Changing High School Structures and Programs

National High School Center

The School Improvement Grants have expanded the funding assistance available to secondary schools, especially with the inclusion of Tier II schools (see chapter 1 and 2 for more information). As a result, states and school districts have an opportunity to put unprecedented resources toward high school reforms that would increase graduation rates, reduce dropout rates, and improve teacher effectiveness for all high school students, particularly for students who are in greatest need of high quality teaching and supports to catch up academically with their peers. Research suggests that structural changes designed to enhance learning opportunities, in combination with instructional enhancements, are critical aspects of effective high school reform (Quint, 2006). The pieces within this section provide a brief overview of five structural changes.

- Dual-enrollment gives students the opportunity to take postsecondary-level courses in high school that allow them to earn high school and college credit.

- Thematic learning academies are smaller academies within a larger school that focus on specific themes. These academies—which can be designed around academic- or career-based themes—focus on personalization, the development of college- and career-ready skills through academic and occupational curricula, and easing transitions into and out of high school.

- Credit-recovery programs allow students to recover lost credit through strategies such as afterschool or summer coursework and online portals.

- Re-engagement strategies are designed to meet the needs of youth who have dropped out of high school or are at risk for dropping out. Programs are designed to meet the unique needs of students who are poor, incarcerated, pregnant or parenting, homeless, and/or in need of special education or English language learner services.

- Smaller learning communities include a variety of strategies and structures (e.g., small schools, thematic learning academies, magnet programs) used to subdivide larger comprehensive high schools to foster student engagement and teacher involvement.

The state plays a critical role in ensuring that districts and schools make innovative structural changes to high schools and have the resources they need to fully implement and sustain these changes. Furthermore, the state

can help monitor the success of these structural changes so that effective programs are scaled up and ineffective programs are phased out. Some examples of how states can support these programs include the following:

- Establishing sophisticated but user-friendly systems for collecting, disaggregating, analyzing, monitoring, and using student data; and hold schools and districts accountable for identifying and supporting students who are struggling;

- Supporting—through policymaking and funding—district and school efforts to personalize the learning environment, to ease transitions into and out of high school, and to ensure that students are exposed to a balanced blend of academic and career-oriented learning opportunities;

- Helping districts build leadership capacity among faculty and administrators in low-performing schools to address diverse student needs; and

- Promoting district-level partnerships with the community, employers, and institutions of higher education to facilitate learning opportunities for students and their teachers and to make coursework relevant.

State and local educators and policymakers must carefully coordinate and align their efforts to implement the structural changes that research suggests can improve outcomes for high school students. This section provides background on some promising structural innovations and specific examples of how states, districts, and schools may go about implementing them. For each featured approach, a brief list of references and resources is also provided.

References

Quint, J. (2006). *Meeting five critical challenges of high school reform: Lessons from research on three reform models*. New York: MDRC.