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High Schools of the Future: How States Can Accelerate High School Redesign

By Craig Jerald, Neil Campbell, and Erin Roth December 4, 2017

At the Manchester School of Technology in New Hampshire, high school freshman John Thornton completed Algebra I in the spring and immediately moved on to his next math course. "I walked right into the Geometry classroom and asked for a full unit and started doing it as soon as I got home," he recently told *The Christian Science Monitor*.[1]

And in Christiana, Delaware, students at Design-Lab High School learn by applying "design thinking" across the curriculum, honing their ability to tackle hands-on problems that have no simple solutions. "We rarely use pencils in this class," observed a junior in an interview with *The News Journal*.[2]

In Cedar Rapids, Iowa, students enrolled in Iowa BIG learn entirely by working outside the classroom on self-selected, community-based projects proposed by local businesses, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies.[3] In an interview published by the school, one student explained that "it's very passion-driven."[4] Instead of turning in homework and taking tests and quizzes, students earn credit toward graduation by demonstrating to teachers that they have mastered academic standards during their day-to-day project work.

Recently, educators and policymakers have taken steps to improve high school graduation rates. Their efforts have already led to a record 83.2 percent graduation rate in 2016 and a 40 percent reduction over the past decade in the number of high schools graduating less than 6 in 10 students.[5] Yet significant challenges for high schools remain, as highlighted by the Gallup Organization's 2016 poll on student engagement, which found that only 1 in 3 11th-graders was engaged in school—compared with nearly 3 in 4 fifth-graders.[6] Furthermore, research has shown that 40 percent to 60 percent of first-year college students require remediation in English, math, or both.[7] Finally, analysis from the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce highlights the need to increase educational attainment; it estimates that by 2020, the country will be in need of 5 million more workers with a postsecondary education.[8]

Given the urgency of this challenge, many innovators around the country are questioning and rethinking fundamental assumptions about the high school experience. While their motives may vary, these innovators share one overarching goal: to do a better job graduating students who are fully prepared to succeed after high school. This issue brief describes the current movement to redesign high school and it suggests ways in which state policymakers can support innovators—from removing barriers posed by current laws and regulations to soliciting and supporting on-the-ground redesign efforts.

A national movement to redesign high schools

The movement to redesign high schools emphasizes bottom-up, locally designed solutions rather than cookie-cutter models or rigid checklists of required reforms. Some redesigned high schools are transformations of existing schools, while others are newly launched schools based on innovative designs. Some are charter schools, and some operate within traditional school districts. No two redesigned high schools are exactly alike. Even so, some common themes have emerged, and most redesigned high schools incorporate at least a few of the following design elements:

- **Competency-based education, or mastery learning.** Many redesigned high schools reject the traditional model in which students earn credits and diplomas by putting in enough "seat time" and earning passing grades. Instead, students must demonstrate that they have mastered specific, clearly defined learning goals in order to progress through the curriculum, moving as quickly as they want or as slowly as they need.

- **Personalized learning.** Most redesigned high schools are finding ways to tailor at least some of the learning experience to students' individual needs, interests, and postsecondary goals. Many leverage technology for this purpose, for example, by providing students with personalized digital playlists of learning activities or with choices of online courses and content.

- **"Anywhere, anytime" learning.** At many redesigned high schools, students have significant opportunities to learn outside of traditional school hours and beyond school walls. These opportunities include work-based internships and apprenticeships; service learning; at-home learning through online courses and digital activities; and taking on projects to solve problems in local communities.

- **Hands-on, project-based learning.** Most redesigned high schools emphasize hands-on projects and problem-solving activities, which can take place either inside the classroom or outside the school. These innovative learning strategies aim to engage students; give them opportunities to apply their learning; encourage them to practice problem-solving and design thinking skills; and help them make connections across subject areas.

- **A focus on in-depth preparation for both college and careers.** Most redesigned high schools explicitly recognize that success in today's economy requires a broad mix of academic, social-emotional, and technical competencies—regardless of the path that students pursue after high school. These schools blend rigorous academic learning; greater opportunities and expectations for earning advanced postsecondary credits; and credentials with real-world career preparation, offering students clearly articulated career pathways, or majors.

Defining 'high school redesign'

There is no single, commonly accepted definition of "high school redesign." Most importantly, high school redesign is typically driven by solving a local school or community need. For example, high schools may be trying to lower dropout rates or respond to local job market demand. Therefore, each high school redesign is necessarily different and most often tailored to local need. Broadly speaking, however, innovators are focused on rethinking how, where, when, and at what pace high school students learn, demonstrate their learning, and earn credits for graduation. Even more broadly, high school redesign is an effort to design and test new solutions that will improve students' preparation for success after high school—in college, in their careers, and in their communities.

A policy disconnect

Innovators seeking to redesign the high school experience work within a policy environment built to service more traditional high school models. While this does not prevent them from implementing new approaches, it can create various forms of friction between what innovators want to do and what policy encourages or allows. Such policy friction most commonly occurs when high school innovators confront seat time requirements, which were built into many state policy areas—particularly high school credit and graduation requirements.

Policies related to seat time have roots dating back to the first decade of the 20th century. Steel tycoon Andrew Carnegie created the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in order to administer a pension system for college professors. In order to set criteria for which institutions could participate in the program, the foundation established a new, common definition of college entry requirements. Students were now expected to earn 14 units by completing high school courses, which consisted of five, hour-long, weekly periods over a regular school year. Ultimately, the Carnegie Unit was embedded in policy; from it, states adopted high school graduation requirements so that students could meet minimum requirements for college admission.[9]

> "Under [state regulations], 120 contact hours equals one high school credit. While useful for management purposes such as scheduling students and staff, the value of seat time as an accurate measure of student learning is limited. It's a proxy at best. Students can earn an A or a D and still get credit. Have we really prepared a student who gets a D? There's no question that students master content standards at different rates. To learn Algebra, I've seen them need as little as six weeks and as much as 20 weeks. The time doesn't matter to me, but the mastery does."[10]
>
> *—Member of Ohio Credit Flexibility Design Team quoted in an Ohio Department of Education summary of its work*

To complicate matters, over the course of the 20th century, states began using time-based measures—called instructional, clock, or contact hours—in a number of other state policy areas, such as minimum requirements for educational programs, school approval standards, and formulas for distributing state funding.[11] Moreover, depending on the specific school design and the particular state context, high school innovators can encounter a wide range of other friction points. They are often encumbered by policies related to the transition between high school and higher education; by curriculum or textbook adoption policies; or by limitations on awarding credit for learning experiences that took place outside the school building or regular school hours.

Examples of policy friction in high school redesign

- In its 2015 application for a state high school innovation planning grant, the Salem, Virginia, school district listed 11 different policy impediments to innovation, including everything from seat time requirements, prescriptive graduation requirements, and limited course offerings to more specific problems, such as the "number of available credit-bearing internships and work-based learning experiences."[12]

- In its 2015 application to establish a state-approved innovation school, the Denver School of Innovation and Sustainable Design requested 22 separate waivers of state laws or regulations across a wide range of policy areas, including mandatory instructional hours, governance, budgeting, staffing, textbooks, and student promotion and retention. In addition, the school requested 12 waivers of local school board policy and 13 waivers related to the district's collective bargaining agreement.[13]

How states can encourage high school redesign

While the current movement to redesign high schools does focus on bottom-up solutions rather than top-down comprehensive reforms, state policymakers can support innovators in important ways. More specifically, policymakers can:

1. Make room for innovation through policy flexibility.

2. Update policies related to high school graduation, credits, and funding.

3. Adopt high school assessment and accountability systems with redesign in mind.

4. Solicit and support local initiatives to redesign high schools through strategies such as seed grants and pilot programs.

1. Make room for innovation

The most important way policymakers can support high school innovators is to simply get out of their way. They can do this by reducing barriers and friction points between what innovators want to do and what current laws and regulations allow.

Clarify and communicate existing kinds of policy flexibility

Research shows that local educators tend not to understand, know about, or accurately estimate how much flexibility current state laws and regulations already offer. Part of the problem is that, in many cases, the extent and nature of policy flexibility is simply unclear or too complex.

Research reveals there is more room to innovate than often understood

Three years ago, researchers with the Center on Reinventing Public Education conducted in-depth interviews with principals in three states in order to learn about innovations they would like to make in their schools but could not due to policy barriers. The study found that—out of 22 policy barriers to competency-based education, as cited by principals—20 were merely perceived or could be dealt with through creative workarounds or waivers.[14] The same year, a 50-state policy scan by the Carnegie Foundation found that only nine states provided no flexibility in granting high school credits beyond traditional seat time requirements.[15]

States can begin by taking the simple and low-cost step of clarifying and communicating current flexibilities in state policies related to high school redesign and innovation, particularly any policies based on seat time.

- **State example:** Wisconsin issued an updated report, Fostering Innovation in Wisconsin Schools: Beyond Credits and Seat Time and Toward Innovative Practices that Lead to College and Career Readiness, which explains current seat time requirements and describes 18 separate vehicles that work to provide flexibility to innovate.[16]

Create broader 'default' flexibility in key policy areas

When states rely entirely on individual waivers to provide policy flexibility, innovation is often inhibited, as waivers are often narrowly defined, restricted to special circumstances, or require a cumbersome process to obtain and annually renew. States can go beyond offering waivers by enacting policies that provide broader default permission for high schools to operate in different ways, particularly when it comes to awarding credit toward graduation.[17]

- **State example:** In 2012, Iowa passed legislation requiring state regulations to be amended in order to "allow a school district … to award high school credit to an enrolled student upon the demonstration of required competencies for a course or

content area, as approved by a [licensed] teacher."[18] That broad flexibility permitted Iowa BIG to grant students credit for demonstrating mastery of academic standards while working on community-based projects, rather than for meeting seat time requirements and earning passing grades in traditional classroom settings.

Permit charter schools and, if necessary, raise caps on new charters

Many innovative high schools are charter schools that have taken advantage of the charter school bargain, which affords them freedom from many regulations in exchange for being held accountable for student learning. Charter school laws exist in 45 states, but more than half of these states place caps on the number of charter schools that may be authorized.[19] Charter school policies have wide variance, but states could enable innovative high school designs and accelerate redesign efforts by maintaining and enforcing rigorous standards for authorizing and renewing charters, while also raising caps on charters as needed.

Establish 'innovation status' for noncharter schools

A handful of states have enacted legislation that allows regular public schools outside the charter sector to obtain innovation status, which provides a streamlined way to obtain a multi-year package of policy waivers necessary to implement innovative strategies and new school designs.[20]

- **State example:** In 2008, the Colorado Legislature enacted its Innovation Schools Act, which established a process by which a school or a group of schools could submit an innovation plan to a local school district, which then submits the plan for approval to the state Board of Education.[21] Each plan describes how the innovative school design would improve student outcomes and promote cost efficiencies, and it details each requested waiver of state policy, local school board policy, and collective bargaining provisions, along with replacement policies the school would follow in lieu of the waived requirements[22].

2. Update graduation, credit, and funding policies

In addition to providing policy flexibility, states can consider amending key policies related to high schools in order to move toward a framework that is more conducive to redesign.

Rethink high school graduation requirements

States can broaden high school graduation requirements so that they include more than just seat time.

- **State example:** In 2007, the Colorado Legislature required local boards of education to adopt graduation requirements that met or exceeded guidelines established by the state Board of Education.[23] In 2015, the state board adopted graduation guidelines that

included a "menu of college and career-ready demonstrations" from which local districts could select. This allowed schools to determine students' eligibility for graduation based on whether they earned state-defined minimum scores on national assessments, such as ACT, SAT, AP, and IB exams; received college credits through concurrent enrollment; obtained industry certifications; and completed a district capstone project.[24] In short, the new policy broadened graduation requirements beyond seat time without eliminating it entirely.

Some New England states have taken much more ambitious action, passing legislation to completely eliminate credits based on seat time and instead require all credits to be based on demonstrations of proficiency.

- **State example:** In 2012 and 2016, Maine passed legislation requiring a full transition to proficiency-based diplomas and transcripts.[25] State law now requires students—beginning with the graduating class of 2021—to demonstrate proficiency in the Maine Learning Results in order to earn a diploma. The law specifies that students "must be allowed to demonstrate proficiency by presenting multiple types of evidence, including but not limited to teacher-designed or student-designed assessments, portfolios, performance, exhibitions, projects and community service."[26]

Any new requirements should still align with college entrance requirements, which will require state K-12 and higher education systems to coordinate with each other in this work.

Ensure students receive credit for rigorous but nontraditional learning experiences

As described above, many high school redesigns encourage or require students to learn and progress in nontraditional ways, including competency-based (or mastery) education; anywhere, anytime learning; and opportunities to pursue advanced postsecondary learning while still in high school. States can ensure that laws and regulations enable students to accrue and apply credits for all three kinds of learning experiences.

For example, states can require districts to formulate local credit-granting policies that specify how students can earn credit for competency-based learning and for learning that takes place outside of regular hours or beyond school walls.

- **State example:** Prompted by state legislation enacted in 2006, Ohio's state Board of Education required all local boards of education to adopt a "Credit Flex" policy by 2010-11.[27] Local Credit Flex policies must describe three ways that high school students can earn credit: by completing traditional coursework requirements; by demonstrating mastery of course content; or by pursuing educational options, such as online learning, internships, or community-based learning.[28]

States might also review policies related to granting credit for specific kinds of anywhere, anytime activities, such as internships and apprenticeships with local businesses.

- **State example:** As part of a statewide overhaul of work-based learning policies, Tennessee published implementation and policy guides that specify criteria under which students can earn credit for certain kinds of work-based learning.[29] The state also issued a set of career practicum course standards for credit-granting capstone experiences, such as internships and apprenticeships.[30]

Several states have adopted "course access" initiatives that provide students with opportunities to take many kinds of approved courses for credit—another way to enable students to learn both inside and outside traditional school hours and locations.[31] Such policies also might be especially important for smaller high schools, where economies of scale can make it difficult to afford certified on-site teachers for a wide range of specialized courses, such as world languages, physics, and calculus.[32]

- **State example:** Rhode Island's Advanced Coursework Network enables high school students to earn credits by completing courses from other districts, community-based organizations, training programs, or institutions of higher education that are not available at their high schools.[33] Importantly, the program ensures quality control through its approval process, ensuring that students are not earning credit for the kind of undemanding courses described in recent exposes of online learning and credit recovery programs.[34]

Addressing concerns about rigor and quality

Some observers have raised concerns about whether students who engage in nontraditional learning experiences—such as community-based projects—are actually learning content and skills required by state standards. While traditional seat time policies are no guarantee that students have mastered state learning standards, such policies at least ensure that students are exposed to a minimum amount of instructional time, managed by a teacher whose grading system ostensibly requires students to learn at least some portion of the course material. How can nontraditional learning approaches offer that level of assurance?

Iowa BIG offers a useful example of how high schools can attend to such concerns even when implementing a radically reimagined approach to learning based entirely on completion of community-based projects outside of the classroom. The school uses a digital system to track learning. It relies on a common secondary course classification system developed by the U.S. Department of Education—plus nearly 350 discrete academic standards drawn from Iowa standards, the Common Core state standards, and the Next Generation Science Standards.[35] Teachers observe students while working on their community-based projects, they track which standards students have attempted, and they validate standards in which students have demonstrated mastery.[36]

As with Iowa and New Hampshire, states that revise their policies in order to allow granting of credit for competency-based and anywhere, anytime learning can require licensed teachers to observe and validate student demonstrations of competency. New Hampshire's guidance further specifies that teachers' expectations for demonstrating learning outside the classroom should be equivalent to expectations inside the classroom.[37]

Concerns about another kind of anywhere, anytime learning—online courses—were highlighted in a recent Slate expose about the low quality of credit recovery courses offered by some online providers.[38] To address such concerns, states might look to centrally managed course access initiatives, such as the Louisiana Supplemental Course Academy, which vets and approves online providers of courses that students may take for credit.[39]

Provide fair funding for redesigned high schools

Many states provide foundation funding to school districts based on hours of instruction provided to students, with complex administrative rules about what kinds of activities count and how to count them. This can conflict with personalized and competency-based approaches common in redesigned high schools. For example, Thomas Rooney—the superintendent of California's Lyndsay Unified School District, which began implementing competency-based and personalized learning approaches at the high school level in 2007—recently observed, "Money comes to the district based on the 'seat time' factor and positive attendance. That's an issue, and some district boards won't let the district change to a competency-based model because it'll keep the district from getting money."[40] In addition, some states specify that funding be based on contact hours with teachers, which can make it difficult to count the time students spend in anywhere, anytime learning activities that teachers facilitate but may not oversee in person.[41]

States should review policies related to funding in order to ensure that redesigned high schools are not shortchanged if they incorporate approaches that rethink the how, where, and when of learning and de-emphasize the amount of time students spend in classrooms.

- **State example:** In 2014, the Ohio Legislature passed simple language in order to better align funding for high schools with its Credit Flex policy requiring districts to establish ways that students can earn credit for competency- and community-based learning. First, it established that ninth- through twelfth-grade students may be considered full-time equivalents as long as they are enrolled in five units of instruction. Second, and most importantly, the new legislation affirmed that, "instead of being paid based on the student's hours of attendance, payment will be made based on the percentage of 5 approved credits a student takes."[42]

- **State example:** Although New Hampshire requires instruction to be "under the direction of a teacher employed by the school district," for purposes of funding, it provides an exception for activities under its extended learning opportunities initiative as long as a teacher employed by the district verifies that students have earned credit by demonstrating mastery of competencies through activities outside the classroom.[43]

3. Consider redesign in assessment and accountability systems

States should expect innovative high schools to meet high expectations for providing students a quality education—especially given that one impetus for high school redesign is to better prepare students for success after high school. To do this, policymakers should craft assessment and accountability systems in ways that reward positive outcomes and present no strong disincentives to innovate.

Consider assessment strategies that streamline standardized testing

There is much debate about whether current statewide assessments hinder innovation in high school designs, particularly those that emphasize competency-based and personalized learning. Some local innovators and national advocates argue that they do, especially in states that have required high school exit exams as part of their accountability systems.[44] For example, according to one consortium of high schools participating in the Competency-Based Education Pilot for Ohio—a state that has required passage of state tests or threshold scores on other exams to graduate—"testing windows that are currently required for state-mandated assessments do not adequately reflect the needs of the students within a STEM school and/or CBE [competency-based education] environment." The consortium maintains that "it is difficult to assess students' mastery of learning and move them along the learning continuum when they have to wait for a state assessments."[45]

However, even proponents of innovation recognize that it still may be some time before states can administer technically sound, large-scale assessment systems on demand and in ways aligned with new approaches to learning. As the Foundation for Excellence in Education and EducationCounsel explained in a recent report, the journey will require a substantial technical and financial investment, and in an age when there is much public concern about the number of standardized assessments that students take, states will need to proceed cautiously.[46]

- **State example:** To date, New Hampshire's Performance Assessment of Competency Education (PACE) pilot program is the most advanced effort to explore new assessment approaches that can better support the goals of competency-based education that are common among redesigned high schools. Participating PACE districts conduct several layers of assessment, such as locally designed and administered performance assessments and a commonly administered "complex performance task," which covers a portion of the state's learning standards.[47] These common tasks are developed by the participating districts and are used to ensure that judgments of student performance are comparable across teachers, schools, and districts. A reduced number of statewide standardized assessments serve as an external audit on the effort. These assessments include the Smarter Balanced assessments—administered in, at least, fourth and eighth grade—as well as the SAT for participating high schools.

For states not yet ready to develop assessment instruments similar to those used throughout the PACE districts, they can consider a compromise position offered by the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which New Hampshire has also adopted. In lieu of a state test in high school, ensuring that reading and math meet federal accountability requirements, states can approve the local use of nationally recognized standardized assessments at the high school level—such as the SAT and the ACT—as long as the assessment is aligned with state standards and meets other technical criteria. Administering a college entrance exam can reduce the number of standardized tests high

school students must take; focus standardized assessment on tests that are meaningful to students' practical concerns and postsecondary planning; and introduce cost savings for families. Moreover, multiple research studies have shown that such strategies increase the proportion of low-income students who enroll in college.[48]

Include accountability measures that focus on the right results

The ultimate objective of high school redesign is not simply to innovate but also to find new ways to graduate all students so that they are better prepared for success after high school. At the same time, redesigned high schools that are implementing competency-based learning approaches argue that the goal should be mastery of learning objectives, not the amount of time it takes to earn credits or to graduate.

Accountability requirements under ESSA suggest several ways that states can align accountability measures with such goals. First, ESSA requires states to include at least one measure of school quality or student success, in addition to other measures, such as academic achievement on state tests and graduation rates. A Center for American Progress analysis found that, of the first 16 state ESSA plans submitted to the Education Department, 13 plan to include measures of college and career readiness in order to meet that requirement. These measures include participation in or performance on advanced coursework or postsecondary entrance exams; career preparedness measures; and postsecondary outcomes, such as college entry and persistence.[49]

- **State example:** Under Louisiana's ESSA plan, high schools can earn points on an index of college- and career-readiness based on the strength of the credentials their students earn, with more points awarded when students graduate with postsecondary credits or degrees in addition to the regular high school diploma.[50]

In addition to the typical four-year graduation rate, ESSA also gives states the option of including extended-year graduation rates that accommodate students who take longer to complete high school. According to CAP's analysis of first-round ESSA plans, 13 out of the 16 states will use extended-year graduation rates in their high school accountability systems. Notably, states must set more ambitious goals for improving extended-year graduation rates and closing gaps among student subgroups.[51]

Publish meaningful reports on high school performance

States can ensure that parents, students, and other stakeholders have access to a broad range of information about high schools, including data on graduates' postsecondary outcomes, such as college entry, persistence, completion, and workforce participation. The good news is that states have made significant progress toward developing longitudinal data systems that can provide such information, and more than 40 states now publish postsecondary outcome data for individual high schools.[52]

The bad news is that such information is often scattered across different places and can be difficult to find and use. According to a report from the Data Quality Campaign (DQC), only 24 percent of parents have used a state education agency website to locate information on how well a local high school prepares students for college or the workforce. Only 17 states include such information on the main school report card, which they publish for each of their individual schools.[53]

States should act on the good advice offered by the DQC in another recent report, which recommended that data on graduates' postsecondary success be positioned next to graduation rates on a high school's report card. It also encouraged schools to include data on workforce participation or military enlistment when available, and that they provide a range of college-related outcomes in addition to college entry—such as enrollment in remedial courses, persistence to second year, and completion of college degree.[54]

4. Advance local efforts to redesign high school

Finally, states can take a more proactive approach to fostering high school redesign by incorporating strategies—such as seed grants, pilot programs, and incubator initiatives—that directly solicit and support local innovation efforts.

Foster innovative high school designs through pilot and incubator programs

Pilot programs and incubator initiatives offer states a way to incrementally foster and seriously support local efforts to redesign high school; they also help to identify challenges and successful strategies when it comes to implementing innovation beyond the idea stage.

Unfortunately, no state currently has a pilot program or incubator initiative specifically focused on cultivating comprehensive innovations in high school design. However, a handful of states have recently launched pilot or incubator initiatives focused on competency-based education or mastery learning, and those initiatives include high schools.[55] Under Illinois' competency-based high school graduation requirements pilot program, for example, 10 school districts are piloting competency-based approaches to awarding credits for graduation in one or more of their high schools[56] And in states such as Florida, Idaho, Ohio, and Utah, high schools are participating in broader K-12 pilot or incubator initiatives focused on competency or master learning.

- **State example:** In 2015, Idaho passed legislation authorizing an incubation process that would support an initial cohort of up to 20 local, competency-based education initiatives. Participants were selected based on a competitive application to become members in the Idaho Mastery Education Network, through which they receive funding; professional development; planning assistance; opportunities to share information and collaborate with fellow innovators; and other supports. The legislation also required

the state to conduct a public awareness campaign about the benefits of competency-based education as well as to establish a committee of educators that would advise the incubation process and identify challenges—including policy barriers—to competency-based approaches.[57]

Provide seed grants for high school redesign and innovation

States should consider investments to support local high school redesign efforts. Even small planning or implementation grants can spur local educators to begin to hold conversations about new approaches to how, when, where, and at what pace high school students learn and demonstrate their learning for credit.

- **State example:** In each of the past three years, Virginia has awarded $50,000 in high school innovation planning grants to local school districts that have submitted competitive proposals to reinvent how high schools prepare students for college and careers, including through "student centered learning, with progress based on student demonstrated proficiency."[58] The proposals must identify potential policy impediments as a step to obtaining streamlined access to relevant waivers. The state has awarded planning grants to 11 districts so far—with four receiving multiple planning grants—along with second-year implementation grants of an additional $50,000 to eight of those districts.[59] These grants may not cover all of the costs for outside support or additional staff time for design and development of redesigned high schools, but they do help local school leaders and grant-makers plan and implement redesign efforts.

At this stage in the modern movement to redesign high schools, states should focus on policies that provide opportunity, encouragement, and support for local innovation—including those described above—rather than more sweeping policies that mandate statewide comprehensive reforms. This will allow innovators and policymakers alike to study and learn from the inevitable missteps, mid-course corrections, and incremental successes that are central to true innovation, establishing a more informed foundation for wider-scale efforts in the future.

Leveraging federal resources to support high school redesign

States and school systems interested in fostering innovative high school designs can take advantage of funding available from several ESSA-authorized programs, listed below. ESSA also requires states to identify schools that are in need of comprehensive support and improvement; this includes any high school for which the graduation rate is under 67 percent.[60] Those schools must implement evidence-based interventions and supports, which could incorporate some of the principles of high school redesign discussed throughout this brief.

- **Optional reserve of Title I, Part A funds for direct student services.** Section 1003A of ESSA allows states to reserve 3 percent of their overall Title I, Part A funds to provide certain kinds of educational services directly to students in districts with high numbers of schools identified for improvement.[61] Several kinds of authorized services could be used to support elements of high school redesign. Notably, states could ensure that their students are able to access academic courses not currently available in their schools, such as advanced courses or career and technical courses leading to an industry certification; credit recovery or accelerated courses leading to a high school diploma; and AP or IB courses and examinations.

- **Title II, Part A funding to improve teaching and school leadership.** This program provides states and school districts with flexible funding for a range of purposes, which include the preparation, recruitment, and development of strong teachers and school leaders. Schools could use these funds for professional development as they implement and transition to new high school models. For example, Kansas recently used a portion of its Title II, Part A dollars to support a Kansans Can School Redesign Project.[62]

- **Title IV, Part A student support and academic enrichment grants.** This new block grant program authorizes funds for a wide range of purposes, including many that are relevant to high school redesign, such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM)-focused specialty schools and STEM learning activities. The program also helps schools to provide students with a well-rounded education that includes a wide range of coursework; community-based learning; AP and IB courses and exams; and dual enrollment courses. Furthermore, it trains teachers to use technology in order to effectively personalize learning for students.

- **Title IV, Part C charter schools program grants.** This program provides competitive grants to state education agencies and other statewide entities in order to support the startup of new charter schools and the replication or expansion of high-quality charter schools. ESSA specifies that state entities distribute these funds "in a manner that, to the extent practicable and applicable, ensures that subgrants … will assist charter schools representing a variety of educational approaches."[63] While this language probably prohibits grantees from reserving all or a portion of funding to support high school redesign and innovation exclusively, it does suggest that at least some of the funding could be used to support such charter schools. Therefore, state grantees might explore establishing a competitive priority that would encourage innovative approaches to how, where, when, and at what pace charter high schools enable students to learn and demonstrate learning for credit.

Unfortunately, in its budget proposal for fiscal year 2018—which was released in May—the Trump administration signaled its desire to eliminate funding under Title II, Part A and Title IV, Part A, which would deprive states and districts of significant resources that could be used to support high school redesign. The FY 2018 appropriations bill passed by the House in September 2017 would eliminate Title II, Part A while providing a small increase to Title IV, Part A.[64] The bill under consideration in the Senate would not eliminate Title II, Part A and would provide a larger increase to Title IV, Part A, but final funding amounts are still to be determined.[65]

Conclusion

The current wave of high school redesign is pushing the boundaries of how, where, when, and at what pace high school students learn and earn credit by demonstrating their learning. And the leading edge of innovation is pushing forward. States can accelerate support for innovators through the policy strategies described in this brief. However, just as innovators learn and incorporate new ideas into their designs—and reengineer their designs when they encounter unexpected challenges—states must constantly learn and adjust their policy strategies.

While many colleges and universities say that graduates of redesigned high schools will not be disadvantaged in the admissions process,[66] family concerns about college admissions might inhibit enrollment in new high schools that use competency-based approaches.[67] At least one state, Utah, has passed legislative language with the intent to bar public institutions of higher education from treating graduates of competency-based high schools unfairly during the admissions process.[68] As new issues and challenges emerge, states will need to remain vigilant and creative about how to best encourage and enable innovative high school designs.

Craig Jerald is the president of Break the Curve Consulting. Neil Campbell is the director of Innovation for the K-12 Education team at the Center for American Progress. Erin Roth is a senior policy analyst for education innovation at the Center.

Endnotes

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