

# **The Third Way: Education Innovation in North Carolina and Bridging the Divide between Preparation for College and Career**

*North Carolina New Schools Project  
In Collaboration with State Superintendent June Atkinson*

*“I ask every American to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training. This can be community college, a four-year school, vocational training, or an apprenticeship. But whatever the training may be, every American will need to get more than a high school diploma (emphasis added).” President Barack Obama, February 2009*

*“Every student — no matter where he or she lives in NC — must graduate from high school with what it really takes to succeed in a career, in a two- or four-year college or in technical training.” Governor Bev Perdue; College and Work -- Ready, Set, Go*

## **National Overview and Rationale for Change**

Economic disruption resulting from globalization and the advancement of knowledge and technology continue to drive the call for a step-change in performance by public schools everywhere. In response, policy makers in North Carolina, led by Governor Perdue and the State Board of Education, continue the press for *raising* standards and updating the state’s curriculum and school accountability to ensure that the state maintains its reputation as a desirable location for capital investment and high-wage, highly-skilled jobs. At the same time, North Carolina continues its decade long leadership position in secondary school innovation with the emergence of new models of schooling more closely linked to the economy and delivering on the promise that more students graduate prepared to earn at least two years of college. For example, the state is home to 70 early college high schools--more than one-third of the almost 200 established nationwide--and in 2008 earned the Innovation in American Government Award issued by the Harvard School of Government.

But with even higher stakes to align secondary school change with both higher education and the economy, questions emerge regarding the role of career and technical education (CTE) in school transformation. Throughout most of its history, our nation has been served by career and technical education in the public schools that continues to evolve as the economy and society change. Today, a spirited debate continues among those who advocate for a stronger role for the “core curriculum” and others who believe that promoting specific career preparation defined by course sequences and the possibility of industry certifications is the best response in the current climate. This debate is often waged by those with vested interests in the current model of high school, including faculty, professional associations and community advocates strongly wedded to conventional staffing and funding patterns. Yet this traditional model of high school—one divided between core academic courses and optional career and technical education—limits consideration of more innovative options to increase both rigor and relevance for high school students, ensuring that students are well prepared for both higher education and evolving careers in a rapidly changing global economy.

## **Questions to Consider and a Proposed Third Way**

Rather than assuming that preparation for college and preparation for a career represent two distinct programs that have little to do with one another, what if there were a “third way” that recognized that these preparations are now more alike than ever before, and blended the best of both worlds? Below are key questions that could help bridge the often compartmentalized US and North Carolina model for secondary education and accelerate the transformation of our schools in ways that will result in a strong, nimble and adaptable workforce in every region:

- What is **actually** required for **all** students to be fully prepared for careers, college and life in times of rapid change?
- What changes are required in career and technical education (CTE) —and in academic programs of study—to succeed with all students?
- What is the vision for CTE in an era of innovation when the conventional notion of preparing for a stable lifetime career is no longer predictable or certain?
- In the modern workplace, in which entrepreneurial skills and innovation assume an increasingly prominent position, how can teachers in CTE and in academic courses transform schools to deliver on ambitious new educational outcomes?
- Is CTE defined by specific courses and sequences aligned with entry into a specific career, or is there a larger vision in which every student gains the knowledge and skill for continuing to learn and adapt to rapidly changing job prospects beyond high school? Within this vision, what range of possibilities is best suited to communities and to the state?

When rapidly changing global economic conditions mean that students must be prepared to continuously adapt and learn new career-related content beyond high school, graduating all students prepared for college and work requires a new way of thinking about the relationship of career preparation to academic preparation for college, or a “third way.” The third way must bridge the academic requirements for success in the new economy with maximizing the future possibilities for students through simultaneous preparation for college, careers and a future marked by accelerating technological innovation. The pitched battle between college preparation and those who advocate for career and technical preparation belies the real need: a fundamental redefinition of dated concepts that reinforce the false divide between college **or** career preparation. The need for a common high academic standard for students headed to the workforce and those headed to college was underscored by the recent Achieve report that noted “...aligning high school graduation requirements with the demands of college and the workplace has gone from a radical concept to the new norm throughout the country.”<sup>1</sup>

## **CTE and the Millennial Generation**

In 2006 Congress changed the traditional title of vocational education to “Career and Technical Education” in the reauthorization of the Perkins Act to encourage “the expansion of tech-prep

---

<sup>1</sup>Achieve, Inc. *Closing the Expectations Gap 2010: Fifth Annual Progress Report on the Alignment of High School Policies with the Demands of College and Careers*. April 2010.

programs which link and align CTE offerings between high schools and two-and-four year post secondary programs.”<sup>2</sup> While originally vocational education was largely a pathway for students judged to be “non- college material,” this name change continued a trend building since 1990 toward both a college and work ready standard for all graduates. Leaders recognized that vocational education separated from post-secondary education was inadequate for preparing students for careers in a rapidly changing international economy:

“Grounded in the notion that the U.S. was falling behind other nations in its ability to compete in the global marketplace...” The focus (of the 1990 Perkins re-authorization)...included integration of academics and vocational education, alliances between education and the workforce (including tech-prep) and closer linkages between school and work.”<sup>3</sup>

North Carolina high school students have increasingly taken advantage of CTE courses to prepare for both college and careers. During the last five years, more than 70 percent of NC high school students have taken at least one CTE course each year. Among those who completed four units in a CTE concentration, 86.5 percent graduated from high school, compared to 71.7 percent of all other students. And the percent of those students completing a four unit CTE concentration who went on to post-secondary education has jumped from 43percent to 62 percent over the last ten years, comparable to the 65 percent of all NC high school graduates who attend post-secondary institutions.

Yet barriers and opportunities remain for realizing the potential of more integrated academic and CTE coursework. The State Superintendent’s Career-Ready Commission appointed by Governor Bev Perdue issued a report entitled “A Crisis of Relevance,” pointing out that too many NC students fail to make connections between school and their goals for the future. These students are not engaged or inspired by what they are learning in school, have no clear plan for the future, and therefore drop out or graduate from high school unprepared for either college or jobs.

This crisis in relevance is echoed nationally in data cited by Tony Wagner in *The Global Achievement Gap*<sup>4</sup>:

- Only about two-thirds of all American public school students graduate in four years with a regular high school diploma—a number far lower than that in other industrialized countries.
- Poor basic skills in reading, writing, and computation were not the main reason for the high dropout rate: It turns out that *will*, not *skill*, is the single most important factor.

---

<sup>2</sup> Hoffman, Nancy. *Translating Vocational Education Technical Issues in the United States for International Reviewers*. Boston: Jobs for the Future, November 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Threeton, Mark D. “The Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education (CTE) Act of 2006 and the Roles and Responsibilities of CTE Teachers and Faculty Members.” In *Journal of Industrial Teacher Education*, Volume 44, Number 1. The Pennsylvania State University, Spring 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Wagner, Tony. *The Global Achievement Gap: Why Even Our Best Schools Don't Teach the New Survival Skills Our Children Need--And What We Can Do About It*. NY: Basic Books, 2008.

- Only about a third of U.S. high school students graduate ready for college today, and the rates are much lower for poor and minority students. Forty percent of *all* students who enter college must take remedial courses.
- Sixty-five percent of college professors report that what is taught in high school does not prepare students for college. One major reason is that the tests students must take in high school...usually measure 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> grade-level knowledge and skills...multiple choice assessments...rarely ask students to explain their reasoning or to apply knowledge to new situations (skills that are critical for success in college and careers), so neither teachers nor students receive useful feedback about college-readiness.

Despite the lingering perception among some parents and community members of CTE as “non-college preparatory,” even academic courses are not always developing the higher level critical thinking, problem-solving, teamwork, communication and learning-how-to-learn skills needed for both higher education and work. Wagner’s work makes the case that limited assessment and accountability measures do not address the critical skills so valued by employers and higher education alike. Ironically, the “messy,” real-world problems often incorporated into CTE courses provide the opportunity to develop critical and creative thinking skills around what to do when the problem itself is not clear and there is no set procedure for solving it. Yet even these opportunities to struggle with and overcome ill-defined problems can become compromised by lack of alignment and coordination among separate academic and CTE courses, academic courses that teach content divorced from meaningful application, and CTE course designs that focus too much on imparting immediate job-related procedures rather than the critical, flexible skills needed by entrepreneurs and innovators.

These higher level and “soft” skills have become of increasing concern to employers and now appear to be equally valued for success in higher education as well as the workplace. In 2006 the NC State Board of Education incorporated 21<sup>st</sup> century skills into its strategic goals and set as its mission “that every public school student will graduate from high school, globally competitive for work and postsecondary education and prepared for life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.” Yet even when CTE courses may offer more engaging and authentic opportunities to learn how to apply academic content to real-world problems, these opportunities are happenstance rather than deliberately planned because of the “separate, independent track” scheduling of potentially related academic and CTE content.

As competition for college admissions has increased, so have demands for academically rigorous courses. Students often are forced to choose between academic courses valued for college admission and career-related coursework that may increase their ability to apply and understand their knowledge to greater depth at the cost of competitive college admissions. In addition, rapidly-changing economic conditions in local communities often quickly eliminate demand for jobs for which students have traditionally been preparing, or create new ones for which high school career and technical education is either not yet developed or restricted to the post-secondary level. Unless both academic and CTE courses set a priority to develop flexible and adaptable “learning how to learn” skills in every course, both tracks run the risk of locking students into limited skills that do not prepare them to deal with problems for which there is no set process for solution. In effect, rapidly changing economic conditions have made it

increasingly difficult for high schools to ensure that students have developed the entrepreneurial and learning skills necessary to quickly adapt to changing career and entrepreneurial opportunities.

### **The Drive for Higher College and Workforce Readiness Standards**

Beginning in 1996 the nation's governors, along with private sector leaders, established Achieve as a bipartisan effort to raise academic standards in the nation's public school. In 2005, Achieve created the American Diploma Project to ensure that the high school diploma provided an assurance that graduates were actually ready for college and work. In 2009, Achieve joined the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governor's Association to invite states to collaborate in the creation of a common set of college and work ready standards; currently 48 states have enlisted. These developments are the result of an imperative that the United States quickly become more competitive with other developed nations and that the core skill requirements in mathematics and reading are now essentially the same for those entering the workforce as those historically associated with graduates seeking a four-year degree.

The push for ensuring that all students are both college and work ready tilts against historical patterns in high schools, where a portion of students were ready for college while others pursued work related interests and courses of study which required lower levels of content mastery in the core subjects. In North Carolina, adoption of the Common Core by the State Board of Education for freshmen entering in the fall of 2009 signaled recognition that preparation both for careers and higher education require a common foundation in essential content and skills. As noted in a recent report from Jobs for the Future, an acceptable proxy for CTE is STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math), although the tacit understanding is that STEM requires demanding science and math preparation while many CTE programs do not.

### **North Carolina Leads in Search for Solutions**

During much of 2009, the statewide Career-Ready Commission chaired by State Superintendent June Atkinson focused on the evolving role of career and technical education. The Commission's report declared: "We have squeezed the last drop of educational juice from the traditional high school model. The culture and structure of every high school in the state must change if we are to prepare students for a future in today's economy." The report went onto cite examples of school reform models including the NC New Schools Project, adding:

Graduation and student achievement data prove new models of high schools are working to make learning relevant and keep students engaged and focused on academic success and graduation. These examples show why high school reform must be a priority in every county in North Carolina.

One recommendation issued by the report called for every high school in the state with graduation rates below 75 percent to implement some type of redesign. This call set a clear expectation that fundamental change is required for those schools where the traditional model of

high school is simply not working for substantial numbers of students. In January 2010 at the NC Research Campus in Kannapolis, Governor Perdue launched her “Career and College Ready, Set, Go” agenda, which also demands far-reaching changes in the state's public schools. Perdue called for every student to graduate fully prepared for college and work and to secure college credit while in high school.

Similarly, the NC JOBS (Joining Our Businesses and Schools) Commission, co-chaired by Lt. Governor Dalton and Representative Rick Glazier, has been conducting hearings across the state seeking recommendations for strategies to link schools and the private sector, especially in areas which emphasize STEM fields. The JOBS Commission will also build upon the state's success in the creation of early college high schools by considering the next step in advancing this successful reform model. Overall, Commission findings are expected to address the core need for rethinking secondary education that will be both academically demanding to prepare students for success in college as well as relevant to the state's economic development imperative.

### **Re-imagining Student Preparation: Toward Portfolios of Options**

If the 20<sup>th</sup> century approach to CTE was defined by course sequences and a divide between those expected to go to work versus college, the 21<sup>st</sup> century approach is increasingly marked by the emergence of models that blur the lines—in effect, creating a third way that is both college *and* career preparation. NC and local communities must develop portfolios of options that break from the traditions of the conventional high school and that create purposefully designed schools with the common expectation that every student graduates prepared to continue their education and training beyond high school. Jobs for the Future offers a range of recommendations regarding strategies to enhance CTE to ensure students are equally prepared for further post-secondary education. In North Carolina, the State Superintendent's Career-Ready Commission made a number of similar recommendations in March 2010. Both sets of recommendations present a strong link between both career- and college-preparedness, as follows:

| <b>Jobs for the Future<sup>5</sup></b>   | <b>State Superintendent's Career-Ready Commission<sup>6</sup></b>   |
|--|---|
| Ensure curricular integration of standards-based academic content and career and technical content                                       | Make CTE a valuable part of <u>all</u> students' high school experience and use to help prepare them for postsecondary education and/or training and career success |
| Offer professional development opportunities to ensure career and technical educators have necessary tools to integrate academic and CTE | Drive innovation and creativity in high school by developing students' interest, behavior, skills in entrepreneurialism to accelerate their career                  |

<sup>5</sup> Hoffman, Nancy. *Translating Vocational Education Technical Issues in the United States for International Reviewers*. Boston: Jobs for the Future, November 2009.

<sup>6</sup> The State Superintendent's Career-Ready Commission. *A Crisis of Relevance: How NC Must Innovate to Graduate All Students Career and College Ready*. NC Department of Public Instruction, April 2010.

**The Third Way:  
Bridging the Divide between  
Preparation for College and Career**

| content  | interests  |
|--|--|
| Provide CTE students with a strong college preparatory academic curriculum   | Transform culture of NC so every school produces life-long learners both academically-skilled and career-ready   |
| Create broad-based CTE offerings that introduce students to a field with many viable career pathways and provide them with data and tools for assessing job openings, salary levels, and opportunities for advancement | Expand assistance available to high school students to enable them to make both wise academic and career choices and achieve their goals for the future  |
| Include work-based learning as part of a CTE program   |  |
| Forge strong partnerships with local industry  | Connect business leaders with educators in a unified effort to help students understand the relevance of their education to their future goals and prepare them with the knowledge, talent and skills valued and needed in today's workplace |
| Build linkages between the district's CTE program and local postsecondary education, including the provision of college CTE courses to high school students as soon as they are ready                                  | Build on existing governance structures to bring state, regional and local leaders in education, workforce and economic development together to support and grow North Carolina's economy  |

**Recommendations for Action: Accelerating Secondary School Innovation**

Given the lingering economic uncertainty in the wake of the greatest recession since the Great Depression and the accelerating pace of global economic interdependence, North Carolina must invest in innovation if its future citizens are to be prepared to shape not only their personal future but that of their families, communities, state and nation. North Carolina's commitment to aligning its revised Essential Standards to a Common Core represents a unique opportunity to creatively use those standards to forge new, more engaging ways for students to graduate from high school with demonstrated skills for success in both further education and the changing job market.

Yet, like all crises, this moment also offers great danger, if the powerful structures and culture of the past that have failed to engage some students in the pursuit of college- and career-readiness are not recognized and creatively addressed. There is little evidence from over six decades of educational reform in the US that incorporating new standards and assessments into old structures and divisions, such as those currently driving the lack of alignment between academic and CTE courses, will produce significantly better results for students. Rather there is an urgent need to invest in what Clayton Christensen has called "disruptive innovations," very different

models of providing both high expectations and support, and both rigorous college-preparatory content and relevant, future-ready skill development, so that all students graduate ready for both college and careers.<sup>7</sup>

Following are recommendations for how North Carolina can advance a new, more relevant model of secondary education that incorporates both college and career readiness without sacrificing one for the other:

### **Recommendation 1: Establish Blended Models**

*Use the 16 career clusters to create effective demonstration schools that successfully blend college- and career-ready curricula.*

This blended approach engages students through meaningful problems and context aligned to their career interests. Using career clusters rather than career-specific pathways maximizes options for students, ensuring that they will graduate with the ability to continue their education as well as pursue entry into a career. These schools will illustrate how resource allocation, including personnel and curriculum, can be shaped to meet the dual outcomes of schools that graduate students fully prepared for college and careers. These schools will increase student achievement in both higher-level, college-preparatory academic courses as well as with advanced preparation for careers. Students in these schools will secure college credit prior to graduation and make explicit connections between academic content and career exploration.

Projecting the skills required for jobs that do not yet exist requires an emphasis on developing essential skills through every course and content area, to better prepare students for the continuous need for learning new content and skills throughout their career. A consistent emphasis in every course on skill development through rigorous content will better demonstrate the skills most valued by employers and higher education alike, rather than the demonstration of knowledge within discrete boxes of traditional learning.

Unlike traditional secondary schools, these schools will blend course content into new structures for earning high school credit, making the transition from discrete blocks of knowledge toward an integrated and applied approach to learning. Students enrolled in a STEM themed school, for example, might learn algebra I and introductions to biotechnology and physical science in the same course. Other approaches might pair an online high school or college course with a different but related high school course or seminar, making connections across disciplines. Students will have the opportunity to pursue individual paths through internships, mentoring, field experiences and individually-designed projects. This integrated approach to learning will accomplish the dual goals of: 1) engaging students to master more demanding content by illustrating the utility of academic content to real-world problems and needs; and 2) mimicking

---

<sup>7</sup> Christensen, Clayton M., Horn, Michael B. and Johnson, Curtis W. *Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns*. NY: McGraw-Hill, 2008.

the world of adult learning in which solving complex problems requires a search for information across the span of knowledge in literature, mathematics, science and technology.

No such school currently exists in North Carolina. Due to the complex and demanding process of curricular integration, it is further recommended that the schools evolve a blended curriculum over time beginning with ninth grade. Such an undertaking will require expert curriculum design, especially in integrating career-relevant problems and skills into academic coursework. Schools could access a variety of resources to guide such integrated curriculum development, including an experienced CTE teacher, someone in higher education, or a business partner with the time and expertise to assist teachers in incorporating realistic problems into academic courses and in helping students see the connection between their academic coursework and their career aspirations. Business and higher education will be essential partners to ensure not only appropriateness of the content for future career and education, but also a progressive development of relevant critical skills into coursework.

The following table illustrates how such a blended approach is both similar and different from previous approaches to integrating academic and career-technical education:

**Comparative Analysis of  
Traditional Career Pathways, Career Academies  
and NCNSP Whole School Integrated Reform**

|                           | <b>Traditional Pathways</b>  | <b>Career Academies</b>  | <b>Integrated Models</b>  |
|---------------------------|--|--|---|
| <b>Schedule</b>           | Traditional high school designed to ensure students are able to access specific courses to meet pathways requirements.           | Traditional high school with flexibility to provide student internships and specific courses designed for the academy.                               | Purposefully designed to accommodate personal student support, powerful teaching and learning, and college ready focus. |
| <b>Staff Organization</b> | Traditional department structure maintaining separation between CTE & academic.  | Traditional department structure with potential for intra-department connections in planning and delivering special academy courses and internships. | Organized to ensure teachers' collegial work on curriculum, instruction, assessment and major school issues.            |
| <b>Curriculum</b>         | Traditional with course requirements to meet pathways.   | Traditional blended with specific academy courses and internship support.  | Cross curricular connections developed around themes and student relevance.   |
| <b>Instruction</b>        | Progressive instruction may exist, but traditional context limits potential for developing a culture of high student engagement. | Academy courses and internships offer opportunity for higher student engagement with appropriate support.  | Expectation of use of common instructional framework to ensure high student engagement.                                 |
| <b>Leadership</b>         | Effectively manage traditional structures and routines with vision development of secondary importance.                          | Develop vision around academy focus with traditional management expectations.  | Develop vision around design principles, managing to purposefully meet expectation of college ready for all.            |

|                          |   |   |   |
|--------------------------|---|---|---|
| <b>Student challenge</b> | Access to higher level courses motivated through completion of career pathway within traditional context. | Access to higher level courses motivated through internships, academy courses, and link to specific career. | All students challenged as honors level students in heterogeneous course groupings. |
|--------------------------|---|---|---|

**Recommendation 2: Emphasize STEM Education Initially**

*Establish a series of STEM-focused schools that emphasize science, technology, engineering and math education while also blending academic and career-aligned courses.*

Options could include a career-focused STEM school or early college, such as an Academy of Life and Health Sciences or an Early College for Biotechnology and Agriscience. Such schools could provide early examples of the blended academic and career-technical course options described above, as well as alignment to the top economic development needs of each region in the state.

STEM offers one of the most obvious links to high-wage, highly- skilled jobs with the most anticipated future job growth. Enhanced preparation in STEM that emphasizes the interdependence among those disciplines will serve all fields in the future. Almost every field will be driven by technological innovation and the requirement of greater skill and agility within mathematics. A deliberately interdisciplinary STEM education introduces students to a problem-solving methodology that equips them to experiment when problems and answers are not clear, while fostering a passionate interest in the world and the impact of innovation, change and discovery on the economy and society. Such a clear focus on authentic STEM-related problems also supports future citizenship; these applications of technology inevitably raise ethical and moral questions and engage students in service to their community as they weigh competing trade-offs in the social and economic consequences of their proposed solutions.

**Recommendation 3: Provide Organizational and Policy Changes to Foster Innovation**

*Create a protected environment to foster innovation and change educational culture through a blended governance model with state sponsorship.*

Innovation is not an easy task in any organization. It requires calculated risk-taking and the time and willingness to learn from mistakes and failure, with the knowledge that not every first attempt will succeed. Furthermore, changing the culture of an organization is exceedingly difficult. Existing governance structures and organizational cultures can limit innovation by increasing pressure to conform to existing models, policies and requirements that are inconsistent with the intended innovation, essentially killing innovation before it has a chance to prove its worth. “Disruptive” innovation is even more difficult for established organizations to support because it is such a departure from established ways of doing business that work for many of the organization’s “customers.” Only a few companies have been capable of considering and supporting a dramatically different way to conduct their business with customers different from

the mainstream. Yet given the unacceptable losses nationwide of students either dropping out or graduating unprepared for work or college, the need for a very different and differentiated type of school designed to engage these “lost” students cannot be ignored.

Through its support for early colleges and re-designed high schools, North Carolina has already recognized and supported the need for different types of secondary schools to reach students who are not engaged in becoming ready for college and careers. The lessons learned from these “new schools” point to the need for an even greater partnership among local, regional and statewide partners for change, as pointed out in the Career-Ready Commission recommendation: *“Build on existing governance structures to bring state, regional and local leaders in education, workforce and economic development together to support and grow North Carolina’s economy.”* While this recommendation does not specify what type of shared governance might be needed, there must be strong state sponsorship and support for the blended partnerships that support these different kinds of schools. Without that partnership and protection for school faculties, parents, students and their higher education and business partners, it is too likely that these schools will revert to the way school has always been.

There are many specific policy changes and organizational structures that could be created statewide to foster education innovation aligned to economic development priorities in each of the state's economic regions. However, the greatest need is to provide statewide support, encouragement and protection from established ways of doing business for these innovative schools, as long as the school can demonstrate due diligence to offer a well-conceived and planned approach to engage students in an integrated career- and college-ready curriculum. Schools need a “fast response” system that can circumvent typical bureaucratic delays and get answers and resources directly to schools in time to make a difference for their students. It will take focused statewide and regional leadership, resources, structures and governance to protect and incubate innovations while they are developing.

Following are some of the changes such state sponsorship of innovation might consider to give these schools a fighting chance to work:

- **Authorize different models of governance for individual or networks of innovative schools to partner with higher education and business, and report directly to the State Board of Education.** The nature of high school innovation often threatens not only established local political structures and economic interests, but cherished notions of what high school is supposed to be like. The urgency of needed changes to prepare students for a rapidly-changing future simply cannot afford the slowness of creating a shared understanding of the need for change in every local community, although that is a priority to be addressed as these schools develop. Rather, there needs to be an opportunity for visionary educational and business leaders to recruit willing students and parents to a new vision of what high school needs to be like, without threatening past patterns of organization and expectations. As these new schools take root, their success with all students will impact existing school by raising questions about what needs to change for all schools to achieve these higher and different standards, especially assessment of critical 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. But without strong state support for innovation,

these new structures may be perceived locally as a threat, deflecting scarce resources into defending a different approach rather than making it work.

- **Promote networks of like-minded innovative schools to develop virtual learning communities** among faculties, higher education and business partners, focused on aligning high school coursework to ensure student success in earning a two- or four-year college degree related to their career interest. These networks should assist faculty and schools in disseminating curriculum resources, aligning their assessments with standards, and promoting faculty, student, parent and community contributions to customized learning and tutorial resources.
- **Provide support for new forms of demonstrating accountability in collaboration with schools, higher education and business.** The old notion of utilizing multiple-choice measures as the sole measure of college- and career-readiness is insufficient to ensure that students develop the skills so valued by employers and higher education. In response to the State Board of Education Blue Ribbon Panel on Testing and Accountability, we must entertain innovative accountability proposals that are backed and endorsed by business and higher education partners. For example, expansion of North Carolina’s graduation project into more opportunities for “graduation by exhibition” might offer increased learning and accountability for schools and students to demonstrate readiness for college and careers. This flexibility would promote a shared accountability model in which local schools and districts share responsibility for ensuring students are meeting not just content standards, but also the higher-level skill standards which are evidently missing in the 40 percent of college students who met high school content standards but still need remedial work. These recommendations are consistent with those recently proposed by the ETS K-12 assessment center to the Council of Great City Schools.
- **Encourage academic and CTE teachers to take risks in integrating their content by allowing a “year of grace” in counting academic and CTE measures for accountability purposes,** much like DPI has done while developing new course content and tests. Such flexibility would allay the fears of academic content teachers that they might not initially achieve the same test results if they experiment with teaching both their content and “learning-how-to-learn” skills through more engaging and authentic real-world problems and applications.
- **Maximize options to develop flexible, digitally-supported high school courses not limited to the Standard Course of Study** for schools that are demonstrating increased accountability for graduation and college success. Keep the focus on the standards and assessment, not on limiting the creative design of relevant, rigorous high school courses. Accountability includes support from business and higher education for re-thinking the design of high school courses and support structures that produce success for students in completing college coursework and demonstrating valued career-ready competencies.

- **Allow continued flexibility in funding formulas that recognize the need to create different kinds of academic support for students initially engaged in college and online courses while still in high school.** We are only just beginning to understand the additional time and support needed for all students to be successful in these courses. By continuing to count students enrolled in online or college classes as part of a school's enrollment, schools will be better able to creatively deploy academic staff to ensure initial student success as they embark in taking these new kinds of courses.
- **Lobby the federal government for greater flexibility with accountability for using Perkins CTE funding.** Academic content teachers and CTE teachers could use funds to partner with higher education and business to create integrated approaches for rigorous academic coursework that incorporates more engaging and authentic applications related to students' career interests and real-world problem solving.

---

*The North Carolina New Schools Project is a private-public partnership established in 2003 to advance secondary school innovation and success in partnership with the Office of the Governor and the NC Education Cabinet. June St. Clair Atkinson is the NC Superintendent of Public Instruction. For additional information, contact: (919) 277-3760 or [www.newschoolsproject.org](http://www.newschoolsproject.org).*