



INNOVATOR

News about high school innovation

Oct. 29, 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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State Board's focus on readiness raises expectations for all

Commentary from former N.C. Chief Justice Burley Mitchell, chairman of the board of directors of the North Carolina New Schools Project. Mitchell wrote the court's initial Leandro ruling.

In 1997, the N.C. Supreme Court spelled out the promise that the state's constitution makes to all children: the opportunity to receive an education that truly will prepare them to succeed after high school. In its landmark Leandro ruling, the court said that all children have the right to a "sound basic education" of which the true test of quality is genuine readiness - to have the skills and knowledge necessary to effectively compete and contribute in contemporary society.

Now, with the decision by the State Board of Education to revise the criteria for measuring the performance of schools and students, North Carolina's public school leaders have taken a genuine step forward to delivering on that constitutional promise for every child. Among the five indicators the board adopted to gauge performance are three that focus directly on the question of readiness: results of a college-placement test such as the ACT, cohort graduation

rates and an index for measuring the degree that high schools are challenging students in math by tracking enrollments in Algebra II.

By setting a clear standard for what it means to be "ready," the board is raising expectations to a level that should have real meaning not only for students and schools, but also for employers and post-secondary institutions. Finally, a high school diploma will certify the readiness of any and every graduate.

High expectations are crucial, but so too is providing the means to reach them. The sound basic education that the constitution demands is the sum of many parts, not the least of which are effective instruction, a rigorous curriculum and real-time diagnosis of student progress towards the ultimate goal of Leandro, readiness. Thousands of children across North Carolina are already graduating well prepared for further education and gainful employment. The State Board of Education has now said it is time for *all* children to graduate ready.

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Waiting for Superman? Innovation in NC offers an answer

Commentary from Tony Habit, President, North Carolina New Schools Project

The new documentary, *Waiting for Superman*, is drawing crowds and stirring debate about charter schools and the state of public education across the nation. The film has just reached theaters in North Carolina -- but education leaders in our state haven't been waiting around for an action hero to boost opportunities and outcomes for students. Teachers, principals and advocates in our state are already working to ensure that they have access to innovative and effective high schools that prepare them for the world ahead.

Like other public schools, North Carolina's high schools were designed in a different time to support a different economy. The old model no longer serves us in a way that gives every student the best chance to graduate, to opt for college, to get a good job and to add to our communities.

Too many students are bored and disconnected. Too many drop out. Even worse, far too few students finish high school with skills crucial for success as adults. Half of recent high school graduates say that they have found gaps in their preparation for college and for the workplace. North Carolina must change what it expects from students and from schools so that all students graduate fully prepared for college, career and life.

North Carolina can't afford dropouts. One of every four ninth graders in North Carolina does not graduate in five years. That is the equivalent of 131 students quitting every school day. For just one year of dropouts from the class of 2009, North Carolina misses \$12 billion in lost lifetime earnings from students who failed to graduate.

Students must be ready to succeed. Being prepared for a good job in today's global, knowledge-based economy also means being prepared for college. Yet most of our state's high school students never complete a two- or four-year college degree. North Carolina's economic competitiveness depends particularly on the success of underrepresented students, including those from low-income, minority and first-generation college-going families.

Global competition demands innovation. Other nations are racing to create the skilled workforce that today's knowledge-based economy demands. North Carolina students must graduate not only with core skills to excel in college and the workplace, but also with the ability to think critically, solve complex problems and utilize technology to their advantage.

Waiting for Superman features several students hoping to win the lottery by gaining admission to outstanding public charter schools with long waiting lists. The film highlights the painful fact that not every child has access to a high quality education. The North Carolina New Schools Project (NCNSP) and its partners are working to change that same reality for high school students across our state.

NCNSP is engaged in a critical mission: to spark and support sustainable innovation in North Carolina's secondary schools so that all students graduate ready for college, careers and life. The 100-plus public schools that NCNSP works with in more than 70 districts are showing how high school innovation can reduce dropouts, raise graduation rates, boost student achievement, and increase the readiness of graduates for success in college and careers. The State Board of Education recently endorsed a new accountability plan that will create a similar focus on ensuring that students are on track and well prepared by the time they graduate. The accountability overhaul aligns with Gov. Beverly Perdue's education agenda -- "Career and College: Ready, Set, Go!"

You won't find principals wearing capes or teachers leaping tall buildings in a single bound. But inside NC's innovative high schools, you will see educators applying proven design principles that lead to success:

- Unwavering belief that schools must get all students ready for college
- Powerful teaching to engage students in thinking, solving problems and applying what they know to the real world
- Personalized attention to each student's learning
- Collaboration to support every student
- Structure and resources that ensure schools can get the job done

By employing these design principles, our schools are seeing impressive results.

- Students in NC's innovative high schools are outperforming their peers in traditional 9-12 high schools on state tests.
- Our high schools are challenging students, with a greater percentage of students taking Algebra II (an indicator of college-readiness).
- Students in innovative schools are less likely to drop out and more likely to be on track.
- Students in our high schools are graduating, with graduation rates outpacing those of comparison schools in their districts.
- NC's innovative high schools are helping close gaps in achievement.

Many of the students experiencing success in these innovative schools are those who have traditionally not fared well in public school settings. But through personalization and high expectations for all, these students are "winning the lottery" and finding academic success in our schools.

The heroes are already among us. By working together -- as citizens, educators and policymakers -- we can instill in today's students the core skills required for college and the

careers of the future. In so doing, we will build a skilled workforce that can keep North Carolina competitive and make our state a global destination for business and industry. No cape required.

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NC high schools honored for strong graduation performance

State Superintendent June Atkinson recently recognized 11 high schools in North Carolina for achieving a perfect graduation rate. Every single student among those schools' 9th grade cohorts that started four years earlier earned a diploma.

Four of the 11 schools that were highlighted for that achievement are supported by the North Carolina New Schools Project, a public-private partnership guided by the belief that high expectations and innovative instruction are essential to success for all students.

Appropriately, these 11 schools have been highlighted for reaching a goal that's an essential test of any high school's ultimate effectiveness. That, along with ensuring all graduates possess the skills and knowledge to succeed in college and careers are the twin objectives that must drive everything high schools do.

Also worthy of recognition, we believe, are those schools that are setting a similar example with graduation rates that clearly indicate the same kind of laser-like focus on the finish line. Sixty-four high schools in the state graduated at least 90 percent of their class of 2010, significantly outpacing the state's overall graduation rate of 74.2 percent.

Innovative high schools supported by the NC New Schools Project were well represented among that high-performing group. Nearly a third - 30 percent - of those 64 schools were early college high schools and other innovative schools that have been developed by redesigning traditional high schools.

The high graduation numbers from these innovative schools includes achievement by an often-overlooked group of students. With few exceptions, students who are under-represented in higher education because of race or family income also graduated in high numbers from all of the schools associated with the NC New Schools Project.

In all, half the 45 innovative high schools that had graduating cohorts last spring achieved graduation rates of 90 percent or higher. We think that's compelling evidence that high school innovation is making a difference in North Carolina by helping to keep students in school and making sure they finish with a diploma. In today's globally competitive world, the costs of failing to do so are just too high - to the individual, to our state and to our nation.

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Report: Post-secondary education key to Southern recovery

A new report from a Chapel Hill-based anti-poverty organization says that educational attainment past high school has become even more critical for economic recovery and progress in states across the South.

In the [latest installment](#) of its annual State of the South report, [MDC](#) urges greater focus on efforts to ensure that not only are more students graduating from high school, but that they're also completing education past high school. Failure to do so, the report argues, leads to compromised futures both for individuals and the state's prospects for economic development.

"It is imperative that the South dramatically increase the number of its citizens who obtain a bachelor's degree, an associate's degree, a certification, or a job-ready credential," the report summarizes as its "bottom-line" argument. "Just as it is urgent that the South attack the too-high dropout rate in high schools, so it is crucial that the region raise its completion rates in postsecondary education."

While North Carolina fares better than most states on a number of measures cited in the report, its percentage of young adults (ages 25-34) with at least a two-year degree -- 38.5 percent in 2009 -- lagged behind the nation's 41.6 percent, Virginia's 44 percent and significantly behind industrialized nations such as Korea, Canada, the Russian Federation and Japan, all above 55 percent.

And like other states in the South, as well as the nation as a whole, North Carolina has a wide gap between whites with at least an associate's degree and blacks and Hispanics. Among adults 25 years and older in North Carolina, 39 percent of whites have that level of educational attainment compared to 25.5 percent of blacks and 15.9 percent of Hispanics.

"For states and communities, a citizenry with a higher level of educational achievement has multiple payoffs," the report says. "... people who go beyond high school have a habit of avoiding poverty; people with some college education or better tend to figure out how to sustain themselves in the middle class. What's more, the more parents are educated, the less likely their families and their children will fall into poverty; an aggressive offensive to increase the numbers of young people with degrees and credentials amounts to a frontal assault on intergenerational poverty."

The report points to the critical role that community colleges play in states across the South as a path to increased opportunity and economic development. Among "lessons from the field" from community colleges in the South, the report highlights North Carolina's early college high schools, guided by the N.C. New Schools Project, as a model approach.

"Step by step over the past decade, North Carolina has emerged as an exemplar of how to put students on pathways to success by blending and fusing high schools with community colleges," the report says. "The state's efforts have focused on reforming high schools as a preparation for completion of postsecondary education."

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Study finds high costs for low US college completion rate

A new study provides fresh ammunition for the argument that high school students must be better prepared for the demands of college: Not only do too few entering students fail to return for a second year, states and the nation shoulder a high cost for that attrition.

The [study](#), issued this month by the American Institutes for Research, details just how high those costs are. State appropriations alone for full-time first-year students who started in the fall but didn't return the following year totaled \$1.2 billion in 2003, and increased to \$1.35 billion by 2007. Add to that for 2003 grants to first-year students who didn't return \$240 million from the states and \$270 million from the federal government. For states, those grant costs have increased by 30 percent; federal grants by 40 percent.

"The United States spends more on higher education than any other nation in the world," the study observes ... "Yet American students' success is not commensurate with these world-class expenditures. ... Alarming, only about 60 percent of students graduate from four-year colleges and universities within six years."

The study, "Finishing the First Lap: The Cost of First-Year Student Attrition in America's Four-year Colleges and Universities," estimates that North Carolina spent \$315 million during the five-year period from 2003-2008 for first-year students who didn't return. Federal grants to those students during the same period totaled \$56.7 million.

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