

# INNOVATOR

## News about high school innovation

July 2, 2010

Welcome to INNOVATOR, a bimonthly report on high school change in North Carolina from the North Carolina New Schools Project. INNOVATOR informs practitioners, policy makers, and friends of public education about high school innovation in North Carolina as well as success stories and research from across the nation.

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## NCNSP Chairman Mitchell urges districts to stay the course

**Former North Carolina Chief Justice Burley Mitchell, chairman of the NCNSP's board of directors, urged district leaders during last week's Summer Institute to continue supporting redesigned high schools as an effective innovation for reaching all students.**

"Some of you operate in communities in which your district may not fully support the model that you're creating," Mitchell said, addressing the 600 educators attending the three-day conference, but particularly those associated with small, focused high schools created from large, comprehensive schools.

"Our school districts need to get the message that the time for thinking is over," he said. "Your small schools have already demonstrated that having every teacher responsible for progress by every student is the bar we must reach. It is the bar we can reach.

"I challenge our school districts to stand by their new small schools and to support the teachers and principals who have made the commitment to every student -- not just some students.

"Failure is not an option. And by failure I mean failure of imagination. Do we protect the conventional high school because of tradition and because it is convenient for some adults? Or do we create schools in which every member of the staff is accountable to every other member of the staff for results.

"I am proud of what you have accomplished in such a short period of time. You should be proud. But we cannot be complacent, and we cannot stand by when some administrators want to return to the past; a past that served only a few students well."

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## Survey: Teachers more satisfied in innovative high schools

**Teachers in North Carolina's innovative high schools give higher marks on key work issues than do their counterparts in the state's traditional high schools, according to a [report](#) based on data from the 2010 N.C. Teacher Working Conditions Survey.**

The analysis from the New Teacher Center, a professional development group based in Santa Cruz, Calif., found that teachers in the schools that are partners with the North Carolina New Schools Project offered significantly more positive responses about such issues as professional development, class size, time and resources.

The [working conditions survey](#) included responses from more than 1,500 teachers in 104 innovative high schools and nearly 26,000 teachers in 389 other high schools in the state.

The findings are consistent with statewide teacher surveys conducted in 2006 and 2008, which also showed that teachers in innovative high schools were more likely to report positive working conditions on a wide range of issues.

"The small size of these schools is meant to facilitate a greater culture of collaboration among faculty, staff and students, while building connections with parents," the report says. "Past studies suggest that principals in these schools empower teachers, focus on instruction, and provide teachers with the resources and professional development needed to help their students achieve rigorous 21st century learning goals."

The report notes that the survey results reflect a focus on "purposeful design," one of the N.C. New School Project's five Design Principles followed by all partner schools. The principle of purposeful design, the report says, "respects the organization of time, space and the allocation of resources to ensure that these best practices become common practice."

A separate analysis by NCNSP of the survey responses found that teachers in innovative high schools also tend to give more favorable responses when asked whether their schools are "good places to work and learn." For innovative high schools, 43.5 percent of teachers strongly agreed with that statement, while just over a third of teachers did so from traditional schools in the same districts with approximately similar student demographics.

In addition, a question linking professional development and student learning found that teachers in innovative high schools tend to see greater value from development efforts that translate into improved instruction and student learning. Nearly a third of teachers in innovative high schools (32 percent) strongly agreed with the statement, "professional development enhances teachers abilities to improve student learning," compared to 17 percent of teachers in comparison schools and 18 percent of teachers in all other high schools.

Teachers in early college high schools had especially positive responses: 46 percent "strongly agreed" that their professional development leads to better student learning; 61 percent "strongly agreed" that their schools are good places to work and learn.

A growing body of research shows a link between teachers' perceptions of their working conditions, staff turnover and student achievement in all levels of schooling, but particularly in high schools. The North Carolina-based Center for Teaching Quality said in a report on the

2006 working conditions survey that reforms related to working conditions are especially critical in improving high schools and informing innovation efforts underway in North Carolina and elsewhere.

The New Teacher Center's report on the 2010 survey said that the state's innovative schools may offer lessons for other schools.

"As North Carolina's high schools continue to assess and improve teacher working conditions and student performance, these [innovative] schools offer some potential policies and practices that are worth considering ... at the very least, issues of professional support and school and teacher leadership should be further studied."

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## **Stanly Early College takes prize, 5 other schools honored**

**Stanly Early College High School, one of North Carolina's 70 early colleges, was recognized June 24 as winner of the annual Innovator Award, presented by the North Carolina New Schools Project to innovative high schools demonstrating strong results in preparing all students for college, careers and life.**

Stanly Early College was one of six finalists selected from 106 schools that were partners with NCNSP during the 2009-10 school year. Also named as finalists were Caldwell Early College, Howard Health & Life Sciences High School, Randolph Early College, SandHoke Early College and the School of Inquiry and Life Sciences at Asheville.

Howard Lee, executive director of the North Carolina Education Cabinet, recognized each of the schools during the closing session of NCNSP's Summer Institute, attended by 600 educators from innovative high schools across the state.

In highlighting the schools, Lee said the field of contenders for the award this year was the largest it's been because all 106 were included. In the previous two years, the award was given either to an early college or a redesigned school. And, he said, "all the schools keep getting better, and the bar keeps getting higher."

This year's candidates were so strong that the "six schools landed in a virtual photo finish," he said. "All six schools have created a culture where supportive relationships allow teachers to grow and students to thrive. And all of these schools are going the extra distance to ensure that every student is well prepared for college, career and life."

The selection was based on criteria that included student performance measured by state exams, including achievement gaps, dropout rates, suspensions, comparisons to district performance and enrollment of under-represented minorities and economically disadvantaged students. Also considered was schools' success in implementing NCNSP's five Design Principles.

About Stanly specifically, Lee said the small school is "having an outsized impact on the students who are fortunate enough to be part of the school. Compared to the district's demographics, more of the school's students are more likely to be black or Hispanic than the district as a whole and more of them are more likely to come from low-income families.

"Three quarters of Stanly's students are from families in which neither parent graduated from college. And once in the school," Lee said, "they're showing that real opportunity that comes from both high expectations and strong support can erase the kinds of gaps that too often separate students from different races and social strata."

This was the third year that the award was given. The first recipient was Cross Creek Early College High School, in 2008, and Newton-Conover Health Science High School last year.

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## Students more positive about NC's innovative high schools

**A survey this year of more than 21,000 students in 86 high schools across the country found that those in North Carolina's innovative high schools hold more favorable opinions than their peers elsewhere on a number of key concerns for students.**

On most measures in the survey, called [YouthTruth](#), the median North Carolina innovative school showed more positive responses than the median for all schools that participated. In all, 34 schools that are partners with the North Carolina New Schools Project participated in the survey, with responses from 4,700 students attending those schools.

Schools in 10 states and 12 districts or networks such as NCNSP participated in the survey.

The median responses of the 34 NCNSP schools landed near the 75th percentile for all 86 schools (slightly above or slightly below) on areas that North Carolina's innovative high schools are designed to improve for students:

- **Options after graduating from high school:** When asked whether they agree that they would have more options after graduating because of what their school has done for them, students at the median NCNSP school gave a score of slightly more than 4.5 on a scale of 1-to-5, with a median of slightly more than 4 for all 86 schools participating.
- **Student relationships with adults in the school:** Several items related to this issue asked students about the degree to which they have positive interactions with teachers who are supportive and keep them on track academically. Students at the median NCNSP school gave an average score of just less than 4, again on a 5-point scale. The surveywide median was about 3.5.
- **School culture and attitudes:** A summary response of four questions related to the level of perceived respect between adults and students, and the degree to which students believe their classmates care about succeeding showed the median NCNSP school at about 3.6, compared to about 3.3 for all schools in the survey. The highest ranking school on this measure received just above a score of four.
- **Rigor of classes and instruction:** The median NCNSP school landed at about 4.2, compared to about 4 for all schools in the survey. The highest ranking school received a score of about 4.5. Four questions focused on this area, which describes the degree to which students feel challenged to work hard, think critically in their classes and believe that their teachers contribute to their learning.

The 52 other schools that participated in the student survey included traditional and innovative schools. The survey was conducted by [The Center for Effective Philanthropy](#) on behalf of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

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## NYC's small high schools see student gains, study finds

**Students attending more than 100 small high schools in New York City created since 2002 are more likely to be on track for graduation and to earn a diploma**

**compared to their peers in larger high schools, according to a recently released study.**

The [study](#), by the education and social policy research organization MDRC, found that New York's small high schools are helping put a higher percentage and a broader range of students on track to graduation, beginning in 9th grade. The small schools are predominantly located in disadvantaged communities whose neighborhood schools were being closed.

"By the end of four years of high school," the report says, "these effects culminate in higher rates of graduation."

The study, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, compares the outcomes of more than 21,000 students who entered high school between 2005 and 2008, all of them applicants to academically non-selective small schools where lotteries were held because of the number of applicants exceeded capacity. The study tracked the students who were randomly chosen for the small schools against the unsuccessful applicants who were assigned elsewhere.

Specifically, the report noted these key findings:

- By the end of their first year of high school, 58.5 percent of small-school students are on track to graduate in four years, compared to 48.5 percent of the students assigned to other schools.
- The small schools increased overall graduation rates by 6.8 percentage points -- which represents about a third of the gap between white students and under-represented minorities in New York City.
- Small schools increased the proportion of students -- by 5.3 percentage points -- who passed the New York Regents exam in English with a score of at least 75 points, the achievement level that the City University of New York uses to exempt students from remedial courses.
- The small schools' positive effects benefit a broad range of students, including male minorities.

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