeracy, literacy, problem solving and technology with the subject area. Like everything else in Connecticut's High Schools, the curriculum must be mission-driven.

The curriculum reflects a comprehensive system of assessment that includes a range of measures to gauge student learning as they work towards their individualized goals. Assessments are tied to the Connecticut Frameworks and to Connecticut's graduation requirements. Proficiency should be determined through performance tasks that require students to demonstrate their understanding of the content and how it applies to the real world. Additionally, students should be able to collect evidence of their development over time with

selections of authentic work culminating in a meaningful presentation of their learning.

It is also expected that schools developing and implementing a rigorous and authentic curriculum will:

- allow for interdisciplinary programs (e.g., humanities departments, learning teams/communities, senior project)
- incorporate technology in all content areas
- require students to work with parents, teachers, guidance counselors, or other adult advocates to develop self-directed personalized learning goals
- provide courses or learning opportunities for students to explore various experiences or focus on career paths along with required learnings
- expect teachers to work collaboratively and provide appropriate resources to allow them to do so
- require students to share more responsibility for their learning.
- prepare more students for full matriculation into post-secondary education.

Connecticut high schools embracing these ideals will better service the needs of our society. Students engaging in rigorous and authentic learning will be more confident in their abilities, able to relate to the world around them, and better prepared for post-secondary opportunities.

A Snapshot of the High School of the Future:

Students enrolled in civics are held to rigorous standards and experience the government in action. In order to complete the course, students are guided by a variety of resources and their own research and experience. Students have to attend several local government meetings and are responsible to present the information to their classmates. The teacher monitors the students' planned activities and builds upon the presentations with follow-up questions for investigation. Students in the class are encouraged to take a stand on a particular issue, research the issue, determine a supportable conclusion and take the stand in a public forum or with a letter to the involved parties. To learn about the three levels of government each student is asked to find a guest speaker involved in civics matters from the local, state, or federal levels. All communications, scheduling and follow-through are handled by the student. Students complete a reflective piece in conjunction with their language arts teacher describing their learning, their personal positions and their plans for participation in government in the future.

CORE STANDARD THREE

Every high school in Connecticut will have strong, educational leaders who have developed the capacity of teachers, parents, and student to enable all stakeholders to achieve the school’s mission and expectations for student learning.

*The way in which a school organizes learning for students, fosters leadership, and engages its members has a profound effect on teaching and learning. The professional culture of the school must be characterized by thoughtful, reflective, and constructive discourse about decision-making and practices which support student learning and well being.*¹⁵

True educational leadership in Connecticut’s high schools requires every adult in the school community to assume responsibility and leadership that is focused on achieving the school’s mission and expectations for students. School leadership must foster collaboration among all stakeholders of the school community: setting the direction, sharing the vision, and managing the resources needed to insure success for all students. School leadership must be focused on the improvement of student learning and the belief that all students can succeed. Such success refers not just to traditional academic achievement but also to developing the students the physical, moral, social, emotional, and aesthetic well-being.

The principal’s focus must be on inspiring and mobilizing staff, students, and parents to work toward the fulfillment of the school’s mission and, within it, their own learning and life goals.”¹⁶ The principal must ensure that improved student learning is the focus of the school community. As the instructional leader, the principal must work with department heads and other teacher leaders, providing the information, data, guidance, resources and support needed to foster continuous improvement. The principal must ensure that the formative and summative assessments of student work and performances are the basis for all decisions that impact the teaching and learning process. The principal must provide opportunities for teachers to collaborate both within and across departments for the purpose of improving curriculum and instruction.

¹⁵ New England Association of Schools and Colleges accreditation 2005 standards for public secondary schools.

¹⁶ Promising Futures: A Call to Improve learning for Maine’s Secondary Students

Expectations:

Connecticut high school leaders must provide significant leadership in new ways that empower both teachers and students to pursue improved learning for all members of the school community; today. . .

Leaders must maintain a clear vision, facilitating the design of a curriculum that is aligned with this vision, as well as appropriate organization and use of technology and facilities. They are instructional leaders and teacher coaches, providing job-related learning experiences and time for teachers to work together. They are marketing executives, communicating the school's vision and the benefits of attending the school. They are collaborators, developing learning partnerships with businesses, community groups, and institutions of higher education. They are competent administrators, distributing leadership and management tasks across the staff.¹⁷

Successful school leaders create professional learning communities that focus on improved student learning by fostering trust and collaboration. The climate of the school features students who are involved in decision making, are treated with respect and have significant ownership of their own learning. Teachers are fully involved in leading the school with active participation on school and district committees as well as collaborating within and across departments for the purpose of improving student learning. Parents/guardians and the community are supportive of the school's mission and are knowledgeable advocates in providing the necessary resources.

As Connecticut high schools developing leadership structures that focus their members on fulfilling the school's mission, they will experience a positive and improving school culture characterized by thoughtful, reflective discourse and decision making that supports improved student learning. High school leaders must fulfill all fourteen indicators listed under the New England Association of Schools and Colleges' Leadership and Organization accreditation standard.

Underscoring those indicators is the need for high school principals to:

- promote the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness and in an ethical manner
- articulate what high school graduates need to know and be able to do
- focus on continuous improvement of student learning
- support students, including low achieving and at risk students, to ensure that all Connecticut high school students graduate
- encourage and develop professional learning communities

¹⁷ The Case for Small Schools Educational Leadership (ASCD) February 2002

- be instructional leaders that foster a climate of trust and collaboration
- structure the school so all students have the opportunities to meet the school's expectations for learning
- be knowledgeable of current research and best practices for improving students learning
- include the school's stakeholders in developing the school's vision and in the decision making processes required to pursue that vision
- have the authority and resources needed to lead the school in achieving its mission and expectations for student learning
- insure teachers have the time and skills needed to be reflective, collaborate on student work, develop common assessments, and analyze student performance data to improve instruction and curriculum
- insure student grouping practices foster heterogeneity and reflect the diversity of the student body

A Snapshot of the High School of the Future:

The summary of the school's Academic Standards Committee's monthly meeting was sent out to the faculty and covered a number of important topics. The committee, consisting of department leaders, teachers, students, parents, and the principal, outlined an inclusive process that would result in revising the school wide rubrics so they could be more easily understood by students as well as more effectively used by teachers across disciplines. The department leaders and a teacher from each department would be trained on the process of revising rubrics and they, in turn, would work with groups of teachers in making the needed revisions on the two professional development days in the spring semester.

The committee also approved the addition of two new course offerings for next year as well as the proposal to align the school's academic expectations for writing with three social studies courses. The proposal for the focus of the monthly professional development program, drafted by the department leaders and the principal, was confirmed by the committee. The time would be used by departments to assess student performance on common mid-year assessments and by department representatives to improve understanding of the writing rubric with each representative responsible for informing department members. Also, each department was allotted a collaboration period in which the teachers of tenth grade students would work to prepare materials and lessons in preparation for the upcoming CAPT test.

CORE STANDARD FOUR

Every Connecticut high school will develop small, safe, personalized, and positive learning communities.

If high achievement for all students is the goal of reform, then personalization is the key. Although some students might be able to make it through four years of high school despite the lack of any personal connections, all students require a supportive environment – some more than others. Creating that environment is essential to bringing learning to fruition. In keeping with the sentiment implicit in the word, personalization can mean different things to different people. However, most definitions converge on a few common principles associated with providing students with opportunities to develop a sense of belonging to the school, a sense of ownership over the direction of one’s learning, and the ability to recognize one’s choices and to make choices based on one’s own experience and understanding of the choices.¹⁸

The six-story, 2600 student Julia Richman High School where in the early 1990’s a mere third of students earned diplomas and truancy and crime were rampant, no longer exists. In its place is New York City’s Julia Richman Education complex, which houses four autonomous high schools, a middle school, and an elementary school – none enrolling more than a few hundred students. The graduation rates of its high schools averages over 90%, and college attendance rates are similar.¹⁹

Research findings about smaller learning communities, and personalized learning environments have led schools and school districts to rethink school size and the value of a “comprehensive high school.” Breaking Ranks II identifies “making learning personal” as one of three core areas for which high schools must begin planning and implementing. Personalized learning environments and smaller learning communities will foster positive and supportive relationships for students with adults. These personal connections are highly motivating for high school students and are necessary for a successful learning environment. Personalized learning environments are the foundation on which change will take place.

¹⁸ Breaking Ranks II Strategies for Leading High School Reform NASSP

¹⁹ Statistics on the Julia Richman High School and the Julia Richman Education Complex are from “The JREC story,” available from the School Redesign Network at Stanford University: www.schoolredesign.com

Expectations:

Connecticut High schools will establish small, safe, personalized, and positive learning communities that will support each student achieving the school's expectations for student learning as defined by NEASC. Each learning community will:

- ensure that every student will develop a personal learning plan with the support of a staff advisor to advocate, monitor, and support the student's progress through school
- increase opportunities for students to have a voice and involve students in decision making
- conduct significant discussions about what they can give up and/or do differently (i.e. reducing course requirements to increase rigor)
- create a flexible schedule
- establishing teacher teaming and looping structures
- work toward student-teacher ratios with fewer than 20 per class and fewer than 90 per semester
- schedule common planning time for teachers focused on students, especially those with the highest needs
- provide credit alternatives to the Carnegie unit as a way to demonstrate mastery of course competencies and to meet graduation requirements

As small, personalized, learning environments are developed students will have better opportunities to be recognized for their contributions, feel free to risk, ask questions, disagree with classmates and teachers, make mistakes and/or not know answers. Small learning communities will provide teachers the time to accommodate students' various learning styles. Interpersonal relationships (teacher to teacher, teacher to student, student to teacher, student to student) will be characterized by respect. In Connecticut high schools, all staff will recognize that students' backgrounds, experiences, and needs vary; resulting in the allocation of resources to meet all students' needs.

It is further expected that each Connecticut high school will conduct an assessment of its climate for learning and, based on the results, develop a plan to increase the school's respect quotient and sense of community. This climate improvement plan will be reflected in the school's Code of Conduct and will be collaboratively developed, periodically reviewed, and consistently followed.

Schools will:

- periodically conduct climate assessments to identify needs and develop strategies to improve the climate for learning

- annually conduct a safety audit including a review of the crisis management plan

As schools provide a safe, positive learning environment, all students will feel safe; individual differences will be valued by all; interactions among all community members will be characterized by respect; and adults will be trained to recognize the social, emotional, and physical needs of students.

The research is very clear that when schools have collaboratively planned, developed, and implemented small, personalized, and positive learning environments, and have taken specific actions to ensure the safety of all members of the school community, significant improvement in learning results. The research also indicates that schools with working small learning communities experience:

- improved attendance and fewer disciplinary problems
- improved attitudes toward school by students and staff
- less vandalism and fewer incidences of violence
- curriculum that is more relevant and engaging
- respectful and supportive relationships among students, school staff, and parents
- frequent opportunities for student participation, collaboration, service, and self-direction
- greater acceptance of differences and better conflict resolution skills

A Snapshot of the High School of the Future:

In the staff room a group of teachers are discussing the value of their high school's small, personalized learning communities. The discussion is focused on ensuring their colleagues not leave a student's high school experience and the outcome of that experience to pure chance, but rather working to ensure all staff assumes the obligation to understand the personal needs of their students and to meet those needs intellectually, socially, and personally. The conversation also addressed how staff might help students finding voice, while some students have little problem finding voice; others struggle to find a productive voice well into adulthood. The staff efforts to provide a variety of structured experiences in which students are actively engaged; has been successful as all staff believe they can and do address their students' needs to:

- express personal perspectives
- create individual and group identities
- examine options and choose his or her own path
- take risks and assess the effects
- use his or her imagination
- demonstrate mastery

In this high school chance is not a game that should be played with a student's life. This school has been able to address the needs of their students. We endeavor to entice each student to fulfill each of those needs.

How often is it that only a few students express themselves—even though in theory all are “allowed”? Does that mean others don't want to? Are afraid to? Some would say “part of growing up is finding the ability to express oneself and if someone can't then that's life.” But what happens if one never learns that skill? Is that life? We think not! We will provide several arenas in which each student can express himself or herself in one-on-one and group settings—through our advisory program, our activities program, student exhibitions and presentations, and within each classroom.

CORE STANDARD FIVE

Every high school in Connecticut will have an embedded professional development program with the single purpose of improving teaching and learning.

While staff and faculty may support school improvement, they may not always know how to implement what is being proposed. For this reason professional development is critical to the school improvement process.²⁰

The daily working life of most teachers is one of unrelieved time pressure and isolation; they work, largely alone, in a classroom of 25-30 students for hours every day. Unlike teachers in many systems overseas who can take advantage of continuous, daily opportunities for professional development, American teachers have little time to work together on planning, preparation, collaboration, or professional growth.

The whole question of teachers and time needs to be rethought in a serious and systematic way. They (teachers, administrators, and professional staff) need time to read professional journals, interact with their colleagues, and watch outstanding teachers demonstrate new strategies.²¹

It is critical that Connecticut high schools develop a professional development program. These programs must be ongoing, assessment driven (formal or informal), systematic, focused, inherent in structure with the single purpose of improving teaching and learning.

*“To be effective, professional development must provide teachers with a way to directly apply what they learn to their teaching. Research shows that professional development leads to better instruction and improved student learning when it connects to the curriculum materials that teachers use, the district and state academic standards that guide their work, and the assessment and accountability measures that evaluate their success.”
(CITATION?)*

Expectations:

²⁰ Closing the Achievement Gap: High Schools the Work Design for Challenged Schools. Southern Regional Education Board

²¹ Prisoners of Time, The Education Commission of the States Education Reform

Connecticut high schools will be expected to establish professional development programs that are embedded in the daily culture of the school; providing time for professional staff to work together, plan together, and learn together.

School districts must have a professional development program that meets the community's needs. School districts and teacher groups should work together to develop the program as well as to provide the needed contract language to support the professional development program. Teachers participating in such programs must be given opportunities to disseminate information to their colleagues.

A Professional development program will:

- be mission driven, focused on teaching and learning, and differentiated
- use data about student achievement which will shape decisions regarding professional development
- meet the needs of all members of the learning community (teachers, administrators, paraprofessionals, counselors, etc.)
- provide multi-level opportunities (cross grades/various stakeholders)
- promote interdisciplinary collaboration
- address needs of initial educators as well as veteran educators
- be cooperatively developed by all stakeholders: teachers, administrators, et al
- be included in the school budget as an annual expenditure
- will result in increased student achievement

As a result of schools becoming professional learning communities, the personal investment of all staff will be apparent; evidence of improved teaching and learning, improved teaming and school culture, and empowered and motivated teachers will be measurable. Observers will also notice increased interdisciplinary collaboration among teachers, a continuing conversation about teaching and learning, and a sense of sustainability that encourages continued professional development and personal learning.

A Snapshot of the High School of the Future:

The team has one block (63 minutes) every six days to collaborate on student learning and assessment. Facilitation and presentation responsibilities rotate among the eight member team. Typically, a formal protocol is used to address a concern/dilemma specific to Freshman lessons and assessments which are developed during this time. Team members value and protect the professional time where conversations are centered on focused issues related to teaching and learning. Other stakeholders participate in these collaborations when appropriate.

CORE STANDARD SIX

Every Connecticut high school will purposefully and regularly use data to form and transform its teaching, learning, development, leadership, and management; and to provide a rationale for educational decisions that students, educators, parents, and taxpayers can comprehend.

Schools successful in using data to support decision making and improvement use the district resources available to them, create a school structure where data use is embedded in the daily schedule, and use staff expertise to continually develop data analysis skills. Other school factors include: strong principal support and leadership; ongoing use and analysis of timely, student-level data; expert assistance in data use and instructional strategies; interventions to improve teaching and learning; school improvement plans and teams; and professional development opportunities for teachers.²²

Data collecting and reporting are critical components of *No Child Left Behind*. Nationally, school districts must collect and report more data in more detail than ever before. When done purposefully and regularly, data collection, analysis, and discussion is a process that goes beyond accountability mandates and begins to drive teaching, learning, leadership, and management decisions within a district and schools. Analysis of data will inform decisions about everything from class schedules, reading levels and behavior management to instructional strategies, professional development and resource allocations.

For easy access to educational data, the data should be warehoused at the state level, Pre-K-16. This information should also include information about student demographics, educator preparation, personnel evaluation, budget resources, curriculum maps, instructional strategies and materials, formative and summative assessments, professional development opportunities, programs, test results, class grades, dropout rates, graduation rates, post-secondary enrollment rates, etc. In addition, this data should be available for decision makers 24/7/365.

Teacher and staff discussions, focused on educational data, must stem from real circumstances educators face everyday. These discussions involving students, teachers, staff, administrators, and parents, should be a part of a school's daily culture.

²² "Data Driven Decision Making" No Child Left Behind Issue Brief, Education Commission of the States 2002

As data-informed decision making becomes integral to overall school district performance the role of the teacher changes. The doors to the classroom open and teachers team together to share strategies, goals, and plans with each other. As part of the school culture, all stakeholders work together as a professional learning community to improve student achievement through data-informed decision making.

Isolated instruction must no longer be permitted. As teachers use student data it will become one of the most important aspects of best practice. In addition, program evaluation and benchmarking will allow teachers to determine levels of performance and measure progress toward common goals over time. Every teacher team will participate in the process of identifying the current level of student achievement and establishing a goal to improve student performance.

Furthermore, research indicates teachers who purposefully and regularly use formative and summative assessment data to form and transform their instruction are more effective than teachers who do not. The best teachers have always held themselves accountable. When a teacher knows early who is learning and who is not, there is a greater likelihood instruction will be tailored to meet a student's individual needs and shape a student's individualized learning plan.

To accurately recognize and meet the needs of all of Connecticut's students, formative and summative assessments must take varied forms. The notion of all students' knowledge and skills being able to be accurately measured in seat time and standardized tests must stop if Connecticut's high schools are to be the best in the nation.

Expectations

Connecticut high schools must develop a comprehensive plan for the purposeful and regular collection, analysis, discussion, and disclosure of assessment data to form and transform teaching, learning, development, leadership, and management. The plan must include a means by which education boards, and district and building administrators will:

- support a culture of embedded, regular, and purposeful data-informed decision making to support a systems approach to school improvement resulting in increased student achievement;
- provide necessary resources (e.g. time, money) to support regularly and purposefully meeting teacher-directed data teams at each school;
- provide the necessary professional development around data-informed decision making in which teachers, staff, and administrators will participate;

- provide real-time access to a Connecticut Pre-K-16 data warehouse and other in-district data collection systems;
- communicate with higher education institutions and businesses and industries about data in relationship to 12-16 student performance.
- share information about data-informed decision making to provide a rationale for educational decisions that students, educators, parents, and taxpayers can comprehend.

In addition all schools' teachers, staff, and administrators:

- meet regularly and purposefully as part of data teams (e.g. grade-level teams to focus on specific student needs; vertical teams, including grade 8-9, to focus on student achievement in content areas and specific and effective instructional strategies)
- meet across disciplines to identify school-wide issues and establish school-wide goals with data regularly collected, analyzed, discussed, and used to inform best educational practices for all students. Goals should include:
 - common formative and summative assessments;
 - literacy, numeracy, technology, and social and civic data
 - benchmark indicators to measure student achievement in the classroom, across all curricular areas;
 - additional indicators that articulate all student skills outside of the classroom;
 - strategies to reduce student-teacher ratios;
 - strategies to develop individual student learning plans; and
 - strategies to ensure all students graduate.
- meet to establish “graduation” requirements to meet the needs of all students with data regularly collected, analyzed, discussed, and used to inform individualized education plans;

A Snapshot of the High School of the Future:

The data team has just received the results from the quarterly benchmark assessments. The team is actively reviewing the data and is excited with the results. The team's suggestions to colleagues regarding instructional strategies, curriculum adaptations, and extended learning opportunities have had a remarkable impact on student performance this quarter. As the team digs deeper into the data they have discovered that two sub-groups have not responded as well to the various changes made. The team decides to meet with

their department colleagues to look closer at individual student work to determine the next steps as a school.

CORE EXPECTATION SEVEN

Every high school in Connecticut will develop learning opportunities for all students that extend into the community.

“Educational institutions do not exist in isolation from the economic, social, and cultural situations that sponsor and surround them.

In contextual teaching, it is the major task of the teacher to broaden students’ perceptions so that meaning becomes visible and the purpose of learning immediately understandable.

After 50 years in education, I am convinced that few other teaching strategies will so effectively help increase student achievement as helping students make the connections between classroom subject matter and the real-life challenges they will face throughout their lives. Connecting the “why” of concrete reality to the teaching process provides an essential motivational force for learning. If students are to be motivated to learn, they must see and feel the touchstones of reality and meaning in their education experiences.”

Researchers who study learning and thinking outside of school have found that in daily life people think about, find, and solve problems:

- *within a broader societal goal structure*
- *in a way that is integrated with actions*
- *by using numerous cognitive supports (mnemonics, concrete manipulatives, visual aids, etc.)*
- *in collaboration with others or in distributed patterns*
- *in different orders of complexity*
- *as part of a complete task*
- *as solutions become²³ ????*

At the turn of the century the primary focus of schools was to educate a small percentage of workers to think, collaborate, problem solve, and lead. Learning was limited to what individuals gained at school, in church, and at home. Today, technology and a rapidly shrinking world have changed where, when, and how learning takes place.

As Connecticut schools continue their reform efforts, the learning community must move beyond the school walls and provide real-life applications of essential learning and an understanding of the global economy.

²³ Contextual Teaching Works: Dale Parnell

Expectations

Connecticut high schools must provide all students opportunities for learning beyond the high school setting, day, and calendar. These opportunities will focus on providing students real world experiences to enhance their learning in the classroom, and explore careers.

Connecticut high schools should design opportunities specifically focused on relevant learning and connected to post-secondary and career opportunities. Each opportunity should include activities that further develop students' appreciation for their civic and ethical responsibility as well as their understanding of the value of the experience as it connects to the real world.

As students learn in the context of their community, the student and the community will have a better understanding of their responsibility in the formal educational process. Students will gain an appreciation for diversity, as well as, understanding the organizational structure and behaviors evident in the modern workplace.

High schools will provide experiences such as:

- Internships
- Job shadows
- Alternative credits
- Field trips
- Speakers
- Service learning experiences
- Community service experiences
- Mentoring
- Virtual educational opportunities
- Formal school, business, higher-ed partnership/ advisory teams
- Courses for college credit

As learning moves outside of the school walls Connecticut students will experience additional opportunities for networking, exposure to different forms and uses of technology, and a better awareness of the community and their role as active participants.

Schools should require a personal, digital portfolio and a comprehensive post secondary transition plan for every student. This portfolio and plan will be the future road map for the student's post secondary experiences.

As a result of these new opportunities it is expected that all students will develop strengths in the following areas:

- critical thinking
- problem solving

- application of academic concepts
- ethical behavior
- awareness of the global economy
- interpersonal and team building skills
- leadership and organization skills
- time management skills
- employability skills

High schools cannot be solely responsible for educating our adolescents. Extending learning into the community will provide mutual benefits to the school, the students, and the community. Communities, as contributors to the educational process, will become more aware of school operations, overall student performance, and areas of need.

Learning that takes place beyond the high school walls will be valuable for students, teachers, and the entire community as each stakeholder becomes more actively involved in the high school experience.

A Snapshot of the High School of the Future:

A junior at New Milford High School stepped off the bus in the front of New Milford Hospital to participate in a very unique experience. The student will later describe this opportunity as life changing and career affirming. She witnesses the delivery of two babies in the Family Birth Center today. After observing the deliveries, she assists the nurses in caring for the newborns and their mothers. She has been well prepared academically and occupationally not only with her coursework, but with the mandatory training in HIPPA and Universal precautions as well as topics from Medical Ethics to Diversity in the Workplace. In the hospital, the student learns about the technology and testing utilized pre and post natal for both the mothers and babies. The nurses serve as her mentors and resources as she pursues her goal of becoming a Labor and Delivery Nurse. The student maintains a weekly journal of her experiences while being exposed to a full range of health related careers. She is now better prepared to make decisions about postsecondary education and a future in the challenging field of healthcare.

The real world experience described above is part of Education Connection's Regional Internship Program which serves as an exemplar of student learning outside the classroom walls. The experience is a culmination of rigorous academic and healthcare coursework that breathes life and relevance to a student's educational and career path.

The Senior Year Revisited

In the agricultural age, postsecondary education was a pipe dream for most Americans. In the industrial age it was the birthright of only a few. By the space age, it became common for many. Today, it is just common sense for all.

—*National Commission on the High School Senior Year*

For many seniors, the senior year is a time to reflect on the previous eleven years of learning, fun-filled events that have taken place, completing the remaining graduation requirements, and preparing for post secondary life. It is known that during the first three years in high school, many students have scheduled their classes to ensure the senior year will be less than rigorous.

In an article “The Senior Slump: Making the Most of High School Preparation” Michael W. Kirst writes, “Many students who express interest in post-secondary learning mistakenly assume that meeting their high school graduation requirements means they are prepared for post-secondary learning. All types of students, including the highest performing, talk about the second semester of the senior year as being a time they have “earned” to relax and have fun.

Even though about 70 percent of seniors will go from high school to post secondary education in 2000, the weak academic focus in the senior year is one reason why the percentage that completes a baccalaureate degree is not much greater than it was in 1950.”

The Connecticut High School Advisory Committee believes all schools must seriously consider revising the senior year to ensure all graduates have an intellectually as well as socially engaged senior year and to ensure adequate preparation for post-secondary learning and life. It is recommended that school communities consider the following when discussing the senior year:

1. Provide and/or expand dual-enrollment post-secondary programs that invite all students, not just the highest achieving students, to participate. This will enable students to meet the requirements for higher-level academic and technical studies.
2. Provide open enrollment for Advanced Placement and Honors courses. Seeking out low-income and disadvantaged students for enrollment in these courses will result in more students meeting higher standards.
3. Review high school policies granting course credit for work experience that has no strong academic components.

4. Provide academically-based internships and/or apprenticeships by coordinating with the business community to develop high-quality, paid or unpaid, experiences that focus beyond entry-level jobs. Additional ways to incorporate the real world into the high school include creating school-based enterprises; offering students opportunities to take responsibility for running aspects of the school; and incorporating adult mentors from the business and social service communities.
5. Ensure every graduating senior has developed a post-secondary five-year plan.
6. Develop senior year curricula that focus on post-secondary preparation for all students, not just AP and Honors, and then ensure all students are enrolled in rigorous courses focused on post-secondary preparation.
7. Provide structures and opportunities for students to volunteer in their community. The senior year is an appropriate time to reinforce and/or initiate the belief that a lifelong commitment to giving back to the community is a good thing.
8. Provide options for service and work-based learning opportunities that offer credit. Students have much to gain from high-quality career programs that combine a demanding academic curriculum with challenging technical content. Apprenticeships and internships related to course content show students how their studies relate to the world of work.
9. Develop a requirement that all students complete a senior project demonstrating their capabilities for research, creative thinking, rigorous analysis, and clear written and oral communication. Seniors should showcase an accumulated portfolio of their work throughout high school.
10. Provide students access to "virtual" high schools that use distant learning techniques to provide high-quality instruction and programming in academic and career/technical courses.
11. Provide travel-based study options for seniors by giving them the opportunity to earn credit for spending time in another city, region, or country while being engaged in structured experiences that allow them to develop academic and social skills and new perspectives on their lives.

Practices to Consider Ending...

As high schools begin or continue their journey of redesign, traditional and often well-intended practices often interfere with new research on learning. These rituals and traditions will need serious reconsideration and decisions will have to be made to prevent further interference with learning. Communities are asked to reconsider each of these practices to determine if they contribute to increased student success for all students. If they do not, each practice should be phased out, and replaced with meaningful practices that support the seven research-based CORE Standards defined in this document.

Practices to consider phasing out and replacing that have an impact on *Teaching and Learning*

- Curriculum that is based on doing every chapter in the book
- Interruptions that disturb learning
- Meetings that do not focus on teaching strategies that meet the mission of the school and improve student achievement
- Learning in 45 - 55 minute time blocks 180 days a year
- “One size fits all” curriculum
- Learning defined by content that is practiced and assessed with worksheets and not connected to the real world
- Denying some students access to challenging learning opportunities and advising others into courses with low expectations
- Tracking/levels
- Professional development that is not targeted, ongoing and systematic
- Grading based on limited evidence of student learning
- Teacher managing and controlling learning

Practices to consider phasing out and replacing that have an impact on *School Structures*

- Administrators’ focus on day to day management
- Administrators not having the autonomy to be effective leaders
- Large impersonal high schools with large teacher/supervisor ratio
- Supervision of teachers through old supervision structures
- Students in rows and closed door classrooms
- 125+ students per teacher
- Students far behind in academic skills entering high school
- Decision making not based on research or best practice.
- Practices that impede a focus on students, such as, the bus schedule
- Inadequate resources to support the academic mission
- Present school funding formula and emphasis on property taxes

