

How Should High School Change? These Districts May Have the Answer

They're creating space for work-based learning—and inspiring their states in the process



By [Elizabeth Heubeck](#) — September 30, 2024 ⌚ 12 min read



— Katie Thomas for Education Week

Chesterton, Ind. -

The traditional structure of American high schools has looked fairly similar for several decades: Students sit in rows of small, square desks with a teacher at the head of the class, for approximately seven hours a day, five days a week, 180 days per year.

It's a model that seems to work for fewer and fewer high school students, as evidenced by recent data showing climbing rates of chronic absenteeism, increasingly disengaged students, historically low rates of college readiness among high school seniors, and declining college enrollment.

These troubling indicators have been percolating for years, and educators, reform advocates, and policymakers have gone through countless iterations of high school reform strategies. Now, though, the fallout of the pandemic has made the need for policymakers and school officials to think about high school differently especially acute.

"I remember having conversations with district administrators and school leaders as we were just starting to come out of the pandemic. I was asking people, 'What do you want? What do you hope we can do differently coming out of this, so we don't just snap back to normal?' And the most common response I had from people was that we need to rethink high school," said Robin Lake, the director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education, a research organization at Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College.

It's not that everything high schools are doing is flawed, but rather that the landscape of post-secondary options that they now hand students off to is far more varied and complex than it used to be—and many high schools haven't started wrestling with what that means for their day-to-day work.

Students' options are, paradoxically, both more wide-open—think the gig economy and industry-specific credentials—while somehow also more difficult to attain: College is more expensive than ever, and in the long term, many jobs will require discipline-specific skills and training rather than a more general education.

In some pockets of the nation, real and significant change to the high school experience is underway or on the verge of implementation. States such as Colorado, Delaware, and Indiana are actively working on policies to help transform the high school experience. Some individual districts have gotten a head start by overhauling curriculum to align with in-demand industries and building local industry partnerships to develop internship pipelines.

Among the plans and policies that aim to reimagine the high school experience, most lean into a few key features deemed essential to driving impactful change: namely, experiential learning and a broad array of curriculum options that expose students to subjects with direct ties to career pathways.

But unlike previous attempts at revitalizing high school, the new efforts need to be both rigorous and flexible—providing new options and opportunities while not precluding students from eventually going to higher education if they choose.

Could a reimagined high school experience benefit both students and states?

Where it all might lead could look something like what Chesterton High School in Chesterton, Ind., has added over the last four years. The school of about 2,000 students has long had traditional career and technical education programming and a teacher-cadet option for students interested in becoming teachers (its version of a “grow-your-own” teacher program). Now, it’s added another option, creating room in the course schedule for seniors to spend interning.

When Abby Ailes first walked into her internship at a local engineering and surveying firm, the Duneland Group, the Chesterton High School senior knew very little about the process of building a home, let alone how to develop construction site plans for an entire neighborhood. But soon, the industry jargon made sense to her, as did the lines on the computer screen that represented construction plans she would soon learn to generate. Toward the end of her internship, she created a site plan for a five-unit house.



Charlie Ray helps Abby Ailes, 17, an intern, in the offices of Duneland Group engineering firm in Chesterton, Ind., on June 4, 2024. Ailes is among the seniors at Chesterton High School who participate in an extensive work internship.

— Eric Davis for Education Week

Abby, now a freshman at Purdue University Northwest in the school's Construction and Engineering Technology Management program, said that she took an introductory engineering class as a junior in high school, but it didn't compare to what she learned in her internship.

"We worked on making blocks in class, expanded blocks, a cube," she said. "Here, we make real things."

Chip Pettit, the superintendent of the Duneland School Corporation, the K-12 district near Lake Michigan that runs Chesterton High, in 2019 challenged the school to get at least 50 percent of seniors to engage in an experiential learning endeavor, either through its CTE or teacher cadet programs, or internships for high school seniors.

By the 2023-24 school year, Chesterton High Schools' seniors exceeded the ambitious goal Pettit had set by 15 percentage points. Among its 467 seniors, 181 completed an internship/work-study arrangement, 108 completed a CTE program, and 14 were enrolled in cadet teaching.

The Chesterton example is helping inspire the state's own work to revamp graduation requirements that are more personalized toward students' interests and more practical in terms of both coursework options and experiential learning.

“For years, the American public education model has been this industrialized factory-type model, where everybody comes in and we deliver a similar curriculum to all,” Pettit said.

The Indiana education department wants its changes to mean graduates will be better positioned to succeed in the workforce—regardless of the post-high school path they choose. With the [newly proposed diploma requirements](#), the first half of high school would focus on basic knowledge and skills acquisition, followed by two years of tailored coursework and work-based learning experiences tied to a chosen pathway of interest.

The state's goal ultimately aligns with what Pettit has tried to create at Chesterton High.

“What, philosophically, we're trying to do is individualize or personalize the process for a students where, by the time they get to their senior year of high school, the only reason that they should still be in our building is if there's [instructional] programming that they're compelled to take advantage of,” he said. “What better experience than to place them with a work-based learning or career internship in a field of study that's of interest to them and let them develop workforce skills?”



Chesterton High School in Chesterton, Ind., pictured on June 4, 2024. The high school's work-based learning opportunities are helping to inform the state's revisions to graduation requirements.

— Eric Davis for Education Week

Some states have begun to legislate change

That message is resonating around the country.

Colorado, for example, in 2021 passed the [Successful High School Transitions](#) bill, making it easier for some high school students engaging in experiential learning opportunities outside of the traditional classroom setting to be considered full-time students.

The new law “was really an acknowledgement that our current state framework of high school and seat time is very outdated in how students need to be learning. More of students’ learning needs to be outside of the classroom or more experientially connected to community and to work,” said Shannon Nicholas, the chief of staff at the nonprofit Colorado Succeeds, a nonpartisan coalition of business leaders focused on improving the state’s education and workforce systems.

More recently, a 2023 [report](#) led by the Colorado Department of Education found a mismatch between the state's workforce needs and its high school graduates' readiness. Whereas more than 90 percent of the state's top jobs that provide a living wage require a postsecondary education or training, undergraduate postsecondary enrollment among Colorado residents at the state's public colleges and universities has declined by 8 percent since 2010, according to the report, [in an echo of national trends](#).

The transitions bill is a good step toward freeing up high schools to be more flexible in how students can structure their school schedules, Nicholas says, but she and other advocates want a deeper high school overhaul in which students can graduate with at least one industry credential, some college credit, or a work-based learning experience.

A critical component of change: targeted curriculum pathways tied to industry

Proponents of change in other parts of the country tend to share elements of this vision.

Brian Erskine, the supervisor of college and career readiness at the Colonial School District in New Castle, Del., is one such advocate.

Just as Indiana's Duneland School Corporation got a jump start on expanding experiential learning opportunities before the state began revising graduation requirements, the Colonial district developed a "pathway program" ahead of the state's [Pathways Initiative](#), which aims to link education and workforce development efforts through CTE programs.

Colonial, which has one high school of about 2,200 students, began revamping curriculum offerings 12 years ago. And unlike the state's initiative, which is restricted to pathways within CTE, every one of Colonial's students chooses from about two dozen career-oriented pathways as they enter high school.

"We had pathways before there were [Delaware] pathways," Erskine said of the district, which serves primarily low-income students, about half of whom attend community college or no college after high school graduation.

William Penn High School students now have over 20 pathways to choose from, from visual and performing arts to allied health. Students take multiple courses tied to their chosen pathway, in addition to standard high school curriculum and, increasingly, can opt to participate in related

experiential learning on campus or the broader community. The pathways do not pigeon-hole students into a post-high school track, Erskine said.

“It’s not either CTE or college,” he said of the program’s design, to which he attributes elevated graduation rates in recent years. “It’s expanding possibilities.”

Nor are the pathways siloed, explained Erskine. “All our degree programs are inter-connected,” he said. “The agriculture kids are working with culinary kids. The digital design kids will design a poster for another pathway’s event.”



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Brian Erskine, supervisor of college and career readiness, Colonial School District, New Castle, Del.

Key to a new high school model: a receptive business community

In the past few years, Colonial has pushed to increase partnerships between students and local industry and give 11th and 12th grade students real-world work experience outside school walls that align with their selected pathways.

It’s a piece of reimagining high school, and one that can take some time to develop.

“You have to have a supportive community that really wants to work with you,” said Pettit, the Indiana superintendent. His district has secured partnerships with an estimated 200 local businesses committed to opening their doors to internships with Chesterton High School seniors.

Nicholas, the Colorado advocate, counts this aspect of the redesigned high school experience as a win in her state.

“Employer-based partnerships are really popping here,” she said. “We’ve got a strong employer community that’s really committed to partnering with their school systems to offer job shadows,

internships all the way into apprenticeships.”

Ideally, these experiential opportunities eventually lead to careers with in-demand industries. In Colorado, those include information technology, the cybersecurity industry, construction and advanced manufacturing, aerospace, health care, and K-12 education, said Nicholas.

Change is usually a challenge

Even in states like Colorado, considered a pioneer for a reimagined high school model, change is slow.

“There’s been a lot of conversation in Colorado about high school juniors and seniors doing things that are more connected to what they might do after high school,” said Nicholas. But to date, only about 1 in 4 high schools in the state actually looks different than it did prior to the passage of the High School Transitions bill in 2021, said Nicholas—through a combination of college and career programming, work-based learning including internships and apprenticeships, and other navigation experiences that help students understand what they want to do after high school.

The slow change doesn’t surprise Nicholas, whose advocacy work aims to bridge the gaps between Colorado students’ educational experience and the state’s future workforce needs. “This is transformational change for school systems. We’re asking educators to open up school schedules and instructor contracts so that students can learn in and outside of school and get credit for their learning. Business and industry partners have to co-create learning opportunities and curriculum so that it’s more relevant and aligned to what the workplace looks like. And students and families have to understand these pathways and what options are available to them,” she said. “This all takes time, resources, and deep partnership.”



This is bigger than can be left up to school districts to figure out on their own.

Robin Lake, director, Center on Reinventing Public Education

Others involved in advocacy, such as Lake of the Center on Reinventing Public Education, hold similar views. “I really think that parents get it, district leaders get it, school leaders get it. And

it's just very hard to change high schools," Lake said. "They've been very immune from change efforts in the past."

Philanthropies, notably, have tried mightily, often with modest results. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's first major foray into education grantmaking, around 2000, was promoting smaller high school models. *(The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation provides general operating support for Education Week. Education Week retains sole editorial control over the content of that coverage.)*

Part of the problem, Lake suggests, is how funding is tied to in-building enrollment and attendance.

"Kids have to actually be in the [classroom] seats in order to get funding. And so high schools [in Colorado] were having to do these add-ons and scheduling flips to find time in the school day [for experiential learning opportunities outside the building]," she said.

Another obstacle? Convincing driven, college-bound students who may feel like they can't afford the time away from the classroom to participate in an internship.

"The way the college acceptance game works, students still have to participate in sports and extracurriculars on top of their apprenticeships and everything else to make their college application look good," Lake said. "High schools will not change as long as higher ed. is sending the signal that they want to see all these things."

Pushing against this traditional paradigm will require resources beyond what school districts can offer.

"The business community needs to be engaged at the state and probably the federal level. They have to be part of this conversation. And higher education," Lake said. "It calls for a lot of strong leadership right now and a lot of vision for leaders to recognize that this is bigger than can be left up to school districts to figure out on their own."

And yet, districts like Indiana's Duneland School Corporation aren't waiting for a nod of approval to implement change.

"We said: Let's look for reasons to say yes, as opposed to why not, or whatever barriers we might encounter," said Pettit. "And as the Chesterton High School team has found new [experiential]

opportunities for our students, we just continue to look for reasons to say yes.”



Elizabeth Heubeck

Staff Writer

Elizabeth Heubeck is a staff writer for Education Week.

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