

Changing High School Structures and Programs (NHSC)

Changing High School Structures and Programs

National High School Center

The School Improvement Grants have expanded the funding assistance available to secondary schools, especially with the inclusion of Tier II schools (see chapter 1 and 2 for more information). As a result, states and school districts have an opportunity to put unprecedented resources toward high school reforms that would increase graduation rates, reduce dropout rates, and improve teacher effectiveness for all high school students, particularly for students who are in greatest need of high quality teaching and supports to catch up academically with their peers. Research suggests that structural changes designed to enhance learning opportunities, in combination with instructional enhancements, are critical aspects of effective high school reform (Quint, 2006). The pieces within this section provide a brief overview of five structural changes.

- Dual-enrollment gives students the opportunity to take postsecondary-level courses in high school that allow them to earn high school and college credit.
- Thematic learning academies are smaller academies within a larger school that focus on specific themes. These academies—which can be designed around academic- or career-based themes—focus on personalization, the development of college- and career-ready skills through academic and occupational curricula, and easing transitions into and out of high school.
- Credit-recovery programs allow students to recover lost credit through strategies such as afterschool or summer coursework and online portals.
- Re-engagement strategies are designed to meet the needs of youth who have dropped out of high school or are at risk for dropping out. Programs are designed to meet the unique needs of students who are poor, incarcerated, pregnant or parenting, homeless, and/or in need of special education or English language learner services.
- Smaller learning communities include a variety of strategies and structures (e.g., small schools, thematic learning academies, magnet programs) used to subdivide larger comprehensive high schools to foster student engagement and teacher involvement.

The state plays a critical role in ensuring that districts and schools make innovative structural changes to high schools and have the resources they need to fully implement and sustain these changes. Furthermore, the state

can help monitor the success of these structural changes so that effective programs are scaled up and ineffective programs are phased out. Some examples of how states can support these programs include the following:

- Establishing sophisticated but user-friendly systems for collecting, disaggregating, analyzing, monitoring, and using student data; and hold schools and districts accountable for identifying and supporting students who are struggling;
- Supporting—through policymaking and funding—district and school efforts to personalize the learning environment, to ease transitions into and out of high school, and to ensure that students are exposed to a balanced blend of academic and career-oriented learning opportunities;
- Helping districts build leadership capacity among faculty and administrators in low-performing schools to address diverse student needs; and
- Promoting district-level partnerships with the community, employers, and institutions of higher education to facilitate learning opportunities for students and their teachers and to make coursework relevant.

State and local educators and policymakers must carefully coordinate and align their efforts to implement the structural changes that research suggests can improve outcomes for high school students. This section provides background on some promising structural innovations and specific examples of how states, districts, and schools may go about implementing them. For each featured approach, a brief list of references and resources is also provided.

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Dual Enrollment/Early College High Schools

National High School Center

A strategy designed to address the challenge of improving student access to and success in college is the expansion of dual enrollment opportunities, where high school students simultaneously earn high school *and* postsecondary credit for the same course while being exposed to the demands of college-level work (Bailey, Hughes, & Karp, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 2003; 2004). These courses can be taken on a high school campus, the campus of a postsecondary institution, and sometimes through distance learning. Research has documented the effectiveness of dual enrollment efforts in aiding high school students not only in their transition to college, but also in graduating from college (Bailey et al., 2002; Anderson, 2001; Wechsler, 2001; Crossland, 1999).

It is becoming more common for high schools to give students some level of access to college courses. According to an Education Commission of the States database, in 2008 forty-six states had statewide policies governing at least one aspect of dual enrollment. State policies vary widely on a number of dimensions, including state oversight, target population, admissions requirements, course locations, tuition, and funding. According to an NCES study that surveyed U.S. high schools, 71% of high schools reported offering dual credit courses in 2002-03. However, dual enrollment was less available to the student populations traditionally underrepresented in postsecondary institutions. Of the high schools with more than a 50% minority student population, only 58% reported offering dual credit or college-level classes (Waits, Setzer, & Lewis, 2005). Studies indicate that despite the relatively wide availability of college courses to high school students, the number of students taking advantage of the opportunity is fairly small (Kleiner & Lewis, 2005).

One specific effort to expand opportunities for student participation in dual credit options is the Early College High School Initiative. There are over 200 Early College Schools (ECSs) in 24 states and the District of Columbia serving a population of over 30,000 students. ECSs are designed to ensure that underrepresented, first generation college-goers can earn a high school diploma and up to two years of college credit tuition-free. While other dual enrollment options provide students with a taste of college, the goals of ECSs are to provide students with a blended and more integrated academic and social experience.

The specific designs of ECSs vary, but all agree to adhere to the initiative's core principles that include: a commitment to serving students underrepresented in higher education; a partnership between a local education agency, a higher education institution, and the community, all of whom accept joint responsibility for student success; a jointly developed, integrated academic program that allows students to earn one to two years of transferable college credit; a comprehensive student support system that develops the academic and social skills necessary for college success; and a commitment to advocate for supportive policies that advance the early college movement. A series of reports (AIR & SRI, 2006; 2007; 2008) have examined ECSs and their characteristics, and the National High School Center summarized early findings in one of its publications (National High School Center, 2007).

Action Principles

For State

1. Consider including dual enrollment as part of a larger statewide P-20 alignment effort.
2. Consider adopting statewide articulation agreements that address credit transfer for dual credit classes in both 2- and 4-year institutions of higher education.
3. Consider identifying funding streams that would help make dual credit options affordable for all students, not just those with the ability to pay for tuition, books, and other materials.
4. Consider aligning standards, assessments, and graduation requirements with postsecondary expectations.
5. Create the longitudinal data systems that can track student progress pre-K-12 through postsecondary and workplace.

6. Consider the implications for tuition assistance and campus housing for recent high school graduates transitioning to postsecondary institutions with one or two years of college credit.
7. Consider the impact that preparation for end-of-course exams might have for students who want to enroll in dual credit options.
8. Consider incentives for collaboration and communication across the educational system.

For District

1. Promote partnerships with postsecondary institutions.
2. Provide information/resources to support program design options across multiple schools and postsecondary institutions.
3. Serve as policy advisors on program implementation.
4. Help find instructors who could teach college level courses and assist with administrative planning.

For School

1. Ensure that school staff members (administrators and guidance counselors) fully understand the state's graduation and dual enrollment policies.
2. Design clear course pathways that provide students with opportunities for dual credit options, particularly for students traditionally underrepresented in postsecondary institutions.
3. Provide course-selection guidance for students interested in and eligible for dual credit options.
4. Balance student interests with the transferability of credits when advising students on course selection.
5. Provide adequate academic and social support for student success in college-level classes.
6. Build time and incentives for cross-institutional collaboration between high schools and postsecondary institutions.

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Thematic Learning Academies

National High School Center

The transition to high school presents numerous academic and social challenges for some students, particularly ninth graders and those who are underprepared for a rigorous college-preparatory curriculum (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006) or have difficulty acclimating to the larger, more bureaucratic environment of the typical American high school (Lee & Smith, 2001). With fewer opportunities for individualized attention, students can easily get lost in the crowd, fall behind, lose interest in school, and eventually drop out. To help address this concern, schools across the nation are implementing thematic learning academies, which tend to be smaller, focused programs within a larger high school. Popular approaches to learning academies—which include personalization as a critical element for success—are theme-based academies (e.g., leadership, arts, technology), ninth grade (or freshman) academies, and career academies. These academies focus on students' individual needs and provide them with a balanced mix of core academic preparation and opportunities to develop practical, work-based skills. The academy models are helping high schools successfully engage students and keep them on track for graduation.

Theme-based academies. Some learning academies are designed to provide a learning environment centered on a particular theme. While some of these themes can be related to a specific career field (e.g., science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), other themes can be more general (e.g. leadership). Specific designs for thematic learning academies can vary. For example, these academies can be limited to students in a particular grade, or can be offered as multi-grade arrangements.

Ninth grade academies. Referred to as the “ninth grade bulge,” students in ninth grade comprise the largest percentage of the overall high school population because they are much more likely to fall behind during this critical year and not be promoted to tenth grade (Wheelock & Miao, 2005). Ninth grade academies provide specialized attention during this transitional year by helping underprepared students catch up academically, offering a more personalized learning environment, and giving teachers the opportunity to collaborate. Some ninth grade academies include a seminar on study skills, and some use a block scheduling structure that allows time for intensive development of the critical skills that students need to succeed in high school (Smith, 2007).

Other aspects of ninth grade academies may include: an advisory component that facilitates meaningful interaction between teachers and students and can help identify and respond to students' needs early on; and teacher teams that are responsible for addressing students' learning needs and responding to discipline and attendance problems in proactive ways (e.g., eliminating in-school suspension). Upper grade academies, or “houses,” provide similar supports for students beyond ninth grade.

Career academies. Designed to expose students to a rigorous core curriculum, career academies simultaneously teach college- and career-ready skills in specific fields, such as arts, business, health sciences, hospitality, and engineering. Close partnerships with the employers in the local community provide career awareness, internships, and other work-based learning opportunities for students.

Like the other academy models, an emphasis is placed on personalized learning (Smith, 2008), and career academies often involve a mentoring or advisory component. Research suggests that career academies can have a positive impact on attendance, credit accrual, graduation rates, and college attendance rates, as well as postsecondary employment prospects for young men (Kemple & Willner, 2008).

Action Principles

For District

1. Monitor student and school data to ensure that students who are falling behind and/or are at risk for dropping out receive additional supports through placement in thematic learning academies.
2. Provide support for schools developing thematic learning academies through professional development and coaching.

3. Foster collaboration between feeder middle schools and high schools to promote placement of students, including students with disabilities and English language learners, in ninth grade and other learning academies to ensure that students in need of additional support have their needs met from the first day of high school.
4. Encourage school leaders to develop and nurture partnerships with local businesses and organizations that are linked with the school's thematic academies.

For School

1. Determine and implement a structure to personalize the learning environment best suited to the school's context.
2. Provide parents with information about the purpose and outcomes of thematic learning academies.
3. Develop partnerships with local business, organizations, and government agencies and leverage these partnerships to give students hands-on learning opportunities, such as internships and job shadowing.
4. Provide professional development for all staff to help prepare them for the new school structure and to support new roles.

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Credit-Recovery Programs

National High School Center

Research has shown that students who miss or fail academic courses are at greater risk of dropping out of school than their peers. To re-engage these students researchers recommend that schools provide extra academic support (Dynarski et al., 2008). For example, schools can provide extra study time and opportunities for credit recovery and accumulation (also known as credit retrieval). These programs may be delivered in remedial classes during the regular school day or as extended learning time (e.g., before or after-school, Saturday school, or summer programs). In these programs, students can work closely with teachers either individually or in small groups to complete coursework or credits required to graduate. In other words, credit-recovery programs need to address the challenges that prevented students from previous success. This may include flexible pacing and schedules of instruction, adapting instructional methods and content to students' level of skills and learning styles, extra practice, and frequent assessments to inform instruction and to provide feedback to students. Data reported by schools suggests that credit-recovery programs may have positive effects on earning credits toward graduation, attendance rates, and passing rates on state standardized tests (e.g., Trautman & Lawrence, 2004).

Recognizing that credit recovery can be an important strategy for dropout prevention, several comprehensive dropout prevention models include this component. For example, the Talent Development High School model offers after-hours credit-recovery programs such as Twilight School and other summer and weekend activities for making up or catching up on work. This model has shown positive effects on students' average number of course credits (Kemple, Herlihy, & Smith, 2005). Additionally, an increasing number of schools use online learning options for credit recovery (Watson & Gemin, 2008). The use of technology as an alternative to traditional classroom instruction individualizes instruction and allows for scheduling flexibility. However, it also requires strategizing in order to maintain students' motivation and engagement and to help them develop independent learning skills, self-discipline, and technology-based communication skills necessary to become successful online learners. There is some initial research evidence supporting the effectiveness of utilizing technology to help students complete courses required for graduation (e.g., Cavanaugh et al., 2004; Hannafin, 2002).

Action Principles

For State

1. Set clear standards to govern credit-recovery programs.
2. Ensure programs meet minimum credit standards and are implemented with fidelity.
3. Determine the maximum number of credit recovery courses that a student can take.
4. Determine the instructional methodologies used for the credit recovery program(s) (e.g., online program, direct instruction, computer assisted instruction, etc.).
5. Certify national and state instructional programs (e.g., virtual learning courses) that can be used by districts and schools for credit recovery.

For District

1. Offer credit-recovery programs (e.g., an intensive semester of instruction in reading and mathematics, online credit-recovery programs).
2. Recommend that teachers certified in the appropriate subject oversee students trying to make up credits.
3. Establish an application process that requires parental consent for participation in a credit-recovery program.
4. Establish minimum criteria to determine eligibility for participation in the credit-recovery program.
5. Use a longitudinal data system to identify students at-risk for dropping out of school who may benefit from credit-recovery programs.

6. Use longitudinal data systems to track the outcomes of students participating in credit-recovery programs to inform decisions about retaining, re-designing, or replacing current credit-recovery programs.
7. Provide professional development and resources for teachers and others who are involved with the credit-recovery program.

For School

1. Offer mandatory support classes or after-school courses for credit-recovery for students at high risk (e.g., below 2.0 grade point average).
2. Monitor the credit-recovery program with appropriate data supports to make sure students have mastered the material before being awarded credit.
3. Convene a panel of principals and teachers to peer review each credit-recovery course to ensure it aligns with state and local standards.
4. Approve participation of a student in a credit-recovery program after review by the school leadership team, school improvement team, grade level team, or other school committee including the guidance counselor responsible for the student and a teacher in the appropriate subject area.
5. Continue to review data to help inform instructional decisions that will, over time, reduce the number of students needing credit-recovery options.

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Re-engagement Strategies

National High School Center

Re-engagement of high school dropouts (also known as school re-entry or dropout recovery) aims to give dropouts who want to return to school the help they need to graduate. More specifically, re-engagement programs aim to help dropouts remain healthy and safe; ready for work, college, and military service; ready for marriage, family, and parenting; and ready for civic engagement and service. Re-engagement programs may be housed in a wide range of offices and departments—most commonly a high school or an alternative education center. In some cases, re-engagement programs are overseen by a district central office or by specific district departments.

Some of the re-engagement programs are tailored to meet the unique needs of high school dropouts including young adults below the poverty line, pregnant youth and young parents, incarcerated youth and youth offenders, special education students, English language learners, homeless youth, and migrant youth. A number of research studies have demonstrated the positive impact of re-engagement programs on academic outcomes, employment outcomes, and health and social-emotional outcomes of these diverse populations including economically disadvantaged youth (Bloom, Gardenhire-Crooks, & Mandsager, 2009; Schochet, Burghardt, & Glazerman, 2001), migrant youth (e.g., Cranston-Gingras, 2003), youth offenders (e.g., Abrazaldo et al., 2009), and young parents (e.g., Bos & Fellerath, 1997; Quint, Bos, & Polit, 1997; Weinman, Buzi, Smith, & Nevarez, 2007).

In order to best serve the needs of these students, re-engagement programs offer a multi-dimensional approach that may include, in addition to intensive academic interventions, targeted interventions to promote responsible citizenship, life-coping skills, physical fitness, health and hygiene, job skills, parenting skills, and college preparation. The nature of the additional program components varies by model and population served. For example, in a model for youth offenders, grantees provide services in partnership with juvenile justice, education, construction, and workforce development agencies (Abrazaldo et al., 2009). A program that provides long-distance learning for children of migratory and seasonal farmworkers (Cranston-Gingras, 2003) and a model for at-risk youth (Bloom, Gardenhire-Crooks, & Mandsager, 2009) help youth transition from the program by providing vocational evaluation and counseling, career exploration, job skill development, and assistance in postsecondary placement. Instruction is often individualized to students' needs through small class sizes and tutoring services. In addition, students may receive mentoring, counseling, referral to external support systems, and incentive payments tied to length of stay, program attendance, or performance. To overcome factors that may prevent students from maintaining regular attendance, some programs also provide housing, child care, and transportation. While some re-engagement programs are non-selective, others specify eligibility criteria such as minimal scores on basic tests of mathematics and reading, no current drug use, demonstration of motivation and personal responsibility, no current gang affiliation, no records of criminal behavior, and no current psychological problems.

To recruit participants, re-engagement programs may host a hotline for dropouts who would like to learn more about the options available to them, run ads in the local media, distribute flyers, or hold fairs at local schools where students can re-enroll. Some districts or organizations may hire a specialist who works with community non-profit organizations and faith-based groups to identify dropouts, contact them, and provide information about re-engagement opportunities. In some cases, programs may recruit and train teachers, counselors, administrators, business people, parents, and other volunteers to visit students at home to encourage them to re-enroll.

Action Principles

For State

1. Identify and profile districts and schools within the state that have successfully re-engaged dropouts.
2. Communicate targets for dropout recovery and graduation rates to districts.
3. Require districts to provide administrators with professional development on practices for preventing or recovering dropouts.
4. Make available external or in-house experts on dropout recovery to districts as part of providing technical assistance and other resources.

5. Identify or provide funding sources to support dropout recovery efforts.
6. Provide guidance in how federal and state funds can be used to support dropout recovery efforts.

For District

1. Consider creating a dropout recovery office that has responsibility district-wide for identifying, tracking, and recovering students who dropped out.
2. Develop a district-wide dropout recovery database to identify and track students for dropout recovery. The database will include academic and support services provided to students, high school graduation or GED, and other student outcomes (e.g., college enrollment, job attainment).
3. Determine the ongoing staff development activities that will most directly impact the effectiveness of the re-engagement staff and provide professional development on a regular basis.
4. Collaborate with other state and municipal agencies (e.g., local law-enforcement agencies) and specific departments and offices in the district (e.g., the migrant education office) to coordinate delivery of services to recovered dropouts.

For School

1. Build awareness and obtain staff buy-in of the re-engagement program.
2. Prepare a school-specific dropout recovery plan and incorporate in the school improvement plan.
3. Assign appropriate staff to the re-engagement program, including an administrator, and define their responsibilities in the identification, tracking, recovery, and monitoring of recovered students. Identify the key qualities of staff for re-engagement programs and hire experienced teachers that have the desired qualities.
4. Establish a warm and welcoming atmosphere on the part of administrators, teachers, and staff from the time a student comes to enroll and throughout the student's stay in the program.
5. Maintain close communication and collaboration with parents/guardians of re-entry students.

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Smaller Learning Communities

National High School Center

Smaller learning communities (SLCs) refer to all school design efforts intended to create smaller, more learning-centered units of organization (Oxley, 2007). These communities serve up to a few hundred students, and are formed either by building new limited-size schools or by converting comprehensive high schools into multiple communities. The goals of creating SLCs are to increase student engagement and teacher involvement. Many educators believe that in small schools teachers know their students better; students feel less isolated and alienated; discrepancies in the achievement gap can be reduced; and teachers are encouraged to develop innovative strategies (Cotton, 2001).

Common structural approaches to SLC efforts include the following:

- Small schools break large schools into small, multi-grade, autonomous programs housed within a larger school building. Schools-within-a-school may be organized around themes. Each has their own culture, program, personnel, students, budget, and school space.
- Career academies organize curricula around one or more careers or occupations by integrating both academic and occupation-related classes. (For more information see the section on “Thematic Learning Academies” in this chapter.)
- Freshman academies, also called ninth grade academies, are designed to meet the needs of ninth grade students as they make the transition from middle school to high school. (For more information see the section on “Thematic Learning Academies” in this chapter.)
- “House” plans assign students within the school to groups, either across all grades or by grade level, each with its own disciplinary policy, student activity program, student government, and social activities.
- Magnet programs usually have a core focus (e.g., math and science, the arts) and selectively draw students from the entire district (Page, Layzer, Schimmenti, Bernstein, & Horst, 2002; Bernstein, Millsap, Schimmenti, & Page, 2008).

One of the most common strategies used in SLCs is interdisciplinary team teaching, which groups core teachers to share students in common for multiple years and integrate various curricula. Other personalization strategies that can often be found in SLCs include teacher advisory programs that assign teachers to a small number of students for whom they are responsible over multiple years; adult advocates or mentors who offer support and guidance to students on a regular basis over several years; and family advocate systems that bridge the gap between school and home with regular meetings of students and families with their family advocate at the school (Bernstein et al., 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

Action Principles

For State

1. Provide assistance, information, and/or support for establishing smaller learning communities.
2. Foster state-level policies and funding support strategies to promote the creation of SLCs.

For District

1. Partner with parents and community stakeholders to foster awareness and support for SLCs.
2. Provide adequate resources for developing and sustaining the SLC, including building space, financial support, staff, etc.

For School

1. View the SLC as a means to an end, not an end unto itself.
2. Ensure teachers’ support of the goals and methods of the SLC and plan for the changes in their working environment.

3. Form interdisciplinary teams of teachers that share students and planning time in common and support the development of innovative curriculum and instructional programs.
4. Provide professional development focused on SLC structure and strategies, including effective teaming practices.
5. Designate specific assignments within the SLC for school administrators, counseling staff, special educators, and remediation specialists.
6. Ensure that school admission is driven by student and teacher choice and that the SLC attracts a diverse group of students.

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