



Schools Break the Mold to Produce Graduates Ready for Success in College and Careers

Schools are implementing new and effective strategies in an effort to graduate 90 percent of students and to ensure that graduates are prepared to succeed in college, advanced training and work.

Small Learning Communities

One approach showing great potential for boosting the success rate of students is to organize the high school into small learning communities (SLCs) or career academies that blend academic and career/technical (CT) studies and 21st-century skills to raise achievement and strengthen students' connections to school and to relevant learning experiences. These two organizational structures differ slightly:

- **SLCs** are schools-within-schools that house an autonomous program in a larger school setting, often with a grade-level focus or an academic or career theme. Students and teachers are scheduled together and may share a common area of the school.
- **Career academies** are SLCs in which teams of teachers serve groups of students focusing on a specific career theme. These academies provide a college-prep curriculum with a career focus and partnerships with employers, the community and higher education.

A number of *High Schools That Work (HSTW)* and *Technology Centers That Work (TCTW)* sites are reporting good results and lessons learned from the “small is better” strategy of organizing into SLCs and academies.

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District Redesigns High Schools to Emphasize Career Themes

Jefferson County Public Schools in Louisville, Kentucky, has succeeded in getting the district and the community to focus on preparing students to be both career-ready and college-ready.

In 2008 the Jefferson school system convened a community task force to examine the needs of the district and to make recommendations. The group decided that the system wasn't broken — it was obsolete. To address the problem, leaders combined the vision and mission of the district with the economic goals of local business and industry and the global economy.

Fifteen of the 21 high schools in the district were selected to be redesigned around a career theme matching the economic goals of business and industry. **These schools were transformed from schools teaching an out-of-date model that prepared some students for mostly manufacturing and factory jobs to schools that expect every student to study a career major along with a rigorous academic core that will prepare them for college and careers.**



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Meaningful Learning

In making the change, the task force declared that there is no distinction between work-ready and college-ready. The critical thing is for students to be engaged in meaningful learning that connects to their lives. “We needed to reinvent how we were educating our students,” said **Brian Shumate**, high school liaison for the school system.

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The county was organized into three school “networks” where each career theme is replicated so that all students get equal access to programs in each career area. The professional career themes for each region are communication, media and the arts; business and information technology; engineering (aerospace, architecture, manufacturing and construction); human services; education and international studies; and medicine, health and the environment.

Students enter the career theme programs in the 10th grade after attending a freshman academy that prepares them through foundational courses, career exploration and a nurturing environment. In grades 10 through 12, students will progress through their choice of several programs of study, each of which features core courses and related experiences around a career major within the school’s career theme. Each student also benefits from an adviser-advisee program. Eventually, students will leave the 12th grade with “credentialed” diplomas featuring either an outside endorsement, dual credit for high school and college, or both. In five years, all of the high schools will offer industry certifications.

Aiming for the Top

The Jefferson County goal is clear: to move the Louisville region into the top tier among its peers in raising educational attainment. The Greater Louisville Education Commitment aims for at least 40 percent of working-age adults to hold a bachelor’s degree (40,000 more) and 10 percent to hold an associate’s degree (15,000 more) by 2020.

“Our schools are systemically connecting students to an innovative world beyond the school walls,” Shumate said.

Businesses that are willing to work with schools will have easier access to the classroom and advisory committees, as the district has employed specialists to work with the schools in each professional career theme. The five specialists build relationships among the schools, businesses and the community. Advisory committees for each school and program have already begun to meet. Future administrative and teacher hires will be based in part upon their “fit” to the school’s professional career theme emphasis. Strong partnerships and continued focus will work to ensure that the new initiative has enduring results.

Teacher Collaboration

The career pathways specialists also work across each of their three schools featuring similar programs. Teachers that were previously isolated now form cohorts that collaborate across the curriculum to plan more effective lessons and centers of study. Within the schools, specialists and principals will use the new school structure to encourage collaboration between academic and CT teachers to help students connect learning to the future beyond school and to increase relevance for students and parents.

The district’s emphasis on college and career readiness has already generated fledgling career pathway “pipelines” from the elementary grades through college. The new high school programs link middle grades career exploration modules to high school dual credit agreements with postsecondary partners.

The task force plans to meet annually to review progress and recommend changes. The new structures and connections created by community and school leaders in Jefferson County have fundamentally changed the public schools. Relationships are expected to cement the new school structure in place.

Common Roadblocks for Career Academies — and How to Clear Them

More than a decade ago, the **National Educator Program** (NEP) in Denver, Colorado, studied commonalities of schools throughout the United States that had implemented career academies. “Understanding that success leaves clues, we studied our research and that of others to determine how thriving, sustainable academies are alike,” said **Mark Thompson**, director of NEP. The result was *The 5 Keys for Successful Career Academies*, published in 1998 and updated every five years.

“We also got specific about the common roadblocks facing academies and how schools have overcome these barriers,” Thompson said. Four of these events or struggles, along with ways to overcome them, are outlined below:

- **Lack of Common Vision** — This roadblock occurs most often and has the most far-reaching effects — touching a variety of systems that overlap within the school. When there is no clear, articulated vision that everyone believes represents their own values, an academy has difficulty getting off the ground. “The academy may have slick brochures and host visits from other schools, but it will exist primarily on paper unless there is a common vision,” Thompson said.

The way around a lack of common vision is to address the first key for a successful academy — faculty ownership. While this essential element covers many concepts, from teacher involvement to sustainability and improvement, it requires building on the values of each staff member. “The vision doesn’t need to match each person’s values exactly, but it must incorporate them to some extent,” Thompson said. “This is what transforms a school of many into an organization with one vision and a finely honed mission.”

- **Staff Infection** — Every school staff is infected with one of three things: enthusiasm, a defeatist attitude or indifference. Academies that struggle with “staff infection” often do so because the administration or the district has decided to implement an academy without the staff’s input. “This has become more prevalent since 2001 as districts apply for small learning communities grants,” Thompson said.

The easiest way to avoid this roadblock is to involve teachers fully in the decision-making process. “People rarely get upset with you about decisions they have made,” Thompson said.

- **Funding** — “Academies do not need funding to survive and thrive,” Thompson said. “In fact, funding sometimes can be a distraction.” Career academies are a method and context for instruction. Funding helps, but it is not a requirement. When some schools receive funding, they create a roadblock by spending the temporary funds on infrastructure. “This should never be done,” Thompson said. “Thriving academies are built on values and mission, not grant money.”
- **Master Schedule** — This often-cited roadblock is the most perplexing, mainly because many schools tackle the problem backwards by taking a master schedule and trying to figure out how to make an academy fit into it. “The best way is to forget the master schedule for awhile and think first about everything you and your staff would like the academy to accomplish for your students,” Thompson said. Ask teachers to design instruction, outcomes and other factors and then create a master schedule to meet those needs.

The 5 Keys for Successful Career Academies is available online at <http://neponline.org/page6/page6.html>.

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Large High School Succeeds With a Small-School Design and a Strong Advisory Program

Akins High School (AHS) in Austin, Texas, is a large urban school that has created a small-school environment for its 2,700 students by organizing into six career academies and maintaining a robust advisory program. Seventy percent of Akins students are Hispanic, and 62 percent are economically disadvantaged.

“Relationships are central to the success of these programs,” Academy Director **Barry Bacom** said. “Every student is accounted for and connected to the school’s goals.”

Students choose an academy based on their interests and goals and are assigned alphabetically to an advisory group of 15 students led by a teacher who remains with the students throughout four years of high school. This arrangement gives students several common points of interest. As members of the same academy, students tend to have career goals in related fields and are taking similar courses to complete an academy-related major. All core academic classes in English/language arts, mathematics, science and social studies are taught by teachers assigned to specific academies, so students in advisory groups are likely to take many of their classes together or at least with the same teachers.

Advisory Curriculum

An advisory curriculum has been developed that includes assistance for ninth-graders to transition into high school; planning programs of study for careers and advanced studies; habits of success for school and life; PSAT, SAT and ACT preparation; and assistance with college applications. Advisory activities are a specific portion of professional development for teachers each year.

Teachers are expected to get to know their advisees well so that they can support their academic achievement. Teachers learn what interests and motivates their assigned students, and students learn where they can obtain extra help from adults in the building as needed.

When the advisory system was first instituted at Akins, each administrator had an advisory section. Later, administrators gave up their sections to devote more time to helping teachers who need a boost in guiding groups of students.

Frequent Meetings

Each advisory group met once a week for 30 minutes in the first few years, but the program is so effective that it is expanding to 30 minutes twice a week. The advisory curriculum also has been expanded to fill the extra time.

The six career academies have common advisory periods, making it easier for school leaders to recognize and celebrate achievement — a big part of the culture at AHS. The school gives prizes such as hats, buttons and t-shirts to build a common identity and generate healthy competition among the academies.

Advisories and other tactics are ensuring that Akins provides the support needed by students to succeed — and students are succeeding. **In 2003, only 18 percent of Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) exams taken at Akins resulted in a Proficient score. That percentage has risen every year since, climbing to 57 percent in 2009. This improvement of 39 percentage points exceeds the statewide gain of 27 percentage points during the same period.**

Akins High School joined the *HSTW* network six years ago, allowing time to mature in its implementation of guidance and advisory services and other components of the *HSTW* school improvement model. The school received a “recognized” accountability rating from the Texas Education Agency for the first time in the school’s history in 2009-2010. “We are one of only four high schools in Austin to receive this designation and the only school with our demographic makeup,” Bacom said. ***Newsweek* magazine ranked AHS among the top 6 percent of high schools in the nation in 2009-2010.**

“It took about three years of pushing the academy and advisory programs to reach a tipping point of teachers and students,” Bacom said. “Now, if you aren’t buying into the concepts, you are in the minority.”



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Akins High School

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Small Learning Communities Meet the Need for Personal Attention at a Technology Center

Meridian Technology Center (MTC) in Stillwater, Oklahoma, began restructuring from a traditional organization into three SLCs in 2009. The center's demographics include juniors and seniors from 10 feeder high schools that make up 60 percent of the enrollment. The other 40 percent comprises adult learners from district communities, businesses and industries.

High school students attend their home high schools for half a day and travel to MTC for the remainder of the day. They study in one of three SLCs: trade and industry, health careers, and professional services.

Each SLC has a director of instruction who coaches rather than evaluates teachers. These leaders frequently visit classrooms to assist teachers with instruction, but they spend the majority of their time getting to know students, monitoring students' programs of study and serving as a liaisons with parents and home high schools.

Instructional Changes

The instructional directors also plan professional development for their teachers, coordinating these efforts with local business and industry leaders who work closely with the school to help ensure that students are acquiring vital 21st-century skills. Teachers now are developing interdisciplinary lessons and are sharing their expertise and resources with their colleagues.

MTC leaders and teachers have addressed several challenges in establishing the new school structure:

- It was important to expand and maintain open communication between administrators and teachers. "Information must be disseminated to develop trust and support and to keep everyone focused on the goals of the school," Assistant Superintendent **John Howell** said. Directors of the SLCs meet weekly and the SLCs meet monthly. The improved communication has eliminated much inefficiency.
- "Turf issues" needed to be resolved. The new structure requires instructors in each SLC to work together more closely. Through regular meetings that can focus on issues unique to their SLCs, the instructors have gained valuable input and are more willing to share resources and ideas.

- The school needed to build consistency in enforcing school policies. Dialogue between administrators and the instructional staff (and now students) allows everyone to understand why certain policies exist. Understanding the rationale for a policy reduces confusion about expectations.
- Change was difficult for some teachers. Since most individuals will buy into something new if they are involved in the decision-making process, the school made an effort to include pertinent information in SLC meetings. Administrators say the new structure has allowed more teachers to become involved in decisions that once were made unilaterally.

At the close of the 2009-2010 school year, MTC Superintendent **Douglas Major** interviewed students and teachers to gather data on their perceptions of the new SLCs. The data revealed that the school culture has become more positive for students and teachers. Students indicated that teachers and administrators know them by name and that the school environment is more "warm and friendly." Teachers reported better interaction with administrators, more support in the classroom and fewer discipline problems. One teacher said, "It has been encouraging to see students 'light up' when instructional directors call them by name."

Although the perceptions gathered so far have been positive, the school plans to collect numerical data on graduation rates, job placement after graduation and college completion rates of graduates.

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A Successful Journey: Urban High School Raises Achievement with Career Academies

In 2006 **Queens Vocational and Technical High School** (Queens Voc/Tech) was one of the original New York City schools that undertook an initiative to implement career-themed SLCs based on the *HSTW* design and improvement framework. The effort was made possible by a contract between the New York City school system and SREB.

Queens Voc/Tech is a citywide school serving 1,200 students. Its student population is 70 percent Hispanic, 11 percent white, 10 percent black and 9 percent Asian. More than 75 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.

“The redesign of our school into small learning communities has led to greater personalization of instruction, the development of a more qualified teaching staff and improved student achievement,” Principal **Denise Vittor** said.

In fact, both student achievement and the graduation rate have improved substantially at Queens Voc/Tech during the past four years. The graduation rate increased from 46 percent in 2006 to 59 percent in 2007 to 74 percent in 2009. Between 2007 and 2009, the percentage of students passing the New York Regents Competency Tests increased from 18 percent to 68 percent in reading, from 80 percent to 97 percent in writing, and from 23 percent to 54 percent in mathematics. In 2010 the school received a Quality Review rating of “well-developed” — the highest rating possible in the New York City school system.

Queens Voc/Tech created three career-themed academies, one ninth-grade academy and one credit-recovery academy for at-risk students. The academies are the School of Skilled Building Trades, the School of Entrepreneurial Studies, the School of Computer and Electronic Engineering Technologies, the School of Exploration and Discovery (for ninth-graders) and the Advance Academy (for credit recovery).

Initially, scheduling was a challenge. The school eventually adopted a hybrid schedule that enables students to take 10 classes per week in a nine-period day. The schedule also provides common planning time for teacher teams in each academy.

The *HSTW* Key Practices have guided the school as it has addressed the following topics:

- **Ninth-grade transition** — Teachers in grade nine meet daily to identify struggling students, plan support strategies, coordinate curricula and participate in professional development.
- **High expectations** — More students are taking higher-level courses and earning college credits while in high school. Some teachers have implemented standards-based grading practices that require students to redo work that does not meet standards.
- **Engaging instruction** — The leadership team developed an observation instrument that is used by the principal and staff members to assess the level of engaging instruction in the classroom and to indicate needed professional development. Teachers in each academy analyze and display student work and portfolios. Boards in hallways throughout the school display teacher assignments, associated rubrics and exemplary student work.
- **Quality CT studies** — Each student majors in one of eight CT fields. Students are required to complete a rigorous sequence of courses, a technical assessment and a related internship to receive a CT-endorsed diploma. They also complete career portfolios. In 2008-2009 the Queens robotics team won the New York City regional contest and participated in the national competition.
- **Extra help** — The Advance Academy serves students who are unable to complete the credits to enter the 10th grade. The intent is to help students catch up with their fellow students and graduate on time. Other extra-help opportunities include night school classes in multiple academic and CT areas; after-school training for CT certification; review classes two weeks before the New York State Regents Examinations; double-period classes for low-performing students; SAT prep with postsecondary partners; and community college gateway courses in English and mathematics. Students also benefit from family advisory groups and tutoring, extra help or make-up sessions once a week, and wake-up text messages targeted to students with chronic absentee records.



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Denise Vittor

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- **Continuous improvement** — The school emphasizes using data to improve instruction. Each SLC uses one day of common planning time per week to analyze data and to focus on literacy across the curriculum, and each has a data inquiry team. The school identified areas of literacy gaps and targeted instruction to close the gaps. The entire staff participated in a full day of *HSTW* professional development on using data and is continuing to address the topic in each SLC.

Inner-City School Sees Drop in Ninth-Grade Failure Rate in First Year of Freshman Academy

With a ninth-grade failure rate of more than 40 percent, **Banneker High School's** leaders, teachers and parents knew a major change had to occur. The answer was a freshman academy that has given students their own identity in separate surroundings where they can focus on completing high school and attaining success in college and careers.

Banneker High School is a Title I school in College Park, Georgia, a suburb of Atlanta. It enrolls 1,300 students, 98 percent of whom are black.

School administrators met with teachers to explain the benefits of a ninth-grade academy in terms of the latest research as well as data from schools that have restructured to focus on improving the achievement of freshman students in an SLC format. These schools have experienced decreased failure rates, increased attendance and fewer discipline referrals. Students at the freshman academy schools were passing high-stakes tests and receiving credits to move forward as sophomores.

Administrative Triad

The ninth-grade academy at Banneker is headed by an assistant principal, an assistant administrator and a guidance counselor. This triad makes up the administrative team for the academy.

Teachers and administrators met before the 2009-2010 school year to craft a mission statement and goals for the academy. The mission is “to facilitate a smooth transition from the middle grades to high school by creating a freshman class with a sense of community, where each freshman is motivated, informed and involved.” The goals are as follows:

- Reduce the number of freshman retentions.
- Reduce the number of freshman discipline referrals.
- Nurture a high level of freshman involvement in school activities.
- Partner with parents to help students succeed.
- Teach the skills needed by students to be successful in high school.
- Lay a strong academic foundation for students' subsequent years in high school.

The academy adopted an interdisciplinary team approach in which all ninth-graders are grouped together and share the same core teachers. “This model allows teachers, the counselor and the administrator to develop a comprehensive perspective on what a freshman needs to exceed or meet academic, behavioral and social standards and expectations,” said **Macquelyn Brown**, assistant principal at Banneker. The team approach is expected to increase attendance and encourage students to develop meaningful relationships.

Lower Failure Rate

After the first year of the freshman academy, the ninth-grade failure rate was reduced from over 40 percent to 18 percent. “This was an improvement from past years, but our goal is 8 percent,” said **Kimesha White**, freshman academy administrator.

Anecdotal information from student surveys has revealed that students have a connection with at least one adult in the academy. Freshmen meet with their advisement teachers weekly to review academic and behavioral progress and to learn how to monitor and measure their success.

The advisement time allows the counselor, the administrator and a social worker to meet with students who are experiencing similar social, emotional, academic and behavioral challenges. These adults, along with an advisement teacher, serve as mentors for the students.

During advisement time, students develop a comprehensive education and career plan based on performance and interests. The plan meets state and local standards and follows the *HSTW*-recommended curriculum of high-level courses. Students learn organizational and study skills and begin to explore postsecondary options.

The freshman academy kicked off with a meeting for parents. More parents attended this event than have attended regular open house events in the past.

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New School or New Environment

Sometimes it makes sense to establish a new school with a new organizational structure to improve student learning. On other occasions, a school can redesign its culture to involve more students in completing high school and getting ready for the future.

New School Focuses on Relationships, Relevance and Rigor in Preparing Students for College and Health Careers

Cornerstone Charter Schools will draw on its success in the private and public school arenas and its belief in the *HSTW* principles for higher student achievement when it opens the new **Cornerstone Health High School** in Detroit, Michigan, in fall 2011. The school is expected to be fully operational in four years with a total enrollment of 1,000 students seeking a superior education.

“The health care industry is vital in Detroit and represents a growing career opportunity,” said Cornerstone CEO **Bob Sommers**. Cornerstone Charter Schools currently operates K-8 schools. The new school will be its first move into the secondary education arena.

Health High School students will be expected to meet rigorous academic and personal standards:

- Score 22 or higher on the ACT.
- Be wholesome in character.
- Be compassionate and responsible for giving something to the world.
- Be culturally competent, including speaking a second language.
- Apply learning to complex real-world problems.
- Be a problem-solver.
- Be technologically savvy.
- Understand and support the guiding principles of the nation.
- Be physically fit.
- Be financially literate.

Instead of using grade levels, Health High School will identify students by their academic and social maturity. **Beginning** students will receive individual and more highly structured assignments to develop academic and social maturity.

Intermediate students will have more flexibility and will begin working in teams.

Advanced students will have significant flexibility and will complete complex projects. **Professional-level** students will enroll in college courses. They will have maximum flexibility, will engage in real-world experiences and will have the option to earn an industry credential. Transitions will occur when students reach specific targets, not at the end of the year.

Blended Instructional Delivery

The curriculum, including all projects, will be delivered in a blended environment, combining virtual (online) instruction and on-site instruction. Each student will be assigned a personal work station. In addition to core academics, the curriculum will include development of 21st-century skills, foreign language, cultural competency, health and wellness, character, and community service.

Advancement will be based on proficiency in course work. End-of-course assessments will provide proof of knowledge and skills. Grades will be either an A or Not Yet.

The staffing design will include “**relationship managers**” to develop four-year associations with students for the purpose of mentoring and nurturing; “**relevance managers**” to link the curriculum to the outside world through activities such as internships; and “**rigor managers**” in the form of virtual faculty for specific online courses. “**Discipline managers**” will be non-faculty who will deal with major behavior issues.

Cornerstone’s focus for student success includes the three Cs — college, careers and community. “Our product is educational experiences,” Sommers said.

Cornerstone Schools began as a private school operator in the Detroit area in 1990 and has become recognized for raising the achievement of public school students. “Of the 49 charter schools in the Detroit area, two in the top 10 are Cornerstone schools,” Sommers said.



“Our product is educational experiences. ... Of the 49 charter schools in the Detroit area, two in the top 10 are Cornerstone schools.”

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School Heightens Students' Awareness of College and Career Opportunities

Principal **Ronnie Rodriguez** of **Los Fresnos High School** (LFHS) in Los Fresnos, Texas, was surprised by the answer he received when he asked one of his seniors about post-graduation plans. The student's response was, "I guess I'll set up umbrellas and chairs at the beach."

LFHS enrolls 1,900 students in grades 10 through 12. Ninety-five percent are Hispanic, and 87 percent are economically disadvantaged.

Rodriguez was an experienced principal when he came to lead LFHS. "I knew the school had excellent test scores and had won acclaim for outstanding athletic achievement," he said. "I also knew we could do a better job of encouraging students to attend college and prepare for successful careers."

Rodriguez immediately began developing a "sea of college awareness." Students were bombarded with messages that "graduation is not enough" and that all students are expected to plan for the future in a college, university, technical school or apprenticeship.

Changing the Culture

The principal and his staff worked an entire weekend to change the symbols of the school. They hung colorful banners in the cafeteria from colleges and universities throughout the United States. Each teacher was asked to spotlight a college or a technical school in a display outside the classroom. Students in the TV production class promoted college awareness with trivia questions, college fight songs and prizes.

Administrators, teachers and students switched from talking about merely passing state tests to meeting the college- and career-readiness goals of *HSTW* Assessment, state assessments, the ACT and the SAT. Seniors were challenged to apply to 10 postsecondary institutions by November, and their acceptance letters were posted on a wall in the cafeteria.

"Teachers became excited about the new school culture," said **Sue Ellen Hill**, family and consumer sciences teacher and *HSTW* site coordinator. "They asked students to investigate postsecondary options as part of course work and found ways to encourage students to plan the next step after high school."

Interest Picks Up

As proof that the conversation has changed, Hill pointed out that students now ask everyone — teachers, guest speakers and other adults — where they attended college. The center where LFHS students obtain college information (financial aid, scholarship opportunities and application requirements) became so heavily attended that the principal had to find another area to accommodate the large crowd.

Systems of extra help were installed to assist students in meeting higher expectations. The school hosts Saturday sessions, providing transportation and meals, for struggling students.



"This program has drastically improved relationships between students and teachers. Students get to see their teachers as supporters, not just instructors."

Ronnie Rodriguez
Los Fresnos High School

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For those who need additional help, the school offers an extended day and transportation. The homework center at the school is open from 4:30 p.m. to 6 p.m. three days a week and is staffed by core subject teachers. Students receive rides home after the homework center closes.

Rodriguez believes attendance also matters in getting students to plan for the future. The school conducts a friendly competition between classes and awards prizes ranging from extra food in the cafeteria to flat-screen televisions.

Once students are in school, Rodriguez expects teachers to engage them in learning activities that will give students good reasons to go to class. "I want students to be excited about learning," he said. The "Teachers in the Bleachers" program encourages teachers to attend student events such as ballgames, concerts and theater productions to interact with students and sometimes take the place of parents who cannot be there. "This program has drastically improved relationships between students and teachers," Rodriguez said. "Students get to see their teachers as supporters, not just instructors."

Los Fresnos High School was named a *HSTW* Pacesetter School in 2010 and has been identified as one of the top 100 high-implementation schools in the *HSTW* network. Students' scores were 90 percent or above in all four core areas (reading and English/language arts, social studies, math and science) of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) in 2010.

School Pioneers the Use of Instructional Rounds to Improve Teaching and Learning

The school culture at **Garfield High School** (GHS) in Akron, Ohio, has improved dramatically since implementation of instructional rounds to observe, discuss and analyze teaching practices as a way to raise student achievement. Teachers and administrators at GHS are relating and communicating better than ever before and students' performance has improved now that the "closed door" culture is disappearing.

Similar to medical rounds conducted by physicians, the purpose of instructional rounds in education is to improve the quality of teaching and learning. The concept is presented in *Instructional Rounds in Education* published by Harvard Education Press.

The Akron School District was one of the first school systems in the nation to implement the program, according to Principal **James Dieringer**. GHS was selected for the program three years ago and is expanding its participation to include all teachers.

GHS is an urban school with a student population that is 61 percent black, 30 percent white, 4 percent Asian, 2 percent Hispanic and 3 percent other ethnicities. More than 70 percent of GHS students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals.

Teachers and leaders who have completed professional development in instructional rounds participate in the program. At the district level, an instructional rounds team includes district personnel and principals of elementary, middle grades and high schools.

Instructional rounds teacher leader **Rick Sims** of GHS summarized the four components of instructional rounds:

- **Identify a "problem of practice."** If improved, this area would make a real difference in student learning. It must be rooted in the instructional core, directly observable, actionable and connected to a broader strategy of school improvement. The "problem of practice" serves to focus an instructional rounds visit.
- **Observe classroom practice.** Rounds participants visit classrooms to gather evidence of a problem of practice. The evidence, including information on teachers, students and classroom content, is nonjudgmental.
- **Participate in debriefing.** The rounds participants debrief after their classroom visits. They share evidence with their team members and listen and learn from their colleagues; look at the information and analyze what it means; and identify patterns from the data and make connections between teaching and learning.
- **Identify the next level of work.** Rounds participants plan together how the school can move to the next level. They leave suggestions in the form of reflective questions that are meant to help school leaders deepen their thinking about the problem of practice.

The common language of instructional rounds maintains the focus on instructional strategies and initiatives and reveals the professional development topics that would benefit teachers in the classroom.

"Since the program is led by teachers for teachers and is focused on improving instruction — rather than on teacher evaluation — participating teachers welcome their peers into the classroom and look forward to visiting their colleagues," Sims said.

GHS teachers disaggregated data from the Ohio Graduation Tests (OGT) and agreed that students were having difficulty answering questions that required higher-order thinking skills. This finding became the problem of practice for instructional rounds and has been included in the 2010-2011 school improvement plan at GHS.

GHS leaders credit instructional rounds with three major accomplishments:

- Teachers are focused on problems of practice and on changing the way they deliver instruction in the classroom.
- Instructional practice is improving through use of a common language for instructional rounds and by focusing on instructional strategies and initiatives, including professional development.
- The school is changing from a culture of teacher isolation to a culture of trust and schoolwide collaboration.



"Since the program is led by teachers for teachers and is focused on improving instruction — rather than on teacher evaluation — participating teachers welcome their peers into the classroom and look forward to visiting their colleagues."

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Garfield High School

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Rigor and Relevance Prepare Rural Students for a Changing World

Ava High School in rural Ava, Missouri, may be small, but school leaders and teachers are determined to give their students a world-class education. The graduation rate has reached 93.7 percent and the school was named one of the top 80 most-improved *HSTW* sites in the nation for 2008-2010.

“This class is going to be tough, but it matters. It’s relevant,” English/language arts teacher **Airin Roberts** tells her students. To make the learning go down easier, she peppers her classes with hands-on projects to engage students in their studies and to show them what will be expected in college and careers.

Students complete 28 credits for graduation. They have access to Advanced Placement (AP) and dual credit courses. They also take classes that prepare them to be proficient in the use of modern technology.

When a *HSTW* Technical Assistance Visit (TAV) team visited the school, Principal **Teresa Nash** paid careful attention to the team’s three major recommendations: Add a literacy coach to the staff, create professional learning communities, and assign more project-based learning.

The literacy coach and the entire staff implemented a comprehensive literacy plan for all students. The school uses the Scholastic Reading Inventory, a computer-based reading assessment, to measure students’ reading skills in grades nine and 10. Students who are two years behind are enrolled in a mandatory reading class using the Laubach reading program. The literacy coach works closely with the language arts department to develop literacy plans, and the principal conducts mandatory literacy sessions each month to provide teachers new ways to strengthen students’ reading and writing skills.

Teachers meet in small professional learning communities (PLCs) to identify the standards to be tested each month and to plan interventions that are student-specific and skill-specific. Teachers in the PLCs practiced scoring writing prompts and taught students how to score them as well.

The PLCs are also used by teachers to develop integrated academic and CT projects as recommended in the *HSTW* TAV report. For example, students reading *Lord of the Flies* were asked to interact in a game of “survivor” as tribes dealing with competitive tasks focused on cultural issues. Students studying Dante’s *Inferno* were charged with developing board games to add excitement and to test comprehension of their reading.

Ava High School has experienced a cultural shift by setting high expectations and connecting students to real-life situations. “Teachers constantly collaborate to find ways to inspire students to prepare for an ever-changing world,” Nash said.

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“The goal from the beginning was to provide all possible services to eliminate the issues that cause students to drop out.”

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Metro Career Academy: An Alternative for At-Risk Students

Metro Technology Centers (MTC) in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, had established six campuses to help high school and adult students gain certification in fields such as aviation, cosmetology, information technology, pre-law and public safety. However, it was not meeting the needs of some young people in danger of dropping out of school and missing out on success.

Superintendent **James Branscum** and Associate Superintendent **Danene Vincent** of MTC set a goal to create **Metro Career Academy** (MCA), a full-service high school for at-risk students in grades nine through 12. In its second year in 2010-2011, the academy already is making a difference.

“Our desire is to work with our sending partner, Oklahoma City Public Schools, to help address the non-graduation rate that was listed as the ninth worst in the nation among urban schools according to the Gates report,” Branscum said. “The cost of non-educated students nationally has been estimated at \$192 billion annually. Based on this estimate, Oklahoma City could recoup more than \$1 million per year for saving 20 students or \$5 million per year for saving 100 students.”

Many Services

MTC leaders used the *HSTW* and *TCTW* school improvement models as they developed plans for the alternative school. “The goal from the beginning was to provide all possible services to eliminate the issues that cause students to drop out,” Vincent said. “Metro Career Academy has a medical staff for student illnesses, child care services for young parents and links to other organizations that can help students succeed.”

The curriculum for the new school was developed by Microsoft and is marketed as Apex Learning. It is a total online curriculum including English/language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, foreign languages and AP courses. All courses are standards-based and involve academic and career preparation. Students are taught integrated academic and career competencies and have opportunities for community service and service learning.

Currently, the academy is focusing on the career areas of entrepreneurship/small business start-up and management; environmental studies; horticulture; and medical, dental and optometric assisting. In addition, juniors and seniors are able to pursue any career field offered at any of the MTC campuses.

Local Partnerships

MCA has developed partnerships with community, educational and business organizations such as Langston University, Boy Scouts of America, the local police department, a dance studio and a credit union.

The academy, which operated from a warehouse-type structure in its first year, has moved into a new 60,000 square foot, \$13 million facility. Enrollment was 180 students in year one and 200 students in year two. The capacity is 400 students.

Built as a complete learning center, MCA features exposed heating and air conditioning ducts and viewing areas to see construction and wiring features inside of the walls. One wing houses a medical clinic to address students’ medical, dental and emotional needs. The facility also contains an optometric clinic, a parent resource center and a mentoring center.

“We are looking for students who are seeking an innovative and challenging curriculum with a work preparation component,” Vincent said. “They may be overage and behind in credits, but they will make progress with instruction that emphasizes hands-on, integrated learning.”

Technology Instructors Change the Way They Reach Students

Technology Centers That Work (*TCTW*) has helped change the way teachers reach students at **Moore Norman Technology Center** (MNTC) in Norman, Oklahoma. Avoiding lock-step instruction, teachers are implementing a variety of strategies that have resulted from the emphasis of school priority teams on high expectations, literacy and numeracy.

Using the *TCTW* model, priority teams address the curriculum and instructional challenges identified by the school leadership team. “Each teacher rotates through each priority team every three months,” said **Bonner Slayton**, literacy specialist at the center. “They complete goals that are developed by the teachers themselves and approved by their division directors.”

In the **high expectations** area, students complete a quarterly self-evaluation of soft skills such as time management, dress and interpersonal skills. They also complete a focused “free write” or stream-of-consciousness piece on how to improve their skills. Students meet quarterly with teachers to discuss performance and to develop ways to improve achievement. “Every student on campus had a one-to-one conference with a teacher in 2009-2010,” Slayton said. Students also make presentations on program-related career fields. Each presentation includes information on career markets, trend research, educational requirements and costs, and interviews with practicing professionals in the field.

For their **literacy** goals, many teachers opt to develop a lesson plan that includes integrating reading and writing into the curriculum. Teachers not only work with a literacy specialist to develop the plan, they also write a reflective piece on the pros and cons of the lesson and its effectiveness. “Teachers tie the lesson plan to what they are already doing in the classroom,” Slayton said. “This allows them to delve deeper into understanding how to implement reading, writing and listening strategies with students at different levels of learning.” To help students experience literacy in real-world situations, teachers assign a number of activities, including mock interviews, self-assessment, a presentation on an employability skill, and simulations of employee training and evaluation. They also make assignments on literacy and critical thinking that require students to use articles from career fields, podcasts, websites and other Internet resources, job shadowing, and field trips.

In the area of **numeracy**, teachers choose how to develop a brainstorming activity that involves mathematics. For example, teachers in the sonography program may ask their health careers students to find information on hypothetical employees and develop a daily schedule. The information includes the number of sonographers, types of exams performed, number of patients, length of exams, amount of time needed to prepare for the next patient, and lunch and break times. Students work in groups to develop a master schedule. “This activity helps students see the importance of numeracy in a career field and allows them to practice their numeracy skills,” Slayton said. Teachers offer lessons in other real-world concepts such as estimation; budgeting; measurement; problem solving; and charts, tables and graphs. Students must orally defend the process of arriving at a solution.



“Teachers tie the lesson plan to what they are already doing in the classroom. This allows them to delve deeper into understanding how to implement reading, writing and listening strategies with students at different levels of learning.”

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Education and Community Partnerships

Schools can break the mold by establishing partnerships with higher education and the community to cultivate students' unique talents, interests and goals.

School and Community Work Together to Produce Work-Ready Graduates

Mary Beth Lykins, counselor at **Claremore High School** (CHS) in Claremore, Oklahoma, says her school checked student data and involved the community in setting up programs to prepare all graduates to be “work-ready” as well as academically equipped for life. The data showed:

- Only 18 of 100 Oklahoma high school graduates complete a college education directly out of high school, even when given extra time. Most Oklahoma graduates pursue CT education, enter the military or go to work.
- Almost half of jobs in the United States are “middle skills” occupations, including clerical, sales, construction, installation/repair, production and transportation/material moving. Estimates are that ample employment opportunities will remain in a variety of good-paying jobs in the middle of the labor market over the next decade and beyond.

Enrollment at CHS totals 1,300 students in grades nine through 12. The school offers challenging academic courses, including 18 AP courses, concurrent study through a local university and two Project Lead The Way programs — engineering and biomedical sciences.

In creating an environment in which all students can provide evidence that they are “ready to work,” Claremore High School and its business and education partners developed a Career Readiness Certificate (CRC) course. Oklahoma has two graduation plans — a standard diploma or a college-prep/work-ready diploma. Students in either plan can choose the CRC class as an elective. “This class has allowed us to fill a need to put ‘work-ready’ into the curriculum,” Lykins said.

Computer Tutor

College-prep students take KeyTrain, a computer tutorial program of basic workplace skills and National Career Readiness Training. Four sections of the course are being offered in 2010-2011.

When work-ready students pass a WorkKeys test, they receive the CRC I and may also qualify for a CRC II. The skills identified for work readiness include applied mathematics; reading for information; and locating information in printed sources, online and/or in person. CRC II focuses more on “soft skills” such as work habits and workplace effectiveness; communication skills, business etiquette and the job search; and listening, observation and teamwork. Both certificates are based on identified performance indicators for students.



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Business and community leaders have volunteered human resources to help students obtain the skills for success. The school uses the 16 nationally identified career clusters to arrange for guest speakers, mentors, tutors and workplace visits. Business representatives also participate in the CHS career fair.

Grading Rubric

CHS uses a grading rubric for workforce readiness classes that addresses students' progress in the course, written reflections of information learned from guest speakers and field trips, participation in developing an online portfolio and attending career fairs, and either a career-related mini-research project or completion of the WorkKeys test.

Lykins used part of a Carl Perkins supplemental grant to pay for the initial three-year lease for KeyTrain and has received an additional grant from Cox Cable to upgrade the package. The local school foundation donated money to pay for a WorkKeys license so that Lykins could give the test at Claremore High School.

The results of this initiative are easily tracked. In a sample of 35 students, all of them jumped at least one level in KeyTrain in one nine-week period. The average increase is two levels in all three areas — applied mathematics, reading for information and locating information.

Seventy-two of 106 participating Claremore seniors earned a CRC in 2009-2010. “We hope to double or triple the number in 2010-2011 when we offer the test to all graduating seniors,” Lykins said. “We even want to offer the experience to the faculty as part of professional development.”

University Works With High Schools to Improve Postsecondary Success and Reduce Remediation

The Arkadelphia, Arkansas, community is supporting a collaborative effort between local high schools and **Henderson State University**, a four-year liberal arts institution. Two years ago, **Arkadelphia High School** and the university developed a model of intervention to improve the success of college freshmen and to reduce remediation of high school graduates on the college campus. The collaboration is showing positive results in easing the transition from high school to college for many students.

The need for such a program was evident in the data: A study found that 59 percent of college freshmen in Arkansas required remediation. The state was spending \$53 million annually to help these students get back on track for a college degree.

When the program began in 2008, a total of 78 Arkadelphia students were eligible to participate. These students planned to pursue a four-year college degree but lacked the scores in one or more academic areas.

Ninth- and 10th-graders whose test results indicate they may struggle in college freshman courses are enrolled in a two-week summer boot camp. These students also participate in the program one Saturday per month at the university, where they can take English, reading, mathematics and study skills-career exploration. Each class is co-taught by one high school teacher and one university faculty member.

During the second year, the program was expanded to include students from other high schools in the area.

Program leaders use the ACT assessments EXPLORE and PLAN to evaluate the effectiveness of the program in helping college freshmen catch up and advance in their studies. The percentage of students showing an increase between their pre-test and post-test scores grew from 68 percent to 74 percent in just one year — from 2008-2009 to 2009-2010.

High school teachers reported that academic performance and classroom behavior of students in the program have improved significantly.

“All of the stakeholders wanted the same thing for students — for them to enter college ready for classes rather than remediation,” said **Virginia Anderson**, director of career education for Arkadelphia Public Schools. “We all pulled together, became active participants and let the students know we supported them.”

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Community Partnerships Help Students Find a Purpose in High School

LaSalle-Peru Township High School (LPHS) in LaSalle, Illinois, is meeting the needs of its changing student population by helping more students find a purpose in high school. By 2012, all students at this Midwestern high school will be combining a college-ready academic core with a high school major.

LPHS serves 1,250 students in grades nine through 12. The student population is 85 percent white, 12 percent Hispanic, 2 percent black and 1 percent Asian. Since 2003, the low-income population at LPHS has more than doubled — from 12 percent to nearly 27 percent. “The Hispanic population is our fastest-growing ethnicity, but low-income students are our fastest growing student group,” said **Steven Wrobleski**, curriculum director at LPHS.

As the only high school in the district, LPHS receives students from eight public middle grades schools and three parochial schools. The largest middle grades school sends approximately 100 to 120 rising ninth-graders each year, while the smallest may send only two or three students. “It’s a real adjustment for incoming freshmen, especially those from small rural schools,” Wrobleski said.

To help more students find relevance in high school, LPHS established concentrations, or majors, following the *HSTW* recommendations:

- A CT concentration includes at least four CT courses in a broad career field, with at least one course at the dual credit level.
- A humanities concentration includes four or more credits in college-prep/honors English and in college-prep/honors social studies, with at least one credit at the AP or dual credit level, and four additional credits in one or more of the humanities, such as foreign language, fine arts or additional literature and social studies courses.
- A concentration in mathematics and science includes four credits each in college-prep/honors mathematics and science, including at least one at the AP or dual credit level.

In the Class of 2013, which includes approximately 300 students, 39 percent have declared a CT major, 34 percent a math/science major and 27 percent a humanities major.

Requiring high school students to complete a major adds focus to learning and helps students connect what they are studying to personal interests and goals, Wrobleski said. “When we say ‘major,’ we’re not pigeonholing students,” he explained. “These majors are above the core requirements. They are the additional credits we want all students to earn so that all students graduate prepared for college and careers.”

The school has started reaching out to the community to provide real-world connections and to make the majors even more meaningful to students’ lives. Before the school year begins, school representatives begin contacting area leaders in business, industry and government to provide information about LPHS’s majors. In January, school leaders make presentations to leadership groups such as the chamber of commerce and civic clubs and sign up local businesses to participate in the Sophomore Career Seminar Day and job-shadowing program.

“Every business we have contacted has wanted to be involved,” Wrobleski said.

Freshman year — Students develop an electronic portfolio in the *Career Cruising* exploratory course in the early fall. In January, students and parents receive information on all majors at Parent Majors Night. Counselors visit all freshman English classes in February before students declare their majors when signing up for 10th-grade courses at the end of the month.

Sophomore year — Students meet with counselors to verify and update their majors and career interests early in the fall semester and complete a career-themed research paper in English class. In the spring, they participate in the Sophomore Career Seminar Day, where they meet in small groups with professionals from career areas such as engineering, journalism, law enforcement or pharmacy. Volunteer business leaders from the community provide information on career opportunities, the high school courses and postsecondary education needed to enter a field, the starting salary ranges in certain fields and the professional satisfaction to be gained from the career. Students receive information in advance and are encouraged to prepare questions for the volunteers.



“We can tell students which courses they need to take, and many students will comply. But when a business leader comes in and speaks directly to students about which classes they will need to do a job, the response is amazing.”

Steven Wrobleski
LaSalle-Peru Township High School

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“Having professionals explain what is needed to prepare for a career field is invaluable to students,” Wroblewski pointed out. “We can tell students which courses they need to take, and many students will comply. But when a business leader comes in and speaks directly to students about which classes they will need to do a job, the response is amazing.”

Sophomore students also participate in job-shadowing activities at local businesses in their chosen career areas. They receive a list of businesses to arrange for a job-shadowing experience on a day when they are out of school due to state testing for 11th-graders.

Junior and senior years — Rising juniors in 2010-2011 will be the first class to graduate with the newly developed majors. As a result, the school has planned several real-world learning opportunities based on the majors. Eleventh- and 12th-graders will work within interdisciplinary teams to solve a local community problem and teachers will assign class projects focusing on the three majors. The school is exploring a senior project and plans to increase internship and work-based learning opportunities.

“All of these experiences and requirements are designed to help students find meaning in their high school studies,” Wroblewski said. “We want our students to see the value of taking the right high school courses. We want them to find relevance in their education.”

LPHS students are already benefitting from increased expectations and a more rigorous curriculum. Since 2005-2006, the school has increased the number of AP and dual credit courses from two to 11. Enrollment in these courses has grown from 60 students in 2005-2006 to 390 students in 2010-2011. With the first class of students required to select a major entering the 11th grade this year, the school expects an even bigger spike in the number of students taking AP and dual credit courses in coming years.

The school’s focus on helping ninth-graders select a major has not gone unnoticed by students. On the 2010 *HSTW* Ninth-Grade Survey, 75 percent of LPHS freshmen reported that they and their parents met with a counselor or a teacher to review the courses they planned to take during high school, compared with an average of 51 percent of ninth-graders at schools across the *HSTW* network. Nearly 90 percent of LPHS ninth-graders said a teacher or a counselor talked to them individually about planning for a career or further education after high school, compared with only 56 percent across the network.

Wroblewski encourages schools wanting to build community partnerships to start small and to make personal contacts with local businesses. “We wanted to ensure we got it right so that community leaders would have a good experience and the program would spread by word of mouth,” he said. Future plans call for juniors and seniors who attend Sophomore Career Seminar Day to explain firsthand to local businesses why the program is so important to the school and the community.

Using Technology

Schools are making greater use of technology in authentic projects and problem-based learning to engage students in their studies.

Edmodo and Diigo: Technology for Teachers and Students

Computers, cell phones, tweets, blogs — Today’s high school students have more communication technology at their fingertips than existed when many of their teachers began teaching.

How can teachers use technology as an asset rather than a distraction in the classroom? **Lisa Byrd**, an English and CT teacher at **Cutter Morning Star High School** in Hot Springs, Arkansas, uses social networking sites Edmodo and Diigo to connect with and instruct her students.

Diigo is a free social bookmarking tool that allows teachers to tag and save specific websites and share them with students in online groups and communities. In this way, the teacher can point students to research materials that are reliable and appropriate. According to Web analysts, these social bookmarks prevent students from “searching for that needle in a haystack.” As students read the information on the bookmarked site, they can electronically highlight pertinent information and add annotative sticky notes to the text. Highlights and notes remain on the site until the students remove them.

Byrd also uses Diigo to create her own library of links to sites related to her classroom and profession: theme openers, interactive writing prompts, digital citizenship, grants for teachers of writing, blogs and teacher resources. On her blog, Byrd provides a personal profile and contact information, a classroom calendar for students, useful links and class photos. In addition, she features a “Word of the Week” and a weekly student blog.

The Edmodo social learning network for teachers and students is also free. Byrd creates a password-secure classroom group and uses a variety of applications: real-time messaging, privacy control, assignments and grading, stored and shared files, a class calendar, shared links, and a document viewer. She is able to make an assignment, grade it and give students results and feedback, all online. She can also connect with other teachers.

“Edmodo is a virtual classroom that students can access from any Internet connection,” Byrd said. After uploading the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet*, she asked teams of students to write an updated “tweet” as a character from the play. Students then uploaded links to their assignments.

Just as the interactive SMART Boards of today are better than the overhead projectors of yesterday, the “backpack technology” available to 21st-century students is enhancing the pen-and-paper methods of the past. “Teachers who incorporate advances in communication technology into their classrooms are ensuring that learning is relevant and students are motivated to achieve,” Byrd said.

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Virtual Learning Helps Students Stay on Target for Graduation

Students cite a variety of reasons that they cannot attend school regularly and remain on course for graduation. Some students are typically at risk. Many are victims of temporary circumstances. Still others want to move ahead at a faster pace.

With the increasing availability of technological tools, the educational needs of some high school students are being met through “virtual learning” rather than traditional classroom instruction. Schools are helping these students succeed through technology that provides the high-quality content the students are missing. Instead of being at risk of dropping out, a number of students are completing their studies online.

Various electronic learning services are available to help schools and teachers meet their goals for high-quality teaching, high student performance and a strong, supportive environment for every student. Districts, schools and teachers are integrating the Kentucky Department of Education’s Kentucky Virtual Schools (KYVS) network services into their programs to provide:

- access to an expanded curriculum for every student.
- AP and foreign language courses.
- options for credit recovery.
- increased instructional support for at-risk students.
- expanded choices for gifted and talented students.
- professional development to build instructional capacity.

Tresine Logsdon, Kentucky Online Teacher of the Year and virtual learning coordinator at **Henry Clay High School** in Lexington, Kentucky, said virtual learning helps fill the needs of students at her school. “Some students may be disengaged, distracted and/or disruptive until they discover how to overcome their difficulties by studying online,” she said. “When students fall into the cycle of missing school and falling farther behind, virtual learning lets them catch up and keep up without becoming overwhelmed and out of control.”

Other students may be doing okay but want to get ahead. One 17-year-old student who benefitted from online learning said, “I’m really drawn to technology. In the traditional system, classes move only as fast as the slowest student. I like being able to progress at my own pace and learn things that are not being taught in the classroom.”

Amanda Wright, director of **BAVEL** — the Barren (County) Academy of Virtual and Expanded Learning in Glasgow, Kentucky — said the school serves students from many districts across the state. More than 70 students have graduated from high school as a result of the program, which was established six years ago and has grown steadily.



“Online learning is not for every student, but neither is face-to-face learning. Kentucky is taking action to meet the needs of all students.”

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One story illustrates the unusual circumstances that might cause students to need the services of virtual learning. A student’s father was severely injured in an auto accident, requiring the student to seek an alternate way to keep up with his studies while staying at the hospital for an extended period. Like many other students who participate in virtual learning, this student returned to regular classes when his father’s condition improved.

Available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, online learning enables students to study when they can at school, home, the library or any other location with Internet access to accelerate learning or make up credits. The teachers hold Kentucky certification and are highly qualified, and the courses meet state and national curriculum standards.

“Online learning is not for every student, but neither is face-to-face learning,” Logsdon said. “Kentucky is taking action to meet the needs of all students.”

Urban Fiction + 21st-Century Technology = Students Turned On to Reading and Learning

When media specialist **Anita Teel** arrived at **Siloam Springs High School** (SSHS) in Siloam Springs, Arkansas, five years ago, she was dismayed at the small number of books that had been checked out of the library during the previous year. The school's 1,163 students had checked out only 300 books over the course of the year.

"I was determined to find a way to hook students on reading," Teel said. Remembering a success story from a conference she had attended, Teel investigated building a library of "urban fiction" — a genre likely to appeal to SSHS students. "I believed that if we could get students to read books that interested them, we could coax them into reading a broader range of printed materials," Teel said.

Book Trailers

English teachers **Kelle Meeker** and **Anna Williams** teamed up with Teel to introduce books that would appeal to students. To entice students to read the books, the teachers assigned them to make "book trailers" using Animoto, a Web application that produces videos from photos, video clips and music provided by the user. A book trailer is much like a movie trailer or preview. The intent is to advertise the book by creating a short video that depicts the main theme in pictures, words and music while conveying the overall emotional impact of the book.

Students went to animoto.com, where they uploaded PowerPoint slides and unlicensed music. "Educators can get free Animoto accounts that will allow students to make short movies at no cost," Teel said.

Connecting to More Genres

The project was a success. Students were interested in the books and enjoyed making the trailers — they even asked to read more books. By the end of the year, they had checked out more than 4,500 books from the school library and teachers' personal collections.

English teachers were able to make connections between traditional literary works and urban fiction through the use of "pairing." For example, the teachers connected Huxley's *Brave New World* with *Unwind* by Neal Shusterman; Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* with both *Rominette and Julio* by Sharon Draper and *Son of the Mob* by Gordon Korman; and *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien with *A Long Way Gone* by Ishmael Beah.

"Students would read both books in a pair and discuss how the common theme of the two books was addressed from different points of view," Meeker said. "This strategy has made the classics more accessible to students and more engaging by helping them refer back to other books they have read."

Expanding the Project

As a result of the project, the teachers have modified their assignments to include other engaging technology such as Glogster (glogster.com), a social network for creating free interactive posters or glogs. Short for graphical blog, a glog is an interactive multimedia image that looks like a poster but allows readers to interact with the content. Students also use Wordle (wordle.com) to generate "word clouds" to give greater prominence to words in a text.

The SSHS library is connected to Library Thing (librarything.com), a social cataloging Web application for storing and sharing personal library catalogs and book lists. "Library Thing makes it easy for students to find books based on their interests, check availability of books and blog about what they have read," Teel said.

Teel did offer a word of caution to those interested in this strategy of connecting students to more books: The urban fiction genre often addresses controversial subjects such as drugs, violence and gangs. Teel suggests that schools form a committee that includes parents and community representatives to help teachers investigate and select books in this category.

In 2010, SSHS was named one of the top 100 high-implementation *HSTW* sites in the network and a Pacesetter School.



"I believed that if we could get students to read books that interested them, we could coax them into reading a broader range of printed materials."

Anita Teel
Siloam Springs High School

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Students Sing the Praises of Using Technology in a Mathematics Classroom

Tess Rivero, mathematics teacher and department chair at **Waynesville High School** in rural Waynesville, Ohio, uses modern technology applications to prepare students for college and careers. Rivero believes every class should employ a website, YouTube videos and math blogs to improve student learning.

“When you get to college, everything will be online except parking,” she tells her students.

Rivero has attached an ELMO document camera to a computer to capture classroom notes, which she posts immediately following each class. “Putting the notes online takes minimal time,” Rivero said. “Using the free Weebly editor, it’s as easy as attaching and uploading an e-mail attachment.”

When checking for understanding of a math concept, Rivero allows students to discuss the solutions with a partner and then write their questions on the SMART Board for her to address.

Rivero created a YouTube channel where she uploads short videos (no more than five minutes) to demonstrate how to work math problems or to review quizzes and test solutions. “Videos are a differentiated instructional tool, because students can watch as many times as needed, using the rewind and pause buttons,” Rivero said. Some of the videos offer professional development for teachers in how to use technology in all classrooms. (To view the videos, including professional development videos on how to use technology in all courses, go to www.youtube.com/spartanmath.)

Students also learn how to access their textbooks online at www.classzone.com. Rivero uses poll daddy.com to put student surveys on the classroom website, where students can view results and comments.

To incorporate writing into mathematics, Rivero has set up blogs on the class website where students can post their reactions to topics provided by the teacher. For example, students wrote blogs to critique projects from a recent math fair. Rivero reviews and approves the students’ blogs before they are posted.

In a recent blog, Rivero’s students wrote about the many benefits of using technology to learn math and to prepare for a technology-rich working environment in the future. Here are some of the students’ views:

- *Technology is a HUGE help in the classroom. I use the website to print and look at the teacher’s notes. I can see what I may have missed in taking notes in the classroom and can see what I missed when I was absent. I can complete my homework even if I miss a day.*

- *The use of technology has definitely increased my understanding of mathematics. I could read about math all day and never understand it until it is demonstrated. When technology is available, why not use it to make learning easier and more interesting? Using technology in high school is great preparation for future jobs and the future in general.*
- *Interactive SMART Boards have helped me learn mathematics. I am able to see everything worked out in front of me — even the calculator comes up on the screen — and then refer back to parts that I didn’t understand. The class notes are posted on the teacher’s website so that I can access them on my own time. Students know they can print out the notes later, so they pay more attention to the lesson being taught and absorb more of the material rather than take notes.*
- *The online notes are neatly organized for easy access to lessons from any day. Having access to online notes makes it easier to complete homework assignments, study or refresh your knowledge of a topic. The videos show how to complete a problem step-by-step online.*
- *I check the teacher’s website regularly to look for extra credit information and helpful links. The online notes are the best part — I can find and print off exactly what was written on the SMART Board during class. If I forget to write down a homework assignment, don’t take notes on a particularly difficult problem or want to look back at something we did three months ago, the website has everything I need. It is also very helpful when I am tutoring other students and need to review what they have been going over in class. Teachers do a better job if they present the material electronically and students are more engaged in learning when they can use the SMART Board rather than a blackboard and chalk.*
- *The website, online notes and videos have helped my mathematics knowledge tremendously. Being able to read the teacher’s notes online at any time doubles the amount of information I retain from the lesson. When I was on vacation, I was able to use the technology to bring up the first summer assignment and begin to work on it on the plane ride home.*

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Technology Center Teaches Good Work Habits Online and in the Classroom

Leaders and instructors at **National Park Technology Center** (NPTC) in Hot Springs, Arkansas, are committed to the idea that teaching good work habits will result in better students, employees and citizens. Therefore, NPTC students are exposed to eight major habits of success via computers and classroom instruction throughout the year.

This member of SREB's *TCTW* improvement initiative is a half-time facility for career-oriented high school students. The center was one of only four centers in the network to receive the 2010 *TCTW* Gold Readiness Award from SREB.

The computer program at NPTC is CHAMPION, which uses the ANGEL online learning platform and is available on any computer with Internet access, in school or away from school. CHAMPION was developed in-house by **Jason Hudnell**, assistant director of NPTC, who conducts professional development workshops for schools wanting to incorporate work ethics into the curriculum.

Students from the career-based internship program help Hudnell research current events to promote positive characteristics. "Having students find articles and videos keeps the program fresh and relevant to this generation," Hudnell said.

"We like the online approach because it saves class time, provides consistency, allows all of the habits to be taught schoolwide and increases the use of technology while helping students prepare for an online world," Hudnell said. The skills are applicable to any career field.

The name CHAMPION is derived from the following attributes of better performance:

ATTENDANCE

CHARACTER

ATTITUDE

TEAMWORK

RESPECT

PRODUCTIVITY

ORGANIZATION

PROFESSIONALISM

- **Attendance** — Students learn to attend class every day and to be on time. Doing so yields benefits for individual students, the class and the school.
- **Character** — Students are taught to maintain honest behavior, be trustworthy in all situations and demonstrate self-discipline.
- **Attitude** — Students learn to exhibit self-confidence and to compliment others on their achievements.
- **Teamwork** — Students are taught to be respectful of others' rights, to be cooperative and to be good team players. They are expected to honor confidentiality and to be mannerly and courteous.
- **Respect** — Students learn to follow directions, observe safety rules and procedures, and conserve materials.
- **Organization** — Students are taught to prioritize their work, handle stress appropriately and complete all work in a neat and orderly manner.
- **Professionalism** — Students learn to maintain a professional appearance, use appropriate language and conduct positive interactions with others.

A lesson on a different work ethic is updated and posted each month. Students are able to access the program from any computer in the building and are given opportunities to work on the lessons during class throughout the month.

Instructors are dedicated to teaching the concepts and often use situations from the real world to explore ethics with their students. Human resources directors from local businesses are invited to come to the center to discuss the importance of the CHAMPION characteristics. The professionals bring videos and real-life scenarios of poor work habits exhibited on the job. "Having someone besides the instructor to stress the importance of good employment traits goes a long way in driving the point home," Hudnell said.



"One of the hardest things to instill in an adult is a good work ethic. If we begin in school, graduates are more apt to come to the workplace ready for work."

Human Resources Manager
City of Hot Springs

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Students show comprehension of the CHAMPION material through quizzes and monitored online discussions. Testaments to the effectiveness of the program come from employers in the community. “One of the hardest things to instill in an adult is a good work ethic,” said the human resources manager for the City of Hot Springs. “If we begin in school, graduates are more apt to come to the workplace ready for work.”

Instructor Sets High Expectations for Students in the Digital Age

Thomas Jacobs, graphic communications instructor at **Central Nine Career Center** in Greenwood, Indiana, uses technology to raise classroom expectations — not just to the level that schools identify for student success but to the even higher level that students have set for themselves.

Central Nine is a shared-time center enrolling more than 1,450 sophomores, juniors and seniors from nine area high schools. The student population is 91 percent white, 4 percent Hispanic, 3 percent black and 2 percent other ethnicities.

Most of the school’s 25 CT programs provide dual credit courses and options for earning industry certification — ensuring that graduates are prepared for college and careers. Central Nine received a *TCTW* Gold Improvement Award in 2010 for improving the percentages of students at the Proficient level by at least 10 percentage points in all three subjects of the *HSTW* Assessment (reading, mathematics and science).

Students Expect More

Pointing to a nationwide disconnect between what students expect and what schools are providing, Jacobs said students want instant feedback, real-time test results and reviews, direct access to information, and the freedom to work at their own pace. “I changed my mind set,” he said, “and decided to do whatever it takes to meet the expectations of students in my classroom.”

Jacobs teaches a graphic communications curriculum that includes **rigorous reading and writing assignments** based on the graphic-imaging industry. He has created **weekly online exams** with **instant feedback** upon completion. The online program automatically randomizes all questions so that students cannot look at other students’ computers to find the answers. Students receive **podcasts** related to course work and **regular e-mail messages**.

Complex Assignments

Project-based learning is another substantial change that Jacobs has made in raising expectations in the classroom. The numbers and types of projects that students are expected to complete have grown tremendously. The projects are more demanding also. “From watching students play video games, I saw that they are most interested in games that are challenging and complex. As soon as they beat the game, they move on to another game,” Jacobs said.

“Classroom assignments do not necessarily have to be difficult, but they need to be complex, with multiple levels and steps for students to complete,” Jacobs explained.

At the beginning of the course, Jacobs places all assignments for

the year on the class website. Students can work through the projects at their own pace and in any order. Some are team projects. Some require two to three weeks to complete, while others require only a day or two, but all have multiple steps for students to work through.

Jacobs has raised expectations not only for the types of assignments students complete but also for the number of assignments. In 2006-2007, he assigned 10 complex projects in one semester, along with a portfolio. All students completed all of the projects, so he decided to increase the requirements. He assigned 14 projects and a portfolio in 2007-2008; 17 projects and a portfolio in 2008-2009; and 22 projects and a portfolio, along with two schoolwide initiatives that required extra time out of class, in 2009-2010. Only two students were unable to complete all projects on time in 2009-2010.

They Can Do It

“Students are telling me that they can do these assignments — and more,” Jacobs said. In 2010-2011, students in the graphic communications course are being assigned 25 complex projects and a portfolio.

In addition to listing all project assignments online, Jacobs provides detailed rubrics to ensure that students fully understand, from the beginning of the assignment, the level of work required to earn a good grade. “Of some 980 projects completed in 2009-2010, I did not have a single student come back and ask me why he or she got a certain grade,” Jacobs said. “They knew which parts of the rubric they had satisfied before they turned in their projects.”

Jacobs also provides opportunities and requirements for students to redo work that is below standard. “Students know up front that mediocre work is not acceptable,” he said.

Some teachers cautioned Jacobs that students would drop out of the program if he raised expectations too high. **On the contrary, enrollment in the graphic communications program has risen as the number of assignments has increased. Enrollment has grown steadily from 32 students in 2006-2007 to 112 students in 2010-2011.**

“If we don’t meet students’ expectations, they become bored and we start to lose them,” Jacobs said. “I don’t want to lose any students — not from the program, not from the center and certainly not from high school.”

Contact:

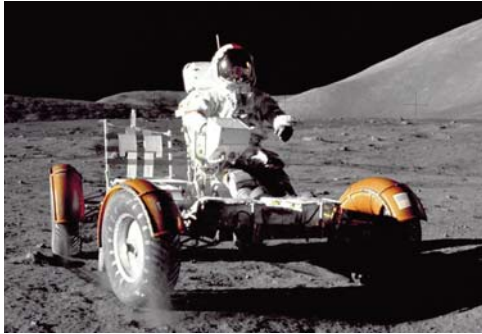
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Students Collaborate in Using Technology to Produce Award-Winning Projects

The **Huntsville Center for Technology** (HCT) in Huntsville, Alabama, is fulfilling its mission to provide academic and workplace knowledge and skills in preparation for successful employment and continued learning. What students are learning is not only world-class but “out of this world.”

Two major undertakings illustrate the role of technology in projects and problem-based learning at the school. The first is a project that has HCT students working side-by-side with NASA engineers to develop a new space station valve. “NASA contacted us because of the school’s commitment to and experience with space technology, as well as our students’ ability to innovate and our teachers’ use of project-based learning to underscore the link between academics and career/tech,” said **Eddie Turner**, director of career/technical education for Huntsville City Schools. The second project — the Great Moonbuggy Race — has been ongoing for almost a decade, during which the school has distinguished itself as a leader in student-produced outcomes.



The project gives students opportunities to acquire hands-on experiences while combining a number of career skills such as precision machining, drafting and design, computer electronics, and automotive and electrical technology.

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“When the school first entered the competition, parents were calling to find out what was going on with their students,” Turner said. “Students were spending evenings at the school, visiting the library, studying late into the night and getting up early each morning to work on the project,” he explained.

The project gives students opportunities to acquire hands-on experiences while combining a number of career skills such as precision machining, drafting and design, computer electronics, and automotive and electrical technology.

Not only did the project transform student behavior, improve attendance and raise achievement, but it also helped the faculty work together as a team and communicate back and forth as never before. “The project resulted in a focused commitment to the project, to critical thinking, to efficient use of time, and to the integration of academic and career/technical education and the real world,” Turner said.

The Great Moonbuggy Race is an annual competition for high school and college teams from throughout the world. It was developed and organized by the Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville to inspire a new generation of explorers, engineers and scientists.

Teams of students design and build vehicles to race across a simulated lunar surface, complete with craters, rocks, lava ridges, inclines and faux lunar soil. For months, they fine-tune their vehicles while strengthening their skills in mathematics, science and engineering.

Each moonbuggy must fit into a four-foot by four-foot box when a team carries it to the starting line. Each vehicle is human-powered by two students — one male and one female — who must be part of the team that built the buggy.

The Huntsville Center for Technology has entered the competition for the past nine years. “The first year was miserable,” Turner said, “but the students learned from their mistakes and have dominated the competition for the past six years.” HCT won first place three times, came in second twice and took third place three times.

“In fact, our team has performed better than college teams,” Turner said. “We have finished the race in under four minutes, compared with college teams that have taken more than five minutes. Some of the college teams have asked for advice from our students on how to improve their speed.”

The winning team each year receives free tuition to the week-long Space Camp program in Huntsville. Awards are presented for best design, most unique and most improved buggies in the race.

Leaders and Teachers Using Innovative Methods

Schools are developing and supporting principals, teacher-leaders and teachers who can pioneer new ways to improve school and classroom practices.

Teachers View Themselves in the Classroom to Improve Instructional Growth

Saturday morning film reviews are a staple of high school football. Coaches and players watch the games to find what worked and didn't work the night before in preparing for the next game.

They pause and rewind the action, talk about how to improve their performance and identify the fundamentals that need attention during the coming week of practice.

Borrowing this successful strategy from the sports world, **Iroquois High School Magnet Career Academy** in Louisville, Kentucky, has launched an innovative program that involves teachers in viewing their actions in the classroom to improve teaching and learning.

Iroquois is an urban school with 1,100 students and 91 teachers. More than 90 percent of students are economically disadvantaged and a large percentage are special education students. Many students are children of immigrant families, with more than 16 languages spoken among the student population. The school is affected by high levels of student transiency.

Making Gains

In 2009, only 38 percent of Iroquois students scored at the Proficient level on the state reading assessment and only 25 percent on the mathematics assessment. While much remains to be done, the school is making gains. Students improved slightly in writing and made major improvements on the state mathematics, science and social studies exams in 2009.

School leaders have engaged in a major effort to improve the instructional practices of teachers, many of whom are young and inexperienced. Leaders believe the teachers are committed and even passionate but lack some of the skills that would result in higher student achievement.

To address this problem, school leaders began including teachers in twos and threes on learning walks around the building. A couple of years ago, the administrators tried videotaping some lessons, but teachers felt vulnerable and the level of discussion was superficial. Nonetheless, Principal **Joey Riddle** and Assistant Principal **Chris Perkins** were convinced that it would benefit teachers to watch and comment on their own lessons.

Web Hosting

In 2009-2010 the school hired Mastery Mavens, a software company, to host digital videos of teachers' lessons. Riddle has handled the contractual aspects while working with the company to refine the purpose and focus of using technology. Perkins is the school's main point of contact regarding usability, layout design, technical details, video transference and requests for modified features.

The Web hosting platform offered two key advantages over other solutions: First, a viewer can pause during the viewing to enter a time-stamped comment or to attach a document (such as a lesson plan) or an external link. Second, the person who uploaded the video can give permission for someone else to view it. Given the reluctance of teachers to open themselves up to observation and criticism, this was a key feature. "The cost of the service is reasonable — far less than adding a coaching position or pursuing other professional development options," Riddle said.

In promoting the program to the teachers, Riddle used a 16-year-old videotape of himself as a first-year teacher in the classroom. He and Perkins reviewed the lesson and commented on what they saw — pointing out that Riddle spent too much time with his back turned to the students, tended to call on the same students repeatedly and did other things that failed to advance the lesson.

Riddle's willingness to use himself as an example underscored the facts that everyone has to start somewhere and that the administrators were not asking teachers to do what they were not willing to do themselves. The teachers observed the technology and were encouraged to participate in the program. "No one was required to participate, and teachers have complete control over who can review their classroom performances," Perkins said.



"Videotaped lessons have become an important tool to help the young teaching staff at Iroquois improve their practice."

Joey Riddle

Iroquois High School Magnet Career Academy

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Some of the better teachers in the school started asking to be taped so that they could improve in instructional areas where they were stumped. As teachers saw that their more respected and experienced peers were participating, the program began to pick up momentum.

- One first-year teacher thought he was doing great, but he found that he was boring. He failed to understand that student compliance does not equal learning. Although camera-shy, he agreed to participate if the camera focused only on students. He was the only person who had access to the results. After watching his performance, he told the assistant principal that it was so bad that, “If I was a kid, I would have jumped out the window.” He saw that he needed to make some serious changes to engage his students in learning.
- Another young teacher feared having an administrator watch her class. The assistant principal said she could delete the results afterwards if she wished; it was her choice. When the teacher watched what was happening in her classroom, she saw some students being challenged but others not working very hard. As a result, she asked teachers she trusted to watch and give her some practical solutions.

In only a few months, Iroquois was transformed from a school where teachers did not welcome administrators in the classroom to a school where teachers want to be videotaped and ask their colleagues to watch and comment. A total of 90 lessons have been posted and reviewed on the website. By the end of 2009-2010, more than a third of teachers were active users of the system. The demand is such that teachers must reserve the video camera in advance.

“Videotaped lessons have become an important tool to help the young teaching staff at Iroquois improve their practice,” Riddle said.

Coaching Helps New Career/Technical Teachers Become Engaging Instructors

Susquehanna County Career and Technology Center in Dimock, Pennsylvania, serves students from seven area schools. Its programs of study include automotive technology, carpentry and cabinetmaking, building/property management, business education, cosmetology, food processing/production/services, health care technology and cooperative education/diversified occupations.

To help new CT teachers come up to speed, the school hired an instructional coach — **Dan Perna** of James Daniel and Associates in Shamokin Dam, Pennsylvania. Perna says a school must have a clearly defined vision of what it wants to accomplish through coaching: *Where do I want my teachers to be and how do I help them get there?*

“The coach’s first line of responsibility is to the teacher,” Perna said. “A coach needs to build trust so that he can keep an open dialogue with teachers. He or she must be a leader, highly self-reflective, patient and willing to recognize others’ strengths and abilities.”

Perna’s role at Susquehanna was to provide support to enhance the skills, resources and creativity of teachers in putting new knowledge and effective strategies to good use in the classroom. The entire faculty participated in coaching sessions once a week and Perna gave individual attention to teachers in the areas of program design, curriculum design, assessment practices and professional development on how to actively engage students in learning through literacy and differentiated instruction.

“Our teachers arrive with different levels of teaching experience,” said Administrative Director **Alice Davis**.

“They are experts in their field, but we need to help them unlock their knowledge in the classroom and the lab.”

Perna and Davis met frequently to discuss how to help teachers get where they needed to be. “Dr. Perna was a valuable resource in coaching our new teachers to integrate literacy and numeracy into the curriculum,” Davis said. “Our technology teachers are available to assist all teachers in integrating technology,” she continued. “We know technology engages students in learning.”

Davis said new teachers find a cohesive faculty at Susquehanna and are comfortable asking for help from colleagues in preparing lessons that will mean something to students.

The school provides the following evidence that coaching helped raise student achievement: The percentage of students scoring at the advanced level on the National Occupational Competency Testing Institute (NOCTI) exams rose from 69 percent in 2009 to 72 percent in 2010.

Susquehanna financed the coaching services primarily through grants. If a grant was not available, the activity became a line item in the regular budget.

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Leading the Way to Rigorous Schools and Classrooms

Rigor is a critical component of school improvement, but leading teachers to increase rigor in the classroom can be a challenge.

Barbara Blackburn of the **Blackburn Consulting Group** in Fletcher, North Carolina, defines rigor as “...creating an environment in which each student is expected to learn at high levels, each student is supported so that he or she can learn at high levels, and each student demonstrates learning at high levels.”

In conjunction with **Ron Williamson** of **Eastern Michigan University** in Ypsilanti, Blackburn advocates a COMPASS model for leading change:

C is for Culture — Conduct a quick assessment of your school culture by talking with students and staff, observing patterns of behavior and/or considering your own behavior. What evidence of rigorous work do you see? What excites students about learning? Do you show your enthusiasm for achievement?

Assess the indicators of culture at your school and use the findings to improve educational rigor. Do you have a set of routines and rituals to communicate the value of rigor? How do you identify and celebrate individuals who have high expectations and contribute to students’ success? What stories and tales do you tell to emphasize your commitment to the success of every student? How do you recognize and reward teachers who reflect the school’s commitment to rigor?

O is for Ownership and Shared Vision — Consensus can be powerful but sometimes difficult to achieve. Tools such as “Fist to Five” from Adventure Associates are available to help groups seek common ground.

M is for Managing Data — Collect data on whether instruction at your school reflects a belief that all students can learn at high levels. Look at the characteristics of curriculum, instruction, assessment and environment in measuring the degree of rigor at your school. For example, the curriculum should be aligned with national and international standards, incorporate higher-order thinking skills, focus on the application of knowledge, and provide opportunities for students to relate learning to their own lives and to the real world. Instruction should offer opportunities for all students to engage in higher-level learning and to apply what they have learned.

P is for Professional Development — Does professional development on rigor relate to the school’s goals and students’ needs? How does it connect with other initiatives at the school? What are the expected outcomes in terms of teacher practice and student learning? Develop action steps and a timeline. Identify support and materials needed to accomplish each step. Move forward after reflecting on and refining the plan.

A is for Advocacy — Talk with district leaders about the importance of offering a more challenging and wide-ranging curriculum to prepare all students for success in life after high school. Refer to the large numbers of high school graduates having to take remedial courses in college. Mention that the level of courses taken in high school is directly related to success in college and the workplace.

S is for Shared Accountability — Leaders and teachers should be accountable to rigor through everyday routines, supervisory practices, professional development, interaction with families and the community, and what is conveyed and taught to students.

S is for Structures to Support Success — Schools can help students achieve at a higher level through common planning, parallel scheduling, shared classes, faculty meetings, the daily schedule and professional development days for teams of teachers to collaborate. Schools should develop systems of extra help and support tailored to local circumstances.

“Students need challenging assignments to improve learning, as well as clear standards and rubrics to help them master the assignments,” Blackburn said. “With these structures in place, rigorous schoolwide change is inevitable at the student level, the teacher level and the administrative level.”

Note: Material for this article was excerpted from the books *Rigor is NOT a Four-Letter Word* and *Rigorous Schools and Classrooms: Leading the Way*. Both are published by Eye on Education at www.eyeoneducation.com.



“Students need challenging assignments to improve learning, as well as clear standards and rubrics to help them master the assignments.”

Barbara Blackburn
Blackburn Consulting Group

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Does National Board Certification Make a Difference?

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) was created in 1987. Its first policy statement, *What Teachers Should Know and Be Able to Do*, set forth a vision for accomplished teaching to prepare students for the 21st century.

NBPTS standards and National Board Certification give teachers and schools a way to define and measure instructional excellence. NBPTS standards are based on five core propositions:

- Teachers are committed to students and their learning.
- Teachers know the subjects they teach and how to teach those subjects to students.
- Teachers are responsible for managing and monitoring student learning.
- Teachers think systematically about their practice and learn from experience.
- Teachers are members of learning communities.

“The most rewarding thing I’ve done professionally was to become a National Board Certified Teacher,” says **Peggy Brookins**, director of the Engineering and Manufacturing Institute of Technology at **Forest High School** in Ocala, Florida. “I was doing a good job, but certification challenged me to show my depth of knowledge and to examine and improve my teaching so that I could realize my full potential.”

Brookins said the certification process strengthened her ability to prepare in-depth lessons involving synthesis, analysis and use of prior knowledge. “Completing the process has allowed me to reach my goal as an instructor to have Socratic conversations with students about mathematics,” she said. “I can truly say my students are problem solvers.”

As part of the certification process, teachers complete 10 assessments that are reviewed by trained teachers in their certificate areas. The assessments include four portfolio entries featuring teaching practices and six constructed response exercises to assess content knowledge.

In a survey of National Board Certified Teachers, 92 percent said the process made them better teachers, and 89 percent said it equipped them to create stronger curricula and better evaluate student learning (Yankelovich, 2001).

National Board Certification can be a valuable experience for teachers, whether or not they achieve certification. These teachers can apply what they have learned to classroom instruction and can improve their ability to increase student learning (Lustick and Sykes, 2006; Rotberg, Futrell and Lieberman, 1998).



“Research has shown that students of certified teachers exhibit stronger writing abilities, better comprehension and integration of complex classroom material, better understanding of concepts and more abstract thinking than students of non-certified teachers.”

Linda Cavalluzzo
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Linda Cavalluzzo, managing director of CNA, a nonprofit research and analysis institution in Alexandria, Virginia, conducted a congressionally mandated review of National Board Certification. “After studying different subgroups of teachers, students and schools, we found that students of National Board Certified teachers perform better than students of non-certified teachers,” she said.

“Research has shown that students of certified teachers exhibit stronger writing abilities, better comprehension and integration of complex classroom material, better understanding of concepts and more abstract thinking than students of non-certified teachers,” Cavalluzzo said.

More information is available at www.nbpts.org and www.cna.org.

This newsletter of “best practices” in implementing the *High Schools That Work (HSTW)*, *Making Middle Grades Work (MMGW)* and *Technology Centers That Work (TCTW)* school improvement models is based on presentations at the 24th Annual HSTW Staff Development Conference in Louisville, Kentucky, in July 2010.

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