



# Teaching and Learning Conditions Improve High School Reform Efforts

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

In recent years, Governor Easley has created considerable momentum toward reinventing the high school experience in North Carolina. The reform movement is built on the premise that helping students compete in the 21<sup>st</sup> century marketplace requires high schools to offer challenging curriculum to all students, create courses relevant to students' lives and goals, and surround students with adults who know and care about them. Redesigned and early college high schools provide working conditions that promote rigor, relevance and relationships to ensure that all students develop skills for critical thinking, problem solving, communication, collaboration and innovation.

Data collected and analyzed by CTQ from more than 125,000 educators show powerful links between teachers' working conditions and both teacher attrition rates and student achievement levels in elementary, middle and particularly high schools. Nowhere are working condition reforms more critical than in improving high schools and informing high school redesign efforts currently underway across North Carolina. Teachers in redesigned and early college high schools are significantly more positive about every working condition area than their high school colleagues across the state.

## Creating Relationships is the Foundation for Success in High School Reform

*The small size of redesigned and early college high schools facilitates collaboration among faculty and staff.* Physical proximity based on the size and layout of the schools was a catalyst for reform in many of the redesigned and early college high schools. Schools often created shared office space for teachers and created time each week for faculty collaboration.

With support from the North Carolina Business Committee for Education (NCBCE), and the Center for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, the Center for Teaching Quality (CTQ) evaluated teaching and learning environments in redesigned and early college high schools across the state. The full report findings include considerably more detail regarding research methodology, working conditions in redesigned and early college high schools, and related recommendations. **Please access full report findings online at [www.ncbce.org](http://www.ncbce.org) or [www.teachingquality.org/pdfs/highschoolconditions.pdf](http://www.teachingquality.org/pdfs/highschoolconditions.pdf)**

*The size and culture of redesigned and early college high schools helps build relationships with students.* Teachers reported that small school environments help build meaningful relationships between students and faculty because students feel comfortable interacting with teachers outside of regular class time. Several of the schools make great efforts to ensure that educators consistently work with the same students throughout high school to meet the unique and complex needs of individual learners.

*Teachers do not have more scheduled planning time than teachers in other high schools, but more communication and collaboration add value to available time.* Teachers at one redesigned high school explained that block scheduling and their use of project-based learning provided opportunities for collaboration. Redesigned and early college high schools without block scheduling created opportunities before, after, or during the school day for staff to gather and discuss instructional strategies.

## Establishing Relevant Learning Opportunities: An Emerging Strategy in High School Reform

*Teachers are empowered as instructional leaders in their schools.* Teachers in redesigned and early college high schools established key roles in making decisions about educational issues. One teacher commented, "We are all leaders in this school... We have a democratic governance structure and everyone is expected to make instructional decisions."



*Principals are strong instructional leaders who helped make learning opportunities relevant.* Principals in redesigned and early college high schools took active roles as instructional leaders. This often took the form of providing what teachers needed for effective instruction and protecting them from disruptions. Principals were also proactive in challenging practices and shaping instruction and related assessment policies to promote student learning.

*Facilities and resources support 21<sup>st</sup> century learning goals.* Higher education and community partners provided important resources as well as concrete links to relevant future goals and aspirations of students. Teachers at schools operating on college sites noted the intrinsic value of college surroundings for high school students who were striving for eventual college admittance and success. Students also benefit from increased access to technology, laboratories, libraries, and college instructors. Strong ties to other community resources enhanced the relevance of coursework, as well.

## Working Toward Rigor in High School Reform

*Accelerated coursework promotes academic rigor.* All of the participating early college and redesigned schools articulated the goal of providing students with accelerated coursework. In the early college high schools, students finish their high school career with both a high school diploma and two years of college credit. All students in the redesigned schools were enrolled in honors-level classes as a consistent minimum standard.

*Parents and community help promote rigor.* Many redesigned and early college high schools engage parents and community members in setting high expectations for students. The principal at one redesigned high school consistently communicated to parents what to expect in the first few weeks of school so that students would not become overwhelmed and give up. Another school used business leaders to help ensure rigor in students' project delivery and presentation.

*Professional development improves educators' capacity to provide rigorous learning opportunities for all students.* Principals and teachers in redesigned and early college high schools found the professional development in their respective schools valuable and relevant. The primary professional development opportunities were provided by the North Carolina New Schools Project, with supplementary activities from the school district.

## Lessons Learned and Issues to Consider

The successes and challenges of redesigned and early college high schools can inform and improve the work of all North Carolina high schools.

### *Build Partnerships that Can Help Improve Instruction, Make Learning Relevant to the Real World and Improve Access to and Utilization of Technology*

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

### *Focus on the Quality of Planning Time*

All high schools across the state should not only concentrate on the quantity, but also the quality of planning time. Redesigned and early college high schools do not provide teachers with much more planning time than traditional high schools, but teachers feel that time is more conducive to meaningful collaboration and efforts to improve student learning.

### *Review Current Standards and Assessments to Align with 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills*

As the state develops measurements of student progress toward 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, some redesigned and early college high schools can serve as models. Efforts to document and disseminate what works for measuring student gains will dramatically improve the rate at which high schools across the state can pursue and achieve similar learning objectives.

### *Empower Teachers to Influence More School-Based Decisions*

The strengths of many redesigned and early college high schools rests with the empowerment of teachers to take ownership of many critical decisions influencing instruction, not only in their own classrooms, but also in the broader schools where they work.

### *Concentrate on Creating a Common Vision for Success*

One of the most important lessons from the high school reform movement is the significance of a common mission and vision. Schools that are not undergoing a dramatic reform process can still commit themselves to clearly define and reach a set of agreed upon goals for student learning.