

INNOVATOR

News about high school innovation

March 24, 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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NC's innovative high schools help 9th graders stay on track

Most ninth graders who attend North Carolina's small, innovative high schools successfully complete their freshman year, clearing a crucial hurdle on the way to graduation and college readiness.

Data from the 2008-09 school year shows that nearly 90 percent of the 6,000 freshman who were enrolled in the state's 101 break-the-mold high schools were promoted to the 10th grade, according to an analysis by the North Carolina New Schools Project. By comparison, the promotion rate for all 9th graders statewide last year was about 85 percent.

To be promoted, freshmen in most North Carolina school districts must pass at least three quarters of their classes, including ninth-grade English.

Research shows that promotion from 9th grade is a strong predictor of a student's likelihood to graduate. A 2006 study of schools in Philadelphia found that among 9th graders, non-promotion was one of three critical factors associated with students who dropped out. The other two warning signals for 9th graders were insufficient credits earned and poor attendance. A 9th grader whose profile included any one of the three factors was found to have a three in four chance of dropping out.

A study by the Chicago Consortium of School Research issued in 2005 found that students who successfully completed their freshman year were nearly four times more likely to graduate high school than their classmates who were not on track.

The 9th grade promotion data from North Carolina's innovative high school adds to dropout data released last month showing that the small schools are also helping to keep students engaged and in school. The overall dropout rate for the innovative high schools during the 2008-09 year was 2.96 percent, compared to 4.27 percent for all high schools in the state.

In 41 of the state's innovative high schools, the entire 9th grade class ended the year on-track -- losing **no** students to dropping out and leaving **no** students without promotion to the 10th grade.

Overall, the 2008-09 results show that the schools are making continued progress on reaching a goal of 95 percent promotion from the 9th grade as a critical milestone for student progress to graduation and readiness for college, career and life in the 21st century.

- The 60 early college high schools had a combined 9th grade promotion rate of 98 percent
- Nearly three quarters of all the state's innovative high schools had promotion rates of at least 90 percent
- Nearly two thirds of the 26 small, redesigned high schools with a 9th grade class promoted higher percentages of their freshmen than a comparison school with generally similar demographics.
- Of 92 innovative schools in 2008-09 that were also open the previous year, 79 of them achieved gains in their promotion rates.

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Report cites NC as national model for high school innovation

A report released this week by an organization with national reach points to North Carolina's efforts to develop early college high schools as a model for other states.

The [report](#), "Policies that Paved the Way," says that a combination of forward-thinking leadership and innovation-friendly policies have helped put North Carolina on the map with more early college high schools than any other state. North Carolina's 70 early colleges account for about a third of the 200 such schools now operating in 24 states.

The report was produced by Jobs for the Future, a Boston-based group that identifies, develops and promotes new education and workforce strategies that help communities, states and the nation compete in the global economy.

"This report is primarily a success story, one that should encourage North Carolina to hold its course and illustrate how other states can support the creation of better pathways through high school and college," said Joel Vargas, JFF program director and the report's lead author. "Schools and colleges that partner in early college schools are both empowered to innovate and accountable for results."

North Carolina's early college high schools, most of which are located on the campuses of community colleges or four-year institutions, allow students to graduate high school with an associate's degree or up to two years of transferrable college credit at no cost.

The report highlights policies that state leaders have adopted or eliminated to forge a climate that supports high school innovation. Those include dual enrollment legislation that allows high school students to earn college credit and a provision that allows schools to secure waivers from certain rules as a way to achieve greater flexibility.

Such policies have helped early college high schools open greater opportunities to students, the report concludes, reflected in lower dropout rates and higher end-of-course exam scores

than students in traditional schools..

"While a number of policy barriers must be removed to sustain and build on this success," the report says, "there is an even greater number of opportunities that can be seized to scale up the practices that are making the early college innovation so successful."

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Computer repair project engages students at Bertie STEM

When he's not in class, chances are that 17-year-old Jack Nicholson is under the hood of his Chevrolet Cobalt, trying to make his car run better. Well, maybe even a little faster.

Unless it's the day that he stays after school each week working under the hood of a donated computer, making it work for a family that might not have one at home or a classroom in need. The teen is one of about 10 students at Bertie STEM High School who meet weekly as the school's Youth Technology Corps, an extra-curricular group that blends community service with computer repair.

"I like it a lot because I like to tinker with stuff," said Jack, who's thinking about a career in automotive engineering. "I'm learning new stuff about computers that I never knew."

The school was one of several of North Carolina's innovative STEM schools that brought students to Raleigh last summer to launch their own school-based [Youth Technology Corps](#), a Chicago-based initiative aimed at engaging students after school with useable, hands-on skills along with meaningful community involvement.

Jennifer Veverka, a science teacher at Bertie STEM who advises the student group, said the extra-curricular club has become a valuable outlet for students and an effective focal point for the school.

"I think it's opening students' eyes to a lot of career opportunities and how much they like computers," said Veverka, who has taught at the school since it opened in 2007. "With a lot of careers in technology and engineering, computers can go hand in hand pretty well."

Beyond the connection to technology, the Youth Technology Corps is also helping students build self confidence and self esteem and helping them understand their connection to their community, Veverka said.

"It's giving them a good sense of self-worth and a good sense of pride in their community," Veverka said. "They're taking what they're doing with their hands and their minds and giving back. In return for doing all this, they're going to become better citizens of Windsor. In a few generations, we're going to be making Windsor and Bertie a better place."

So far, Veverka said, the students have refurbished 20 to 25 computers and are now working on upgrading 15 more. Outdated computers have been donated by the county government and from elsewhere. "If they're getting rid of it, we can take it," she said. "Word is out we're the ones who should get the old stuff. Whatever it is, we'll take it."

The formation of the student group has also helped the school strengthen its ties locally and farther afield. The technology specialist from the school district central office now regularly helps with the club, and an East Carolina University technology teacher who lives nearby has also become involved. Several of his students came to help earlier this month.

Calvin Bazemore, 17, said he's been taking computers apart since he was a kid.

"I like working with the technology and having a chance to help other people," said Calvin, a junior, who wants to be an electrical engineer. "I like figuring out how to put things together."

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Teachers, parents and students key to solving dropout crisis

Solving the nation's dropout crisis depends on a stronger, mutual understanding among teachers, parents and students about the issue, concludes a new follow-up report to the 2006 report, *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*.

The latest report, [Raising their Voices: Engaging students, teachers and parents to help end the High School Dropout Epidemic](#), says that all three constituencies must bridge significant differences of opinion in order to develop effective solutions.

"We found that students, parents and teachers have perspectives that exhibit significant disconnects that if not fully understood and bridged, will continue to set back efforts to keep more young people in school and on track to graduate prepared for postsecondary education," the authors say in the introduction to the report by Civic Enterprises, a Washington-based public-policy group .

Two previous installments to *The Silent Epidemic*, one that focused on the perspectives of teachers and the other on the views of parents, found differing opinions about why students drop out of school. While students in *The Silent Epidemic* cited boredom as a major cause of dropping out, only 20 percent of teachers identified that as a critical factor. Instead, many more teachers believed that students were making excuses for failing to graduate. Parents of students in low-performing schools saw the need for high standards and their involvement as key to student success. Teachers linked lack of parent involvement to dropping out.

"These disconnects are not peripheral," the new report states, "but central to the dropout debate."

The report is based on meetings of teachers, parents and students from schools in four cities: Baltimore, Dallas, Indianapolis and Kingsport, Tenn.

"We found that the act of bringing these individuals together shed light on the barriers that each group faces and led to a collective will to combat the problems that stand in the way of student success," the report said.

The report includes a discussion guide used in each of the four communities that others can use for conducting similar discussions.

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