

JANUARY 2024



# A “good life” for every student: High schools embrace many pathways to success

Chelsea Waite, Center on Reinventing Public Education  
Maddy Sims, Center for Public Research and Leadership

This report is part of the Center on Reinventing Public Education’s [Think Forward New England](#) project, supported by the Barr Foundation.

# Contents

- 3** Executive Summary
- 6** Methods: Documenting innovation for equity in New England high schools
- 8** Part 1: What success means to students, families, and educators
- 11** Part 2: How schools are changing to help every student achieve a good life
- 20** Part 3: The role of the pandemic
- 22** Part 4: Challenges to ensuring a good life for every student
  - 22** Challenge #1: Meeting students' needs without lowering expectations and rigor
  - 28** Challenge #2: Supporting every student to develop a high-quality postsecondary plan
  - 31** Challenge #3: Collecting and using (the right) data for innovation and improvement
- 35** Part 5: Sustaining momentum
- 37** Part 6: Conclusion and recommendations
  - 38** Recommendations for state leaders and policymakers
  - 40** Recommendations for school and system leaders
  - 42** Recommendations for community partners
- 44** Appendix A: Full list of resources and references
- 47** Appendix B: Methodological details
- 50** About this report

## Executive summary

Leticia<sup>1</sup> was a junior in high school when we met her. Growing up, she told us, “I never thought [school] was beneficial. I did not understand anything I was learning.” When the pandemic hit, she was a freshman, and already struggling academically. By her sophomore year, Leticia felt utterly disengaged, accumulating about 90 absences. “I barely went to school,” she said. “I felt like I had no support system, and no one was willing to help me.”

Leticia switched to a different school for her junior year. There, everything changed. “I feel like everybody’s by my side,” she said. Her staff mentor texts to check up on her, and she gets individual support from her teachers with schoolwork and decisions about her future. The change in her school environment dramatically shifted her mood and outlook. “I’m somewhere that helps me a lot,” she said. “My perspective, my energy, all that has shifted.” Now, instead of giving up when she makes a mistake, Leticia recognizes, “It’s okay. I know that next time I can get that done perfectly fine.” In the future, she said, “I want to work with special education kids because ... I connect with them very well.”

As Leticia’s story shows, high schools can make or break a student’s trajectory into adulthood. When designed to ensure every young person, including those who face the most adversity, feels supported, challenged, and confident, schools can [lay the groundwork](#) for students to thrive. But high schools have also been remarkably [resistant to change](#), despite major social and economic shifts prompting frequent calls to reimagine them. And stories like Leticia’s remind us how much can be at stake.

The Covid-19 pandemic and recovery period is a unique opportunity to understand contemporary issues in high school reform. Evidence has clearly demonstrated [lingering Covid impacts](#) on adolescent students that have deepened pre-existing inequities and worsened teen mental health. There’s a natural desire to regain normalcy after the pandemic. But it’s essential, and urgent, that we examine why that



“normalcy” failed in the past to support every student’s needs. We must identify effective, even new, ways to level the playing field for today’s students, and for future generations. Research has [shown](#) that many high school educators and administrators experimented with new approaches during the pandemic. Can the lessons learned in this period contribute to more lasting, transformative shifts?

This report begins to answer that question. Beginning in 2022, Arizona State University’s Center on Reinventing Public Education ([CRPE](#)) and Columbia University’s Center for Public Research and Leadership ([CPRL](#))—with support from the [Barr Foundation](#)—began studying innovations in six public high schools in New England. We chose schools in a range of contexts that all had some form of redesign underway. Over 20 months, we interviewed students who had begun high school around when the pandemic struck; most of them had graduated by the end of the study in December 2023. We also interviewed students’ caregivers, teachers, and administrators.

We wanted to know what success meant for students and the adults in their lives, and how schools were making changes—including before the pandemic—to ensure every student had the opportunity to learn and thrive. We listened for where schools were succeeding, and what challenges they faced in the new normal of a post-pandemic landscape.

These schools revealed to us a challenging blueprint for the future of high school that many educators are already progressing toward. That blueprint includes: instruction that offers

1. Leticia is a pseudonym to protect the student’s identity.

flexibility without lowering expectations; systems to help every student develop a high-quality, individualized postsecondary plan; access to data on the high school experiences and outcomes that matter most for student success; and systemic capacity to sustain innovation over time.

### WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “INNOVATION”?

We designed this study to learn how high schools are “innovating” during the pandemic recovery period. However, we chose not to precisely define “innovation,” or judge certain efforts worthy of the term and others not. Instead, we looked for evidence that schools were developing or trying solutions to solve a problem they saw as intractable (e.g., alternative ways of deploying staff to support students off-track for graduation); pursuing nontraditional high school outcomes (e.g., career or life preparedness, student agency and well-being); and iterating on promising strategies they discovered during the pandemic. We were most interested in learning about the innovations that sought to eradicate inequities and expand opportunities for historically marginalized students, including students of color, low-income students, multilingual learners, newcomers, students with disabilities, students with caregiving responsibilities, and students with disrupted formal education. Few of the solutions we learned about were brand new, but all were new to the schools trying them, and most are still uncommon in U.S. high schools.

## What we learned

**What success means:** Students and families in our study described happiness, fulfillment, and stability as their priorities. They wanted to achieve what we came to refer to as a “good life”—which sometimes, but not always, involved going on to higher education. Educators and administrators, too, were embracing a mission to prepare young people not just for college or work, but to be well: to be fulfilled, happy adults with stable, family-sustaining incomes, strong communities, and choices about what opportunities to pursue. The notion that high schools should help each student achieve success on their own terms is a notable evolution from the idea that higher education is the best path for any given student.

[Read more in Part 1 →](#)

**How schools are changing:** Schools we studied were deliberately shifting their school designs, instructional models, and policies to achieve the vision that every student will go on to lead a good life. They were especially focused on providing students support that is responsive to their individual circumstances, especially in the case of historically marginalized groups such as students of color, low-income students, LGBTQ+ students, and those with disrupted formal education.

[Read more in Part 2 →](#)

**The role of the pandemic:** The Covid-19 pandemic did not directly cause most of the changes we observed. In fact, all six of the schools we studied had begun key innovation efforts prior to 2020. Covid-19 lockdowns and the ensuing return to school temporarily slowed some efforts, but accelerated others. The pandemic also strengthened educators’ dedication to achieving new designs for high school. Further, increased consciousness about issues of race and racism motivated schools to focus on solving inequities and meeting the needs of historically marginalized students.

[Read more in Part 3 →](#)

**Challenges:** Our study of these six schools illuminated key tensions that, if unresolved, could put equity and their vision for student success at risk.

- **Flexibility with accountability:** Schools provided students substantial flexibility and support to succeed in school, but struggled with the risk that flexibility without accountability could unintentionally result in less rigor and lower expectations.
- **High-quality postsecondary plans:** Schools aimed to help every student develop an individualized postsecondary plan. But they were still working to strengthen their systems for postsecondary planning, and to ensure guidance didn't inadvertently perpetuate opportunity gaps by discouraging some students from pursuing ambitious paths.
- **The right data:** Schools mostly relied on a narrow set of traditional indicators for success. That was in spite of their growing recognition that those indicators alone are insufficient, and that prioritizing them over important nontraditional outcomes could actually hinder schools in their work to help students achieve individualized learning and postsecondary goals.

[Read more in Part 4 →](#)

**Sustaining momentum:** We found that during the period of the study, schools sustained progress with the help of a clear vision, visible progress, systemic capacity for learning and improving, and an iterative approach to change.

[Read more in Part 5 →](#)

**Recommendations:** Successful new designs for high school face both instructional and systemic barriers. High schools cannot overcome them alone. State-level leaders, school and system leaders, and community partners must support high schools to:

- Design and strengthen instruction to offer flexibility without lowering expectations;
- Create systems that help every student develop a high-quality, individualized postsecondary plan;

- Leverage data on the high school experiences and outcomes that matter most for student success; and
- Build the systemic capacity to sustain momentum for innovation over time.

Targeted collective action can go a long way toward ensuring that every student has the opportunity for a “good life.”

[Read more in Part 6 →](#)



# Methods: Documenting innovation for equity in New England high schools

CRPE and CPRL designed this qualitative study to reveal deep insights into how high schools were adapting and innovating in the pandemic recovery period, and how students and families experienced the changes in their high schools. We specifically aimed to learn how schools embraced innovation to more equitably serve students. We sought to answer:

- What does student success mean to educators, administrators, students, and families, especially those historically marginalized?
- What innovations are underway to achieve more equitable student experiences and outcomes in high schools during the pandemic recovery period?

- What opportunities and obstacles do system leaders, educators, students, and families face in high schools during this period?

We designed our study to learn from six public high schools in New England over the course of 20 months, beginning in the spring of 2022. We intentionally chose a range of high school types and settings, where schools were enrolling mostly students from historically marginalized communities, and where each school had some history with redesign and innovation. Most, but not all, of the schools have received funding from the Barr Foundation. (See Table 1 for information about the schools we studied.)

**Table 1**

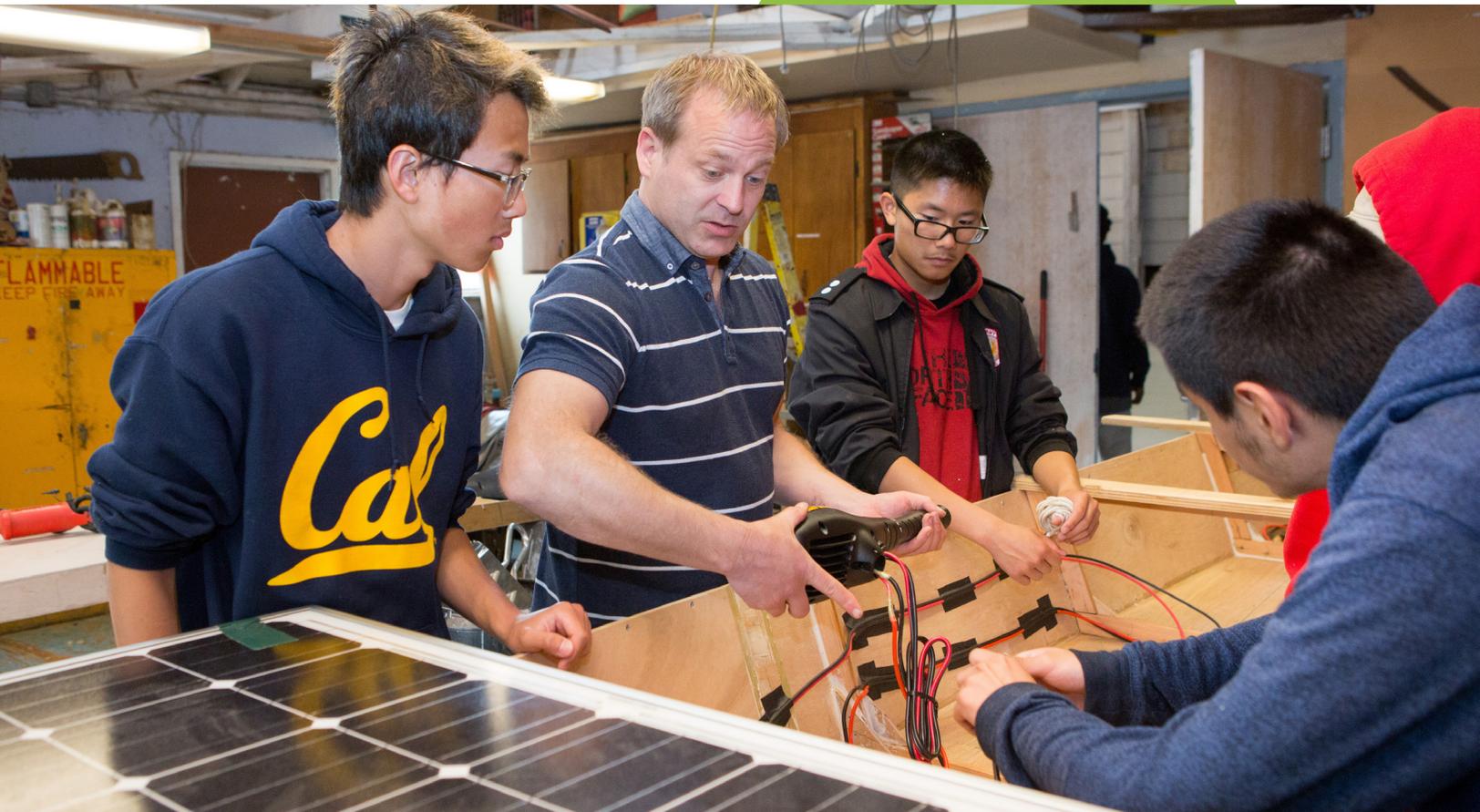
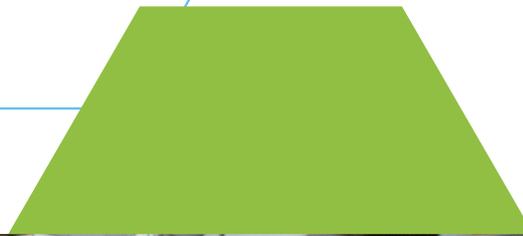
	Locale	Enrollment	Governance	Alternative School <sup>2</sup>	Student Demographics <sup>3</sup>
School 1	Urban	1,235	Traditional Public District	No	BIPOC: 64% MLL: 10% SWD: 12.7% FRPL: 56.4%
School 2	Urban	1,700	Traditional Public District	No	BIPOC: 91% MLL: 15% SWD: 20% FRPL: 63%
School 3	Suburban	200 (within a larger school of 1,508)	Traditional Public District	Yes	BIPOC: 85.5% MLL: 31.5% SWD: 25.5% FRPL: 90.2%
School 4	Rural	579	Traditional Public District	No	BIPOC: 8% MLL: *no data to protect privacy SWD: 15.5% FRPL: 57%
School 5	Suburban	500	Public Charter	No	BIPOC: 95% MLL: 14% SWD: 15% FRPL: 100%
School 6	Urban	160	Public Charter	Yes	BIPOC: 81% MLL: 53% SWD: 31% FRPL: 91%

2. We deliberately included two alternative schools in our sample of six because these schools focus on educating students who have been least well supported in traditional high schools. The two alternative schools in our study aim to support students who are overage and undercredited, who are pregnant/parenting, who have a history of chronic absenteeism, or who experience other major barriers to conforming to a traditional high school trajectory, schedule, etc. Administrators in the two alternative schools told us that public education systems typically view high school graduation alone as “success” for these students, and correspondingly underinvest in students’ preparation to enroll in higher education or pursue career growth.

3. Acronyms: BIPOC refers to students who are Black, Indigenous, or People of Color. MLL refers to multilingual learners, which we reported based on students designated as English learners. SWD refers to students with disabilities. FRPL refers to students eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch. Note that FRPL rates are an imperfect proxy for income, but all six schools served high proportions of students whose families were economically disadvantaged. At School 5, all students are automatically eligible for free lunch; according to the school’s own calculation, two-thirds of its students are low-income.

We conducted 266 interviews from April 2022 to November 2023—the vast majority virtual—with students, their caregivers, educators, and administrators in each school. We sought to recruit at least five participants in each category, and to speak with each participant four times over the course of the study. We were not able to speak with every participant four times, but in total we conducted between 33 and 58 interviews from each school. Our analytic approach was primarily inductive. More details on participants and methods can be found in [Appendix B](#).

Our research is not designed to represent all high schools, either in New England or nationally. However, because of the variety of school contexts we studied, many other schools—especially those focused on historically marginalized students’ success—may see themselves in what we learned. We believe our findings are relevant and actionable for anyone who cares about improving high school education both in New England and nationally.



## Part 1: What success means to students, families, and educators

Our interviews with students, families, and educators yielded a resounding message: The six schools in our study were committed to preparing every student to thrive as fulfilled, happy adults on their own terms—whether or not they pursued a college degree. As our research progressed, we began to think of this vision for student success as “a good life” for every student, borrowing the phrase from the name of a course that two teachers in the study designed.

To enable this broader vision, schools were challenging old assumptions. Some were moving away from a “college for all” mindset in favor of a wider spectrum of viable postsecondary pathways; others (especially the two alternative high schools) were rejecting the idea that securing a high school diploma is enough and instead pushing for expanded access to both college and career pathways. Schools were making these shifts for some philosophical reasons: a growing recognition about viable non-degree pathways; a commitment to college access for students historically underrepresented; as well as a belief that college alone doesn’t guarantee a good life. They were also making shifts in an effort to respond to students’ and families’ priorities.

Caregivers and students in wide-ranging circumstances described happiness, fulfillment, and stability as their priorities. “I just hope that she’s happy, [that she finds] something that she enjoys doing and that she can just find her place,” said a parent of a student in credit recovery. A parent of a straight-A student taking multiple AP courses said, “I want her to just pursue whatever makes her happy, honestly.” Happiness meant personal satisfaction and contentment, along with a dimension of financial stability: “Success would mean for me that I am not living a paycheck-to-paycheck life, or I’m not struggling to provide for me and the others around me,” said one student. But no one in our interviews said earning potential was the main factor in their definition of success.



### STUDENT VOICE: WHAT SUCCESS MEANS TO ME

“How I measure success isn’t exactly in scores or numbers. It’s more of, do I enjoy where I’m at in life, and is this where I saw myself going, and where can I go from here?”

### Beyond college for all

What pathway out of high school will lead to happiness and stability in adult life? Some students told us about college plans, confident that higher education provided the best path, as one student put it, to “being my best self and earning my own money and doing a job that I enjoy.” Some caregivers also confidently declared college as the next step for their students; one mother hoped her daughter would get a college degree as “something to fall back on” even if her initial aspirations didn’t seem to require it. But other young people and families weren’t so convinced that college would lead to success on their terms. The reasons were varied: some students are burned out on school; some prefer to avoid high-stakes tests and applications; others are concerned about financial risk. And many are compelled by an [increasing number of jobs](#) that don’t require a college degree, and want to start earning income. Even if students hadn’t fully ruled out college as a step in their longer-term plans, some felt they simply weren’t ready to commit to a degree pathway. As one caregiver put it, “the state of our environment

and our world” can make it hard for a teenager to settle on a clear decision. We saw plenty of evidence for the patterns documented in [recent surveys](#) and [reporting](#) about declining interest in higher education. Indeed, data [show](#) declining undergraduate enrollment since 2010, with accelerated decline since the pandemic.

### CAREGIVER VOICE: IT'S HARD FOR KIDS RIGHT NOW

“Honestly, I think it’s really hard for kids to settle on what they want to do right out of high school right now, given the state of our environment and our world and everything that’s happening.”

Administrators in our study have also noticed a broader trend away from college as the agreed-upon best path out of high school. “At one point, people defined success by college,” said an assistant superintendent. “And I think that people have come to realize now that that’s not the ultimate measure of success.” A principal from a rural high school noted, “A lot of our students want to go right into the workforce, and there is a pathway for them to make a viable living going that route.” Two counselors from very different schools—one serving students off-track for high school graduation and the other with a track record of sending most students to four-year colleges—said that their hope for students is not about where they end up, but that they have “choice-filled lives.”



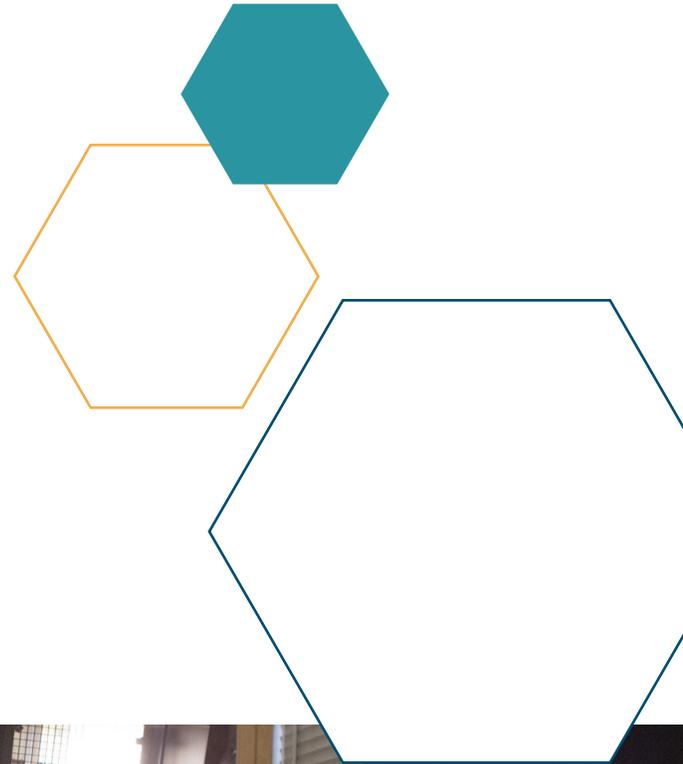
## An expanded vision

Ultimately, we observed administrators, educators, students, and families in our study beginning to conceive of an updated purpose for high school. High schools should prepare young people not just for college or work, but to be well: to be fulfilled, happy adults with stable, family-sustaining incomes, strong communities, and choices about what opportunities to pursue. **Because young people aren’t monolithic in their interests, passions, and needs, high schools should help students discern what success means for themselves—and how to achieve it.** One parent emphasized the importance of schools realizing that “there’s not one way” for students to achieve a good life.

This vision for success and purpose for high school is a notable evolution—and in some cases a clear departure—from the past. In the early days of [modern schooling](#), schools were [viewed](#) as a vehicle for assimilation, homogenization, and formation of a strong national identity needed by governments to achieve social control and political legitimacy. Scholars have described a range of goals that drove [high school reform](#) in the 20th century. Some of these purposes [include](#): democratic equality (preparing youth to participate in democracy as citizens), social efficiency (preparing youth to work and contribute to economic life), and social mobility (enabling youth to gain a competitive advantage in securing social status). Throughout this history and still today, certain reforms have sought to categorize students in ways that grant or revoke their access to future opportunities, such as through screened-admission public high schools, “tracked” classes, or test-based admissions to career pathway programs. The predominant high school reforms of the last several decades have sought to ensure graduates are prepared to compete in a global and changing economy, and to improve access to higher education (and thereby higher earning potential and social status), especially for students who are historically marginalized.<sup>4</sup>

4. For example, the [New American Schools](#) initiative aimed to help Americans win the “battle for our future,” as George W. Bush said in 2000; the “[college for all](#)” reform movement sought to dramatically expand access to higher education; and federal policies like [No Child Left Behind](#) were intended to boost the international competitiveness of American schools and reduce educational inequity by holding schools accountable for academic achievement.

None of these historical purposes for high school reform fully capture what we heard from administrators, educators, students, and families: **high school is an essential step in unlocking an adult life of satisfaction and fulfillment that young people craft for themselves; and that may involve different choices and values than those of their peers.** This is a direct challenge to an assimilationist vision for schooling, because it prioritizes students' self-determination rather than conformity. It is also a subtle but noteworthy evolution from more recent waves of high school reform because it focuses not just on college or career readiness, but on a broader vision for students' well-being and fulfillment as adults in their communities. Educators and administrators in our study believed that achieving this goal required not just improvements to existing high school designs, but new ways of working and learning that focus on students' individual strengths, needs, and aspirations.



## Part 2: How schools are changing to help every student achieve a good life

Our interviews suggested that to achieve success on their own terms, students need something different from what high school has historically provided. They need learning environments where adults will support them individually, rather than expect them to conform to a one-size-fits-all model. They need schools that help them develop a customized postsecondary path rather than either focusing uniformly on college matriculation, or assuming that a high school diploma is sufficient for future success. And they need relevant, rigorous learning experiences that develop foundational skills for higher education, career, and life down the line—including a strong sense of self and purpose. Every high school in our study was undertaking this evolution.

### Loving, supportive learning environments

Overwhelmingly, the students we spoke with needed their schools to provide support and flexibility in the face of hardships and competing demands that are often outside of their control. Those include [unprecedented mental health needs](#), [economic stresses](#) of all kinds, and [caregiving responsibilities](#) at home.

Many students we interviewed spoke warmly about their teachers' care and responsiveness when schools reopened after the pandemic. According to administrators and educators, their efforts to support students and focus on relationships was a deliberate response to elevated student needs during and after Covid-19, but many of these efforts had also predated the pandemic.

### STUDENT VOICE: HOW MY SCHOOL SUPPORTS ME

“Yesterday I came in, and I felt, like, so agitated and really moody. And I felt, like, a little [metaphorically] violent. So I came in and ... it’s amazing because everybody notices that something’s wrong with you and they try to help you. ...They suggested I [talk] to somebody and I did. And as soon as I did, I felt, like, so much better. And then I came to class and I was okay.”



Most schools relied on individualized mentoring and counseling to ensure students felt “known” and cared for. Two schools used a “primary person” model where every student regularly touches base with the same staff mentor about academic and, sometimes, personal issues.

Other schools designed alternate ways of ensuring that each student frequently touches base with an adult about progress, opportunities, and extra support when needed. Two schools used individual “on-track conferences” to identify students who were struggling early in the semester and steer them toward additional support. These meetings—which occurred more frequently for students who had fallen behind academically—typically included a review of student attendance, academic performance, and general well-being.

Some schools also focused on strengthening students’ peer relationships. They created “looping” advisories, for instance, where students spend all four high school years with the same advisor and peers, partly in an effort to nurture student friendships. While advisory programs are certainly not new, the schools in our study have in recent years been more intentional in structuring them and training staff members to be stronger, more connected facilitators.

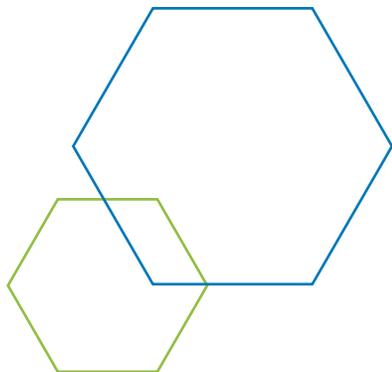
Each school in our study had introduced and continued to expand strategies to support students’ mental health and well-being, and remove the stigma around talking about mental health challenges. Those included activities to promote well-being (such as time outdoors), wellness conversations in everyday classes, and more frequent presentations from guidance counselors and social workers.

### SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT: SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL COUNSELING

One school employed a team of counselors focused purely on social-emotional learning and counseling, who were not directly involved in academic advising yet coordinated closely with the postsecondary advising team. Whenever possible, counselors stayed with students all four years. One counselor reported a caseload of 112—far fewer than the average in the school’s state and the [recommended high school ratio of 250-to-1](#).

Alternative approaches to discipline were another way schools sought to create more positive and loving learning environments. In one school, a counselor told us that both staff members and students can request facilitated “restorative circles,” or conversations intended to repair relationships and find mutually agreeable solutions after a behavioral incident or conflict.

Lastly, given that five of the six schools we studied enrolled predominantly students of color, we heard about a range of efforts to create more affirming learning environments for BIPOC students. Notably, one school had intentionally undertaken a leadership change in the late 2010s that transformed its staff from a mostly white team to a racially diverse faculty led by mostly Black administrators. Four other schools we studied were focused on hiring more teachers of color, training teachers in culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy, or both.



## Postsecondary exploration and preparation

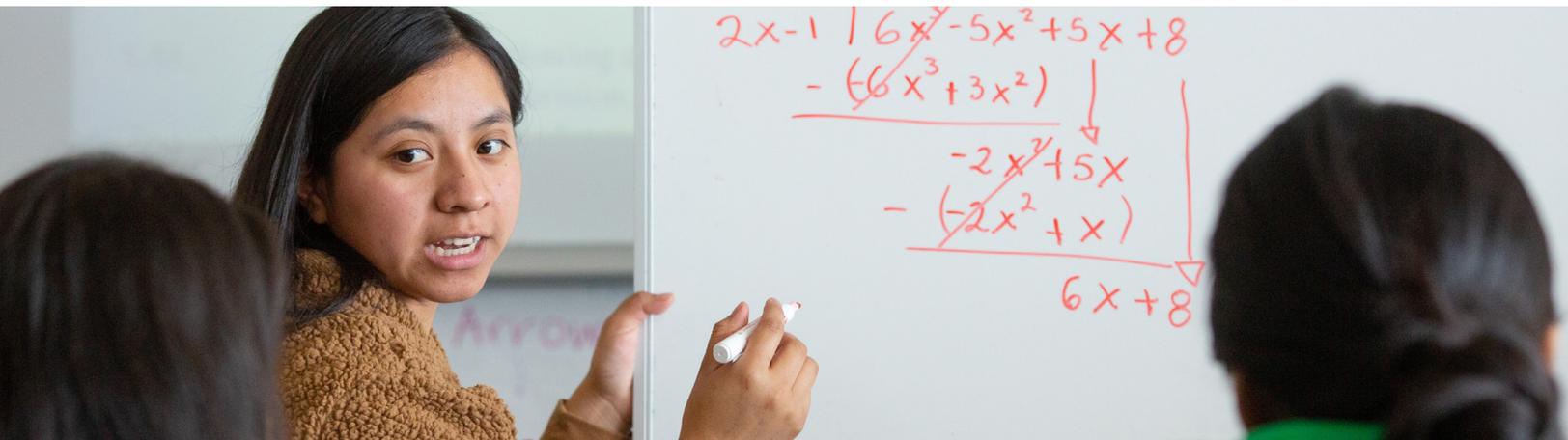
To go on to lead good lives, students in our study needed their high schools to equip them to navigate decisions about the future. Simply exposing young people to different postsecondary options isn't enough for them to make complicated and difficult decisions about higher education and career options—including, often, about careers they've never heard of or imagined. Students told us they needed their schools to help them understand how different decisions and pathways can shape and define adult life. Students interested in engineering, for example, craved a real-world understanding of pay, work environment, career growth, and education requirements for an electrician versus an electrical engineer.

### STUDENT VOICE: KNOWING ALL MY OPTIONS

"I think [my school] could focus less on university ... and more [on helping] families and other students learn how to research all their options. ... A lot of students will go into career paths or something that they were just constantly exposed to as a kid. ... So I think giving kids a broader exposure [to] what's out there and what they can do to achieve that is important."

In all our case study schools, educators sought to ensure every student had a plan for after graduation, but felt increasingly accepting of plans that didn't involve higher education. In particular, we heard enthusiasm for on-the-job training that would lead to career growth even without a degree. At two schools we studied, the student advising process guaranteed that every student would discuss and record a postsecondary plan with an advisor at least once—and in one school, many times—as the student approached senior year. One of those schools had broadened a program that previously focused exclusively on college counseling to touch on an array of postsecondary options, including entrepreneurship paths and opportunities in the military.

Each school used different strategies to expose students to a wide range of career options as well as the requisite education and training. At one school, every student participated in at least one career-oriented class prior to graduation to make connections between their interests and potential job opportunities, and to design a plan to build necessary skills. Several other schools have hosted workforce roundtables featuring local employers, supported students to identify job shadow opportunities, and organized career nights for students and families. At one school, student and family interest prompted administrators to launch a new career center that will pilot career-connected courses and learning opportunities.



### CAREGIVER VOICE: KNOWING WHAT A CAREER WILL ACTUALLY BE LIKE

“I think they need to get out and shadow. Like, you shouldn’t be able to just blindly make a decision [about] what you wanna do the rest of your life. [My daughter] originally thought that she wanted to go into physical therapy and then she went and shadowed one and she hated it.”

Schools were also expanding the types of for-credit learning experiences that students can access. At least four schools were actively building community and business partnerships where students can get academic credit for learning on-site with local employers and cultural organizations. In one school, about 30 percent of students participated in some form of work-study program to earn high school credits. These programs “connect the classroom to the business world,” an administrator explained. Unlike common efforts to incorporate experiential learning through short-term projects or one-off field trips, schools in our study were creating longer-term programming that allowed students to stack experiences and build a more comprehensive understanding of professional fields of interest.

### SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT: CAREER PATHWAY PROGRAMS

One school has partnered with a local nonprofit organization to launch several career pathways programs in industries like finance, nursing, automotives, and manufacturing. Students in the nursing program spend time at a local assisted living home, learn from full-time healthcare professionals, and support with resident care. One participating student described the nursing program as her “favorite class” and said it had motivated her to pursue college to become a travel nurse. She said that program helped her no longer “doubt myself,” and to believe “that I can really do it. ... I feel proud of that, and that I’m learning new things.”

Finally, several schools have worked with local partners, including regional workforce development centers, to support students to earn industry-recognized credentials through work at partner sites. These credentials allow students to not only earn recognition for the knowledge and skills they are building, but in many cases to enter the workforce at more competitive pay rates immediately following high school graduation.



## Relevant, rigorous instruction

Students we interviewed said they need their schools to help them grasp why what they're learning matters. They disliked instructional approaches that presented academic concepts in a vacuum and where the assignments fail to

challenge them. Instead, they described their favorite classes as those that felt personally and culturally relevant to their lives, where they were asked to develop their own opinions, and where they had opportunities to do work that seemed to matter outside of school, and where teachers helped them engage with complex topics.

### STUDENT VOICE: HOW I LEARN BEST

- “U.S. history ... was the class that I most struggled with when I first came to high school. It was a class that I had [an F in], but one of the teachers ... took the time to make me understand what history is really about. ... I understood that history plays a big role in today's society, and he showed me what history really was. So from there, I started liking history a lot.”
- “I just feel like for all the classes really there should be more focus [on] the learning and less emphasis on the grade. Like there's one class that does a really nice job with it: theater. And she's really focused on your learning.
- “I didn't know what pi was for until I used it in welding and with a machine. I wish they taught me how to use things like pi in the real world. [It] feels like you don't learn anything from school, just [from] real world experiences.”
- “I find [schoolwork] interesting because math-wise, they actually teach us about stuff that we're going to need in life, about money, about taxes, about how to finance stuff. And it still has the math in it, too.”
- “... She really doesn't like grades and I think I've learned the most in that class because I'm not worried about trying to get a good grade.”

All six schools we studied had worked for several years or more on initiatives intended to ensure that all students, especially those who have been historically marginalized, have access to rigorous, culturally responsive coursework. While only some school leaders used the term “deeper learning,” all spoke about strengthening students' ability to understand complex topics and to draw connections across academic disciplines, within students' community, or to world affairs.<sup>5</sup>

Schools' strategies for enabling this type of learning varied considerably. Three focused on courses that span multiple disciplines and non-traditional, and often more “real-world,” topics. In contrast, the three other schools have focused

on increasing access to advanced courses in academic disciplines, like AP courses and Early College Experience (ECE) offerings.

The three schools in the former category have invested time and resources in designing interdisciplinary courses to push students to higher-order thinking and real-world applications. In one school, for example, students learned about marketing, social science, financial literacy, and math concepts like ratios and functions in a multi-week intensive course unit on the loan industry. Staff told us that classes like these simultaneously provide students with challenging instruction and draw connections to scenarios that matter for students and their

5. Jal Mehta and Sarah Fine, “In Search of Deeper Learning: The Quest to Remake the American High School,” (Harvard University Press, 2019). Mehta said in an [interview](#), “[D]eeper learning tends to emerge at the intersection of mastery, identity, and creativity. Mastery is developing significant knowledge and skill; identity is seeing yourself as connected to doing the work; and creativity is not just taking in knowledge but doing something in the field. When those three elements come together, it often yields deep learning.”



communities. Instead of teaching students to regurgitate information on tests, educators wanted to nurture skills like critical thinking and communication skills by asking students to tackle open-ended questions and produce original, creative work.

School staff believed that this kind of learning is more appealing than traditional formats, especially to students who have begun to disengage from school. One teacher said

that in interdisciplinary units, “we find that [students] have a higher rate of success” based on attendance, participation, and grades. An administrator from a school hoping to create stronger connections between academic subjects and the adult world said, “I think we can do a much better job of trapping kids in the honey of each content area. To be a writer is such a powerful thing. To be a scientist is such a powerful thing.”

### SCHOOL SPOTLIGHTS: DESIGNING MORE RELEVANT AND ENGAGING COURSES

We encountered the following courses and/or multi-week projects:

- “Does College Make C.E.N.T.S.?” focused on financial literacy, helping students evaluate their options and argue for the benefits and risks of different financial decisions.
- “The Opioid Crisis” helped students develop skills across disciplines, including English language arts, science, and social studies, through learning about how opioid addiction is affecting their communities.
- “Students of the Law” asked students to debate and make sense of historical and recent court cases focused on education and inequality, and included several visits to a local courtroom to observe lawyers arguing cases.
- “Elements of Crafting” melded geometry and English subjects as students learned about the history and different styles of crafting, such as quilting, and explored concepts like fractals and tessellations in both mathematics and literature.
- “The Good Life,” a six-week elective, involved three different subject-area teachers and focused on scientific and philosophical concepts of happiness—including, as one student put it, “how to create your own happiness” and explore potential career paths of interest.

The three schools in the latter category focused on achieving deeper learning through advanced courses designed to prepare students for higher education, believing that college-level work will benefit students regardless of their aspirations. These schools are thinking creatively about how to increase access to advanced courses, especially among Black, Latine, and multilingual students. Some schools opened up AP course enrollment, removing the requirement that students obtain a teacher recommendation before signing up. Schools have also deployed personalized staff outreach to students and families to share the benefits and/or expectations of these courses, especially for families unfamiliar with them; and they've asked upperclassmen to talk about their experiences in advanced coursework with younger students to demystify the process. At one school, enrollment in advanced courses among 12th grade multilingual learners skyrocketed to over 85% in 2020-21, up from under 30% in 2015-16.

Schools were continuing to experiment with strategies to ensure that students, once enrolled, have access to the tailored supports needed to complete and succeed in advanced courses. One school provides intensive study sessions called "AP boot camps," and teachers try to steer students who may need more scaffolding into those sessions early in the year. If successful, those strategies would almost certainly position more Black, Latine, and multilingual students for an easier transition to higher education.

### **STUDENT VOICE: ADVANCED COURSES HELPED ME**

"[T]he AP classes definitely prepared me in terms of course load and having to study for testing and exams," said one student, now a college freshman. The courses provided "a head start" compared to other students, he added. "I think [the AP courses] definitely helped me in terms of creating a routine, keeping myself organized, keeping myself on track, making sure I don't get behind."

In addition to strengthening AP offerings, two schools in our study offered ECE courses in partnership with local colleges and universities. Administrators explained that these courses, which span a wide range of subjects from math and science to elementary school teaching to music, offer students two key benefits. First, they expose students to the rigor of college-level courses, helping to ease the transition to higher education, especially among first-generation students. Second, they can help make college more affordable by allowing high school students to accumulate up to a full semester of college credits at little or even no charge. "Students can literally save thousands and thousands of dollars on college tuition, which is meaningful, especially for students who are weighing whether or not the investment in college is feasible for them and their families," a school counseling director said.

[Data](#) tracking ECE participants in Massachusetts found that students participating in ECE courses are 38% more likely than peers to enroll in college immediately after high school and 53% more likely to remain enrolled one year later. Both schools offering ECE courses have reported an uptick in student interest in recent years and expect enrollment to continue to rise in the coming years. "Students are savvy, and they recognize a good opportunity from both the learning side of things and the financial side of things when they see it," the counseling director said.

Some instructional evolutions we heard about were less about content and pedagogy and more about assessment and progress monitoring. Two schools had invested significant energy in ensuring students were being assessed fairly on what they had actually learned—not how many hours they'd attended class or how often they turned schoolwork in on time. Educators and administrators explained that students sometimes fail courses or earn low grades because of circumstances outside their control, and alternative systems for assessment, credit-earning, and grading can ensure a stronger focus on learning as the metric that matters most.

For instance, one alternative school began piloting its current competency-based learning program when school buildings closed in 2020. Previously, a student could have failed the entire course—sacrificing all credits—when unforeseen circumstances disrupted class attendance partly, or even most of the way, through a course. Now, students can retain the credit they earned for competencies demonstrated in the first part of the course, and pick up where they left off when they can attend school again. At another school, staff embraced a series of new grading policies with the goal of increasing fairness and motivating student persistence. The school’s “grading for equity” initiative allowed departments to adopt changes such as making the minimum grade a 50 (up from a zero), allowing flexible assignment deadlines and test re-takes, and excluding “participation” grades—all of which they hoped would help students earn grades that more accurately reflected what they had learned.

### **A focus on adolescent development, self-determination, and agency**

We heard from students that they want schools to help them discern their own preferences and values. After all, achieving success the way each student defines it means helping students develop a strong sense of self and purpose.

Part of what this means is that schools should no longer tell students what’s best for them—especially if there’s an implicit judgment about the limits of a student’s potential. One counselor from a school mostly serving students of color said that emphasizing college as the best choice, and judging success based on where students go to college, upholds white supremacy culture. The counselor explained that an antiracist vision for success, instead, “should look like students, and people in general, being able to lead the life they want to lead.” A student from that school confirmed that in her experience, her school wants students to develop skills that help them determine what they need and pursue it: “Our school from the very beginning has always taught us to advocate for ourselves.” Likewise, one parent noted that families, too, should be more “open-minded” and take into account “what’s important to [students], not necessarily what’s important to parents.”

High schools we studied were aiming to have students graduate not only with academic skills and knowledge, but also with the tools to become empowered, self-aware and civic-minded. “It’s definitely getting students to see their own potential, to believe in themselves, and also to be accountable for their behavior,” one administrator said. “So, how do [we support students to] take ownership to guide their own life?” Another administrator said part of the school’s definition of student success is “being proud of who you are as a human.” Schools used strategies like one-on-one mentoring as well as advisory programs with activities designed to build skills like teamwork, creativity, self-efficacy, and leadership.

#### **CAREGIVER VOICE: HER THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS MATTER**

“The way [her advisor] talks to her, it means something to her. The way he treats her, she is not just a child, she actually has a say-so in her education and her thoughts and feelings matter ... It shows her that she’s more than just a student that needs to get work done in order to meet requirements.”

Schools were also using the classroom as a venue for identity development and self-expression. In several schools, students developed capstone projects where they pursue a topic related to their own interests. One school allowed students to build credit-bearing “personalized learning experiences” by identifying a subject and recruiting a teacher advisor with whom they codesign a course of study that includes hands-on learning, often outside of regular school hours. Past topics ranged from photography to computer technical support to aquaponics.

Finally, we noted several schools had made changes to the school environment aimed at acknowledging adolescents' [developmental needs](#), rhythms, and preferences. Often, student feedback informed or even drove these changes. For instance, schools had made adjustments to how instructional time is structured, like doubling the time between classes from five minutes to ten, and periodic “flex days” without scheduled classes to offer activities focused on leadership, well-being, tutoring, and postsecondary planning. These changes introduced more informal time into students’ school day, allowing them to seek out extra help from teachers, socialize with friends, or just take advantage of some quiet time to decompress from a challenging lesson.



### SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT: THE RIGHT AMOUNT OF AUTONOMY

Starting before the pandemic, one school had taken deliberate steps to give students more autonomy in their school day. Earlier, the school had enforced compliance-oriented rules, from rigid dress codes to “stress-inducing” five-minute transition periods between classes. But a change in leadership, as well as student feedback, brought a set of more reasonable rules that granted adolescent students the increased autonomy and self-expression that they craved at that age, and that would also help them build skills for self-management as adults. The results made the school feel “almost collegiate,” one administrator noted. In particular, doubling transition periods from five to ten minutes brought “the blood pressure and the tempo of the building down because kids could go to the bathroom and check in with that teacher before and after class,” she explained. “And it ... just allowed for so much more building of relationships between kids, between teachers, [and] between teachers and kids.”



## Part 3: The role of the pandemic

Our interviews began just two years after the first wave of Covid-19-induced school closures, and extended through 20 months of the subsequent pandemic recovery period. For the six schools in our study, this period included an ongoing, and in some instances, increased commitment to centering racial equity as pandemic disruptions shone a spotlight on longstanding inequities. As the study progressed, we sought to understand whether the pandemic and the associated disruptions directly caused the school-level changes—large and small—that we heard about in our interviews.

Our analysis broadly suggests the pandemic did not cause most of the significant changes these six schools made. By the time our study began, schools were already focused on changes to the design of high school, stemming from a growing belief that high schools should support every student in achieving a successful life of their own choosing (see Part 1 above). The pandemic, as well as years of growing consciousness of racial inequities, had deepened this belief, but were not the original or sole cause of it.

Nevertheless, the changes schools made were certainly affected by the pandemic and recovery period. In some cases innovations were delayed because of ongoing disruptions, and in others they were accelerated because of the new sense of urgency to address both pandemic impacts and racial injustices. **In every school we studied during the pandemic recovery period, we heard strengthened—not diminished—conviction for achieving the kind of high school designs that can enable students to achieve good lives on their own terms.**

### The pandemic's impact on students and educators

The pandemic deeply impacted students' learning, with nearly every educator in our study commenting on the effects. Sometimes educators observed lower test scores compared to before the pandemic; other times they cited personal experience in the classroom. As one teacher explained in winter 2023, “[L]ast year, it was a lot of review. I had to go back to basics.

Instead of working on paragraphs, I had to go back to how do we write sentences?” These educators' experiences match [studies](#) showing that disrupted schooling during the early days of the pandemic left students of all ages behind in their learning, with greater impacts in schools serving a large percentage of low-income families and/or Black and Latine students. A national [family survey](#) found that the chronic absenteeism rate for eighth through 12th graders increased by 12 percentage points compared to pre-pandemic. High school students across the country were [more likely](#) to fail at least one class and [less likely](#) to attend college.<sup>6</sup>

The pandemic period also made it hard—sometimes impossible—for students to meet the expectations they were held to previously (e.g., daily attendance, assignment deadlines, sustained engagement in challenging work). As one teacher said, “Students who are already struggling learners in certain areas now have other responsibilities taking care of brothers and sisters.”

In addition to knowledge gaps, students also missed opportunities to build [key skills and habits](#) needed for academic success and strong relationships. Some students told us how their learning had slowed or become more difficult. Other classmates spoke about the impact of social isolation on students' [mental health](#) and their connections with their peers.

6. High school graduation rates actually increased slightly in spring 2020, followed by a return to prior graduation levels in 2021. This pattern is not the result of reporting bias. Studies conclude that a key factor was the temporary relaxation by states and districts of graduation requirements during remote schooling. See, e.g., [“How has the pandemic affected high school graduation and college entry?”](#)

## STUDENT VOICE: ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL IMPACTS OF THE PANDEMIC

“I’m able to learn better than I did during quarantine, but it’s not as good as the way I was learning in ninth grade [before quarantine]. ... I was very quick with understanding material. ... I lost all those skills, and it’s hard to rebuild the skills that you had prior.”

“I feel like because of quarantine, everybody became very distant, very much on social media ... instead of meeting up with people. ... People have social anxiety.”

Adults, too, faced a host of pandemic-related challenges in the schools we studied. These have included [staffing shortages](#) and [increased levels of teacher burnout](#). “I will say, there are a lot of teachers that are leaving ... because I think ... we’re trying all these things, but there’s only so many things and so much time that we have until people burn out,” a teacher explained. School leaders have noticed that this burnout often hurts classroom rigor. “I don’t think it’s intentional, but I’m noticing that the teachers who are constantly presenting exhaustion, it’s impacting the kids,” an administrator said. “I think they’re [accepting] lots of things that they shouldn’t be, even if they aren’t necessarily aware of it.”

By the conclusion of our study in fall of 2023, most study participants said that these challenges were affecting them less than before. Educators still noted some signs of immaturity and learning loss in their classrooms, but reported having more strategies in place to support students—and more energy to do so, as their own lives began to stabilize.

## Schools’ responses

In some cases, schools introduced specific changes directly inspired by the pandemic. But our analysis showed that the greatest impact of the pandemic was not entirely new ideas, but rather solidified commitments to pre-existing ones. Those included the importance of recognizing students’ individual strengths and needs, and designing responsive supports, especially for students historically marginalized. In other words, schools pre-pandemic were already starting to put practices in place to enable success for every student on their own terms.

Some educators and administrators reported that the pandemic energized them to continue trying out creative approaches to meeting students’ differentiated needs. In several schools, this was fueled by educators’ increasing awareness of student struggles, both inside and outside school. In other instances, the temporary relaxing of state-level requirements for schools, and the need to quickly reimagine lesson plans for virtual and hybrid settings, provided administrators and teachers alike a “newfound license” to question long-held assumptions about teaching and learning and the role of schools in students’ lives.

Several educators in the six schools also reported that national and local conversations around race and racism—including for years before the national reckoning caused by George Floyd’s murder—prompted their leadership teams to more explicitly center racial equity. One teacher noted that her district’s focused equity work, including professional learning sessions on racial identity and speaking up against racism, predated the pandemic by several years and recent work has felt more like a “continuation” than a “pivot.”

Pandemic-related disruptions—including concerns about learning loss, increased behavioral challenges, and staffing shortages—sometimes made redesign efforts more challenging than they might have been otherwise. In a few cases, especially early in our study, the pandemic caused administrators to pause or slow down new initiatives. But on the whole, the pandemic seemed to inject new urgency and strengthen commitment to innovation in all six schools.

## Part 4: Challenges to ensuring a good life for every student

What must be in place to enable high schools to prepare young people for “good lives” that they define for themselves?

Anyone who has led or supported high school improvement efforts will be familiar with the key enabling conditions we heard: Schools need a coherent instructional model that supports students to meet high expectations. With this foundation, educators need effective strategies to help students make decisions about their futures and access higher education. To do this well, schools need access to data about how students are doing, and the ability to quickly leverage that data to inform decision-making.

We heard about these challenges repeatedly in our interviews, but they took on a unique cast, which we attributed to schools’ vision of enabling a good life for every student. Achieving this vision required solving for new dilemmas and obstacles, not just effectively implementing a tried-and-true blueprint for high school. And in some cases, the rocky pandemic recovery period made finding effective solutions more difficult.

---

### Challenge #1: Meeting students’ needs without lowering expectations and rigor

We found that during the pandemic recovery period, students needed—and sometimes demanded—a new degree of understanding from their educators about the barriers they faced. Educators were attuned to this, and the pandemic had made them even more convinced that historically marginalized students, in particular, need support and flexibility to meet high expectations. But we heard altered concerns about whether too much support and flexibility could unintentionally result in less rigor and reduced expectations. If so, this would harm students’ chances of success down the road, and perpetuate inequities instead of combating them.

### Benefits of individualized and flexible supports to reduce inequities

Our interviews made clear that giving every student an equitable opportunity to succeed requires more than high expectations alone. Schools must also ensure students are receiving tailored support to live up to their potential and personal aspirations. Since every student arrives at school with different strengths, needs, and circumstances, the intensity and nature of that support must vary accordingly. In particular, students facing structural barriers that impact their out-of-school responsibilities or at-home learning environments may need more intensive support, or new forms of flexibility.

#### EDUCATOR VOICE: THE RATIONALE FOR INDIVIDUALIZED SUPPORTS

As one teacher explained, supporting every student requires teachers to “understand the experiences that [students have] had in any area of their life and how any of those experiences, even if it’s outside of the school system, can affect how someone learns. ... By understanding [that], we can make changes, provide resources, provide accommodations for students so that they have an equal opportunity.”



We heard from educators and students alike that many of the flexible and individualized supports schools provided, described above in Part 2, have benefited students who have been historically marginalized. Some students who struggled academically shared that changes to grading policies—like prohibiting zeros and raising the lowest grade to a 50—helped motivate them to keep trying even when they were struggling.<sup>7</sup> “[W]hen you see the 50, you would [want to] work harder to get a higher grade [because] the 50 doesn’t really look that good,” one student said. “But when [teachers] give the zero, some of the kids just give up and just say, ‘It is what it is. ... I’ve been there. I got a zero and just gave up. But the 50, I felt like if I work harder, the 50 can move.”

Students with prior histories of absenteeism often told us they benefited enormously from individualized mentoring and intensive counseling. Students shared that setting goals with trusted adults helped motivate them to “get into shape,” as one student said, and apply themselves more in their classes. Another student described her school’s social worker as “my school mom” who provides support “whenever I need.”

Greater flexibility also clearly benefited students with out-of-school responsibilities. Students and teachers both agreed that changes like flexible class deadlines and attendance policies, as well as competency-based learning models that measure learning progress more than time in class, were especially helpful for high schoolers with caregiving responsibilities or part-time jobs.

“I had a student who used to come in late every day,” one teacher said. “But guess what? His responsibility was to put his little brother on the bus.” The teacher added that it’s important to be “flexible and understanding” with this student while also “making sure we’re not lowering the standards.”

#### STUDENT VOICE: I HAD TO GROW UP FASTER

“I really had to grow up faster than [my friends]. They still rely on their parents. My friend has a car, but his dad pays for [it] and everything. ... Sometimes I’ll be like, you guys don’t realize how much you have. ... I paid for my car. ... I’m in college. ... Then I work full time. ... You guys just really don’t understand.”

These benefits for students underscored that across all six schools, educators and administrators were realizing that holding an unequivocally hard line, without regard for students’ circumstances and needs, would not help every young person go on to lead a good life.

7. Using a 50 as the grading floor makes the gradations of the letter scale more proportionate by requiring the same degree of improvement to move from F to D as from B to A.

## Concerns about lower expectations and unintended consequences

At the same time, interviewees spoke about the difficulty of providing flexibility and increased support while also maintaining high expectations for all. These two somewhat contradictory, yet equally important desires co-existed with a shared understanding that a central challenge will be “to find what that balance is—how do you give that grace, but also hold people accountable?” as one counselor put it. Historically marginalized students have the most at stake as schools seek to get the balance right. Some interviews revealed a sense of unease about whether some practices intended to support students can inadvertently lower expectations and leave young people underprepared for what comes next.

Several different educators told us they felt an increasingly urgent desire to increase the rigor of academics, especially during the 2022-23 school year, out of concern that students might not be as prepared to graduate after their progress was disrupted by the pandemic.<sup>8</sup> And in every school, at least some teachers and administrators questioned whether every student consistently accessed rigorous instruction and experienced deeper learning. Several teachers and administrators worried that their colleagues scaffold challenging material too much, reducing students’ opportunity for productive struggle. “I see too often where I’m in a classroom and a teacher gets to a point where they ... should be releasing the students to meet the high expectation that they set forth, but then they sit down and begin to water it down almost right away for some students,” one principal said. This observation raises concerns both about adequate instructional rigor and whether teachers’ high expectations apply equally to all students. In too many schools, predictable groups of students—including students with IEPs, those classified as English language learners, and other historically marginalized groups—[lack access](#) to grade-level and challenging material, and miss out on opportunities for productive struggle and skill-building.

Administrators acknowledged that some teachers had not been trained to appropriately scaffold deeper learning for every student. In

those cases, teachers may inadvertently reduce rigor for students with knowledge or skill gaps, or implement resource-intensive strategies that don’t leave them enough time to support all students. A principal explained that some teachers lack the tools and experience to support students to engage in more rigorous instruction and so fall back on “becoming effectively an intensive tutor” for students who appear to struggle. Staff across schools also shared mixed reactions about whether all teachers have a shared definition of “good instruction.”

Some educators also told us they thought that well-intentioned leniency during pandemic-induced remote instruction was having unintended consequences. One longtime teacher reflected, “The class I’m teaching right now is the most emotionally needy and dependent class I’ve potentially ever taught.” When asked why, the teacher said that for several years after the onset of the pandemic, “We didn’t teach coping mechanisms, we just protected them,” suggesting that schools helped students avoid challenges rather than work through them. Appropriate expectations during this time were also compromised by staff and teacher shortages, turnover, and burnout, which made it harder to achieve school-wide instructional coherence. At two schools, for example, administrators shared that most of their teachers were fairly new and thus lacked first-hand experience of the expectations that students were held to pre-pandemic.

We also heard questions about the effect of changes to grading policies—including flexible assignment deadlines, the ability to retake tests, and prohibitions on awarding zeros. Some interviewees worried that these new policies could prevent students from developing responsibility, independence, and other habits needed to thrive in both college and the workforce. “When our kids go to college, this isn’t

---

8. Among educators who felt this urgency, their frustration was most acute when their schools offered flexibilities that took pressure off students to make learning progress on a micro level (e.g., allowing flexible deadlines and mental health days), but still expected them to make the same amount of learning progress on a macro level in order to graduate on time. Throughout our study, we heard little about strategies to accelerate learning, prioritize only the most important learning outcomes, or increase learning time (whether by extending daily schedules or by allowing students extra time to graduate).

how college goes,” one teacher said. “You have to beg for an extension and then you may or may not be granted one. I worry that our attempts to support our students can leave them unprepared for success after they leave our school.”

### CAREGIVER VOICE: HOW IT WORKS IN THE REAL WORLD

“Sometimes I think it’s a detriment to our children to allow late work, especially if there’s not an extenuating circumstance. ... Because now you are letting [students] believe [that is how it works] in the real world. You can’t come to work late every day. You can’t hand in your report to your boss late every day.”

Several educators and administrators observed that any unintended consequences of new grading policies could have particularly negative

effects on first-generation college students. They pointed out that neighboring wealthier suburbs had not implemented similar initiatives, which makes them “a bit nervous” and causes them to “listen carefully for dropping standards.” As one educator summarized, failing to hold students accountable to high expectations harms them “not immediately because ... they graduate. But it hurts them when they try to have a job or go to college or something like that, if we’re setting them up for an unrealistic expectation.”

High school seniors whom we spoke to during the 2022-23 school year didn’t often express a desire for more challenging schoolwork. But when we followed up with recent graduates in the fall of 2023, most students in college (ranging from a community college to a highly selective private college) said it was more challenging than they had anticipated; some felt unprepared. Paired with the concerns we heard from some educators, administrators, and caregivers, these students’ perspectives clearly underscore that **schools need strategies that make it possible for each student to achieve what can feel hard, not strategies that make what’s hard easier.**

### STUDENT VOICE: I FELT UNDERPREPARED FOR COLLEGE

- **Type of academic work:** “I loved this [high] school. I’ll always say that. But in a way, they kind of failed me just because I don’t know what I’m doing [in community college]. ... I’m going into college as a freshman and all I know is how to make a rocket and stuff like that. So that’s the only part of college that really has me stressed out. The work is just different.”
- **Rigor of academic work:** “[My school] told us college isn’t going to be as easy as high school was. ... They mentally prepared us, but not really academically. I remember taking AP classes and they weren’t as hard, but classes are supposed to be on the same level as college level courses, so [college] was very different and rigorous. I feel like it should match.”
- **Finding the help you need:** “I just know [some of my friends] didn’t really like school or whatever, and they’re not the type of people to speak up. They wait until somebody comes to them. But that’s the thing, college is way different. You actually have to speak up in order to get the help that you need.”
- **Time management:** One student said the prohibition on late work in her college classes surprised her, and she felt “unprepared” to manage her time efficiently.

## STUDENT VOICE: WHAT MADE ME FEEL PREPARED

- **Academic expectations:** “I took AP Environmental as a junior and that class was probably the most amount of work I’ve ever done. ... You had to do something every day just to stay on top of it. That one I would say definitely prepped me for [college]. ... Definitely that class helped me just be able to handle a big workload.”
- **College experience:** “I took a couple classes at a community college and that felt like a college class, so you might want to experience that before heading into college.”
- **The right amount of pressure:** At times ... [high school] put a lot of pressure on me, but at the end of the day, that so-called pressure helped me get into [college]. So I feel like at the end of the day, it was worth it.

## Critical questions remain

By the end of our study, it became clear that the most important question was not whether more flexible and supportive schools would result in lower expectations that harm students. Instead, we found that schools had not yet landed on an answer to the more challenging question: which expectations and standards serve students well, and which don’t? Those that do should be held fast, and students should be supported to work through challenges to meet them. Those that don’t should be changed or left aside.<sup>9</sup>

Some answers were clear. No one we spoke to believed that academic work should be made easier just so students could succeed more easily. Several schools were building educators’ skills to scaffold deeper learning without watering down material, especially for historically marginalized students. In two schools we heard specific references to helping educators become confident “[warm demanders](#),” where teachers convey warmth toward students while also demanding they work toward high expectations. Another clear answer related to school discipline: despite increased behavioral challenges during the pandemic recovery period, none of the adults

or caregivers we spoke to believed that more exclusionary discipline policies, like detentions, suspensions, or expulsions, would improve students’ behavior.

But in many other cases, **schools will need to resolve what seemed to be conflicting opinions about which high school rules and policies actually instill the habits and skills essential for students’ adult lives.** Some educators and administrators argued that traditional norms and expectations won’t actually teach students important long-term skills and habits. One administrator in a school that had eliminated zeros in classroom grading explained, “A lot of [teachers] will say to me, ‘Well, who’s going to teach [students] responsibility?’...[A]s if all those zeros are somehow going to make the kid think responsibly or behave responsibly. I just don’t think that.” Staff and families agreed that too much leniency is a bad thing, but disagreed as to which expectations are the most important to uphold.

Students’ own personal experiences and attitudes also affect which responses will help them rise to meet expectations, making one-size-fits-all solutions unrealistic. For instance,

9. Some of the expectations and standards ripe to be changed or left aside may be required by district or state policy, meaning district and state leaders must be involved in those efforts.

several educators told us how slightly stricter attendance policies were helping increase in-class time for students who had begun skipping more classes. But in two schools serving larger proportions of students who had long histories of chronic absenteeism, educators told us that stricter attendance policies were a losing proposition, disconnected from the root causes of the issue. Instead, they argued the better solution was increasing incentives for coming to school, reducing barriers that interfere with class attendance, and designing competency-based systems that would allow students to continue accumulating credit when they missed days or even weeks at a time.

As these six schools work to resolve these questions, it may be useful to recognize that concerns about “leniency” can shut down productive discussions about which factors will lead to student learning, schoolwide improvement, and postsecondary success. In these cases, schools may benefit from reminding families and educators that some policies that are mainstream now—like banning physical punishment—were [previously seen](#) as excessively lenient. From there, the discussion can focus on which expectations are most important and productive to uphold. Additionally, concerns about what the “real world” will expect of high school graduates may gloss over important criticisms that employers, higher education institutions, and lawmakers should consider when designing more humane and supportive policies. When schools try new forms of flexibility and approaches to individualized support, are they indulging teenagers? Or are they creating effective conditions for young people to learn and thrive, which other institutions should learn from?

A student who had recently started college captured the dilemma well. In an interview in fall 2023, the student criticized her high school in retrospect for “baby[ing] us.” In high school, she was given test retakes, flexible deadlines, and proactive support from teachers. But in college, “You’re the one who needs to look for the help. You’re the one who needs to turn in your work.” She said she is “grateful” for what her school did to support her, but advised her school to “give [us] help ... but put a structure so kids are good

to go when they go to college, because college and high school are two different things and you have more responsibilities on your plate than what you think.” The student said her high school “babies us a lot in the sense that they’re there for you.” That revealing comment can be seen both as a criticism of excessive support from her high school, as well as a stark observation of the lack of support from her new college environment.

## Promising efforts

When high school designs prioritize the factors discussed in Part 2 above, adults can feel more confident holding students accountable to expectations that are designed to support their equitable success. The schools in our study are all on this journey. One school has invested time and resources into rebuilding a culture of expectations across all staff. Leaders often repeat the refrain, “We hold the line together, we examine the line together, we move the line together.” The refrain signals not only the importance of maintaining a consistent set of expectations for students, but also of involving students in a responsive, adaptable way. The school has started to see early results of their efforts. “[T]his year I think the students are experiencing a set of reasonable and responsive expectations, both academic and cultural, that teachers are more united in upholding,” one administrator said. “That provides more consistency and less conflict.” This increased sense of stability has allowed teachers to focus more of their attention on fine-tuning their instructional strategies and adapting supports to meet student needs.

### STUDENT VOICE: HELP US BE SELF-SUFFICIENT

“I find that when our school fosters independence, but [also] supports us, that’s worked best for me. I really enjoy having teachers provide us information and resources ... helping us on our journey to learning, but still letting us develop these skills on our own, helping us be self-sufficient.”

Several schools have also observed promising results from tightening enforcement of behavioral policies that they loosened during the pandemic. Two schools recently implemented stricter cell-phone-use policies. At one, students must place their phones in a magnetized pouch at the beginning of each day. While some students try to get around the policy, teachers generally think it's having an impact. "[W]e saw immediate change in the classroom," a teacher said. "Engagement levels skyrocketed." One school also began using a digital hall pass system that has helped reduce the number of students absent from any given class, and the length of absence. A third school strengthened its stance on attendance by enforcing its policy that no student may receive credit for a course if the student has 20 or more absences in a given year. Administrators observed that students are taking more responsibility for "showing up," and when extenuating circumstances arise, students can receive support via accelerated credit recovery programs.

Though not all these strategies radically reimagine the high school experience, they show that schools are keenly aware of holding every student accountable to high expectations that will serve them well, even when designing supportive and flexible learning environments.

---

## Challenge #2: Supporting every student to develop a high-quality postsecondary plan

We found that while schools continued to invest in increasing college access and success, their focus had shifted to ensuring that every student would self-determine a postsecondary plan (as described above in Part 2). But schools hadn't yet defined clearly what a good postsecondary plan should look like, raising the risk of widening opportunity gaps between the most and least privileged students. Schools' infrastructure for supporting students to develop and pursue their highly varied plans was still nascent compared to the infrastructure for more traditional college preparation and counseling.

## The equity risks of inadequate plans

What exactly constitutes a *good* postsecondary plan (both in general, and for any particular student) remained under-defined in every case we studied. Some students and adults either explicitly or implicitly suggested that good plans have both earning potential and relevance to students' individual interests. As one central office administrator said, "Having a plan that's aligned with a passion ... that can make a living is now the gold standard, whether that plan is trade school, armed forces, four-year degree, two-year degree, straight to the workforce." A good postsecondary plan also seemed to be highly intentional, and contain some potential for growth or advancement.

None of the schools we studied had explicitly defined what a good plan looks like. Even at one school with a sophisticated and well-staffed postsecondary advising system, an administrator said, "[A good plan is] something that I think [is] hard to define. We don't have a rubric for it." Mostly in interviews, we heard examples of what's not a good plan: As one caregiver said, "Not just, I'm going to work part-time at the restaurant or at Amazon and float for a while. That's not a really good plan." Recent interviews from the fall of 2023 also raised the need for multiple viable plans—or at least a "plan B," as one student observed. He needed to adjust course quickly when his plan to join the military ended after a medical discharge.

Similarly, concepts like "career-ready" lacked clear indicators—even in schools with a stated goal of graduating students ready to succeed in the world of work. In practice, this meant that most staff seemed to judge students' career readiness and the quality of their postsecondary plans by feel, rather than using a common set of criteria. Although staff wanted to direct resources and support to meet individual students' needs, this was much more difficult without student-level information on which career-ready skills had been, or still needed to be, developed to put a student's plan within reach.

Without established expectations for what high-quality plans and career readiness look like, it's much easier for uneven expectations

to flourish, perpetuating existing inequities. Evidence clearly shows that college access gaps are widening, not narrowing, for lower-income, Black, and Latine students in New England and [nationally](#).<sup>10</sup> School administrators and educators in our study, especially in schools serving predominantly marginalized students, are aware of how important it is to encourage students to strongly consider higher education as an option. At the same time, many are increasingly eager to support students' self-determination and expose them to alternative non-degree pathways, especially when they are uninterested in entering a degree program after high school.

Our analysis strongly suggested that schools need to codify these good intentions with a robust and well-understood template and set of expectations for individual postsecondary plans. Otherwise, troubling disparities in who gets encouraged toward college—and who does not—could develop, and grow. As one teacher said, “I think we could do better at stimulating ambition, because we have students who have the ability, but don’t have the family infrastructure to support that, to encourage that, or even realize what that is and what that looks like.” At the same time, a staff member from another school argued that students with disrupted formal education and adult responsibilities can’t always pursue the lofty—and perhaps more risky—ambitions that more privileged students do. That staff member’s perspective illustrates why it’s important for schools to develop internal clarity, through shared standards or common rubrics, about the elements that make up a good postsecondary plan. Even if that plan is individualized for each student, each one should lead to a family-sustaining income, and should delineate specific skills students must master in order to access vital career and education opportunities down the line.

## Scaling career-connected learning

Virtually every administrator and educator we interviewed acknowledged that if students are expected to make informed decisions about their future plans, then they must have access to meaningful career-connected learning. But tangible progress appears slow. For the most part, students in the schools we studied could

opt in to courses or programs, but only a subset were doing so. One issue may be the limited scale of offerings. At one school, a career learning center only opened this year; at another, one staff member is responsible for forming all the partnerships with local businesses for work-based learning. Another issue may be students’ awareness of the opportunities. One administrator said she worries that top-down messaging isn’t sinking in. “We talk about [career-connected learning opportunities] ... and then for whatever reason, [students] don’t hear about them,” she said. “If they hear about them, they hear about them from their friends.”

Another reason for the slow growth of work-based learning programs is state policies, including seat-time-based credit requirements. As an administrator said, “There’s not a lot of flexibility in credits for students and where they can take those credits. So if students are not planning from their freshman [or] sophomore year, it’s very difficult for them to double up or triple up on courses in a [career] pathway their junior [or] senior year.”

Some schools also faced potential resistance to their increased focus on career and real-world learning. At two high schools, we heard from academically oriented families that they wished their schools would focus mainly on what they see as the most rigorous and prestigious academic opportunities, like AP courses. Meanwhile, other families want a wider set of pathway opportunities. To address potential resistance and ensure equitable opportunity, schools will need to guarantee that career-connected and real-world learning experiences are just as rigorous as college-prep pathways—and reliably produce skills that help students successfully lead good lives, not just get jobs.

## Advising capacity is still developing

Another challenge administrators noted is insufficient advising about the expansive possibilities. In general, our interviews showed that the process for advising high schoolers

---

10. A forthcoming working paper from the Center on Reinventing Public Education finds that students in New England were less likely to enroll in postsecondary education in the first two years of the pandemic compared to before. Postsecondary enrollment among historically underrepresented groups declined especially starkly.

on career paths and work-based learning pales in comparison to the infrastructure for college advising. While schools have resources to help students navigate the many steps to enrolling in college, analogous checklists and guides don't exist for students more interested in getting a good job, starting a business, or pursuing workforce training.<sup>11</sup>

Interviews with some school staff members and families suggested that counselors and advisors have less familiarity with how to guide students to develop a “good plan” that doesn't involve immediate college enrollment.<sup>12</sup> An administrator pointed out that most staff and teachers went to college after high school. “And now all these [staff members] with the same mindset have to figure out how to [help students] join the military, how to go into a labor union,” he said. “They have no idea.”

We saw little evidence from students that counselors advised them about the skills and capabilities they would need in today's dynamic workforce, beyond basic concepts like interviewing or resume writing. We also noticed the persistent misconception that students who wanted to start working right after high school would not need the same college readiness skills as their peers. In fact, many early-stage career pathways will require some form of ongoing education or degree to advance, and some students told us they weren't ready for higher education right now but hoped to pursue it later.

## Promising efforts

Schools in our study were making some promising early progress to ensure postsecondary exploration and planning doesn't perpetuate existing inequities. For instance, one school has begun to build school-wide consensus on what a “good plan” means, including explicit conversations about how to intentionally and thoughtfully embrace a wider variety of postsecondary plans, without perpetuating existing inequities. An administrator explained that in working with the school's guidance

counselors, he has emphasized that a good plan for every student needs to be informed by their individual strengths, interests, challenges, and goals. It also needs to be both ambitious and grounded, with clarity about the skill or resource gaps that a student will need support to overcome. He said schools must proactively avoid the risk that students default into college, trade school, or a job based on resource constraints or preconceived ideas among staff about their potential.

We also saw evidence for early progress in scaling career learning opportunities. One school's leadership team has recognized that scaling its career pathways programming requires more capacity and expertise than they have within the building. The team has partnered with a nonprofit organization that collaborates with high-need districts throughout the state to launch and scale pathways programming to equip students for both careers and higher education. “We have four or five people [from the nonprofit] in the building now that are helping us develop real pathways to get kids the skills they need, but also the opportunities and relationships,” an administrator said. With the support of the nonprofit, which provides program roadmaps, technical assistance, and connections to industry and government leaders, the school has scaled its pathways offerings year after year, constantly improving how it markets the program to students, and supports them. Four pathways (business, nursing, medical responders, automotives) are currently available, with expansion to a fifth for manufacturing likely. The goal, the administrator explained, is to capture “the full spectrum” of students' interests over the coming years.

Several schools have also taken steps to strengthen advising and build a whole-school culture where conversations about careers and adult life more broadly—not just higher education—are the norm. In one school, required classes starting in ninth grade explore the intersection of students' interests and possible

---

11. A recent [article](#) about college and career counseling drove this point home, describing how one counselor has a “checklist of next steps ready” for teens who have “their sights set on higher education.” But, the article pointed out, “there's no equivalent checklist” for the increasing proportion of students who want to start making money without a college degree.

12. Since only two of our participants were postsecondary counselors, we weren't able to verify if, on the whole, counselors agreed with this assessment.



career paths. The goal is to develop a solid plan over the course of the student’s time in high school. At another school, students praised the advisory program as a place to have honest conversations and build relationships. Staff said the program focuses on building skills like teamwork, creativity, self-efficacy, and leadership, and they try to make explicit how these skills will benefit students in their careers and lives as adults. Another school is focused on expanding college counselors’ awareness of other career pathways where a degree isn’t a prerequisite for getting a job. Many educators and staff across schools told us they are increasingly incorporating career readiness and planning discussions into their classes and individual meetings with students.

---

### **Challenge #3: Collecting and using (the right) data for innovation and improvement**

We found that strong data systems and capacity to use data for decision-making were just as important as ever for schools’ improvement efforts. But the goal of helping every student achieve a good life required new, less traditionally accessible, kinds of data and analysis for schools. All six schools in our study were designing student experiences to result not only in traditional learning outcomes, but in non-traditional ones like career readiness, supportive relationships, identity development, and a personal faith in education as a force for growth. These non-traditional outcomes were essential, we heard, for achieving good lives, not just college acceptance or a job offer.

### **Lack of data**

There are stark inadequacies in the data that’s available for schools to leverage. Educators and administrators at several schools described a disconnect between the quantitative metrics that get prioritized and measured by the state—such as SAT/ACT participation and achievement, graduation rates, or attendance—and the metrics that show outcomes the school itself prioritizes. At one school, for instance, annual changes to state testing requirements (e.g., changing tested grade years, or making assessments optional) have made it impossible to compare academic performance across years. The school mainly relied on its own grading data to gauge if academic performance is changing, even though administrators knew this data wasn’t comparable. At the same school, an administrator described how the school has an extremely limited understanding of students’ socioeconomic context because the state also no longer requires families to submit forms for free and reduced-price lunch eligibility. The school had begun relying on limited and non-comparable data from multiple county and local municipal offices instead.

Other kinds of data are completely unavailable, especially when it comes to non-traditional student outcomes. Largely this was because the results schools want to know about aren’t measured reliably or well. For instance, several schools are attempting to track students’ engagement (not just attendance) and progress toward their own learning goals (not just grades). But many are designing from scratch the indicators and data systems to capture this information.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, the majority

of schools in the study struggled with lack of information about how students fare after graduation. Administrators told us they want to know whether students are successful in, and happy with, the postsecondary pathways they choose. But they generally had few ways of learning this systematically. Information about students' postsecondary pathways is limited to higher education trajectories (e.g., from National Student Clearinghouse) or unable to be viewed at the school level (e.g., in the case of a school that operates inside of a larger high school). Only one school had reliable access to information about students' well-being after graduation.

In light of inadequate or missing data about students' experiences and outcomes, schools in our study were mostly focused on measuring inputs. For instance, most staff and administrators could share information about how many students go on field trips, do job shadows, enroll in advanced courses, or have a counseling session. But they weren't able to point to evidence (apart from grades or pass rates) about the skills, mindsets, or relationships students develop as a result of those experiences. For instance, when asked how the school knows that all students develop career readiness skills, one administrator said, "[Because] we have a curriculum that specifically targets it." Yet there's no information about the results the school has seen from that curriculum.

Our interviews with administrators, in particular, surfaced underlying concerns about whether lack of data could work against a school's innovation efforts. First, schools were often evaluating innovations based on anecdotal observations or by feel. That wasn't always enough to convince stakeholders—whether families, teachers, or district administrators—that ongoing effort was worthwhile. Second, leaders sometimes worried that relying exclusively on traditional metrics could actually work against schools' goal of ensuring students went on to lead good lives of their own choosing. **Improving SAT scores, for example, might help raise a school's statewide ranking, but wouldn't necessarily lead to instructional choices that nurture students' individual interests and result in high-quality postsecondary plans.**

## Lack of capacity to use data

Given the importance of effective data use to inform decision-making, we were encouraged to see most of the schools in our study focusing energy in this area. Along with measuring and tracking the data they need, the schools we studied are developing real-time monitoring and intervention to ensure extra support for students who need it. But even those with the most sophisticated data systems and mindsets faced challenges in making the most out of the information.

One challenge is usability of the data systems themselves. Several administrators and educators we spoke to described what amounted to data clutter where there's so much information that it can be difficult to interpret and utilize the data without a well-designed user interface. One staff member told us that she was overwhelmed by the school's in-house database with detailed information about students' attendance, counseling sessions, learning progress, and more. "When I first tried to do this, [I thought] it just doesn't work," she said. She wanted to use the data system to track students' career interests, but ended up creating her own tracking spreadsheet on the side. Instances like this suggest schools can end up data-rich but process-poor.

Another challenge is building teachers' capacity for using data to enable more individualized instruction and support. We found that, by and large, educators discussed using data primarily as a tool for accountability—to assess whether students have met the target learning goals on average—rather than instructional improvement and personalization. Although many administrators said they push themselves and their teachers to utilize data to tailor instruction to individual students, these efforts are mostly nascent. They noted that especially in larger comprehensive high schools, each teacher works with far more students than elementary and middle school teachers do. Additionally, high

---

13. Existing tools can help high schools measure some of these outcomes. Several schools in our study used [Panorama](#) student surveys; [Tripod](#) and the [Leaps Student Voice](#) surveys also collect perspectives from students. Other tools, like [mastery transcripts](#), capture competency-based records of student learning.

school teachers tended to see their expertise as anchored in their subject matter, rather than in more generalizable instructional practices, including customization.

Lastly, schools were still building capacity to use data in “real time”—in other words, for instructional improvement throughout the year. Teachers noted that they don’t have collaborative learning spaces to review, process, interpret, and take action based on data. They also said that gathering formative assessment<sup>14</sup> data—while desired—takes away from instruction because formative assessments aren’t embedded enough in daily classroom activities or curriculum. This issue also relates directly to the challenges, described earlier, with data access: if teachers don’t have access to ongoing data about learning progress throughout the year, then the information arrives too late to be useful for improvement.

## Promising efforts

Most schools we studied were working on solutions to attempt to fill their data gaps. One charter school used a robust system for tracking and supporting students through postsecondary education and into career paths. The system was created only through significant investment by the central offices of multiple regional charter networks. Five schools had developed or adopted ways to measure students’ sense of belonging, engagement in learning (beyond simple attendance), and relationships with adults. Those five schools were also working on data systems and practices that allow them to assess how new practices are going, and iterate to improve them. **These detailed, real-time data systems are critical because redesign efforts involving new practices and solutions require the ability to assess the quality of implementation.** Without that ability, schools can’t ensure that redesign initiatives are having their intended impact, especially on historically marginalized students.



14. According to the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), [formative assessment](#) is a planned, ongoing process used by all students and teachers during learning and teaching to elicit and use evidence of student learning to improve student understanding of intended disciplinary learning outcomes and support students to become self-directed learners.” It requires teachers and students to clarify learning goals and success criteria within a broader progression of learning; elicit and analyze evidence of student thinking; engage in self-assessment and peer feedback; provide actionable feedback; and use evidence and feedback to move learning forward by adjusting learning strategies, goals, or instructional strategies.

## SCHOOL SPOTLIGHTS: ACTIONABLE DATA DASHBOARDS

- In one school, a staff member worked with a developer to build a customized data system that affords detailed insight into how attendance, engagement, credit-earning, and behavior change in real time as staff experiment with new ideas. The platform tracked both student data on real-time progress toward completing assignments and earning competencies in class, as well as staff actions like biweekly “case conferencing” meetings with a caseload of 15 students. The platform helped staff visualize whether they’re on pace with their student meetings and outreach, and also let students see their credits accumulate as they demonstrate competencies in class. With this kind of information, staff could see in real time how their case conferencing sessions were leading to greater credit-earning.
- In two other schools, educators and administrators used a data hub

designed by a statewide improvement network focused on supporting urban high schools. The network designed the hub in collaboration with educators and administrators and has been iterating on its features and functionality over several years through ongoing user feedback. The hub’s goal was to strengthen data access, integration, functionality, and security, and promote timely educator action in support of student learning. Staff at both schools appreciated easy access to data on grades, credits, attendance, behavior, and college and career readiness, integrated into a single system. Color coding (green, yellow, red based on need) allowed educators to easily identify students who require targeted support or who may be ready for more advanced challenges. When a student is flagged red, an administrator explained, “We’ll have seven adults meet about [the student] and it’s a strengths-based protocol that we leverage to develop a two week plan for her.”

We also saw some evidence that schools were negotiating with district and state leaders to better match the data they’re accountable for with their schools’ missions and designs. In one case, a school implementing a competency-based learning initiative had negotiated with the district to map its competency framework—with competencies like “I can craft a line of reasoning” and “I have identified my support network”—to conventional high school course credits. In a charter school serving many pregnant and parenting students, administrators are beginning to negotiate with state leaders about an alternative accountability model that better reflects the school’s mission and student needs.

Several schools are dedicating professional learning time to help educators use data to individualize instruction and support. At one school, central office and school leaders are

using professional development sessions this year to build—or in some cases, rebuild—educators’ skills so they can better analyze how individual students are doing in their classes, and create tailored support plans. At another school, one grade-level teaching team has decided to focus time in their professional learning community sessions on “data stepbacks” where subject-area teachers can focus collective attention on individual students.

## Part 5: Sustaining momentum

In each school we studied, the journey to ensuring every student's path to a good life is in progress but unfinished. Some schools in our study have been working for years—even close to a decade—to shift mindsets, practices, and systems toward a more student-centered high school experience where young people are active participants in creating their own futures. What can these schools teach us about what's needed to not just adopt an innovation, but continuously improve and refine the changes they make?

### FIVE FACTORS THAT HELPED SCHOOLS SUSTAIN MOMENTUM FOR INNOVATION

1. A shared, school-wide vision and mission
2. Leaders and staff who believe in the school's mission and design
3. The ability to document, share, and celebrate progress
4. Systemic capacity for learning and adapting strategies over time
5. Sharing leadership and embracing small steps

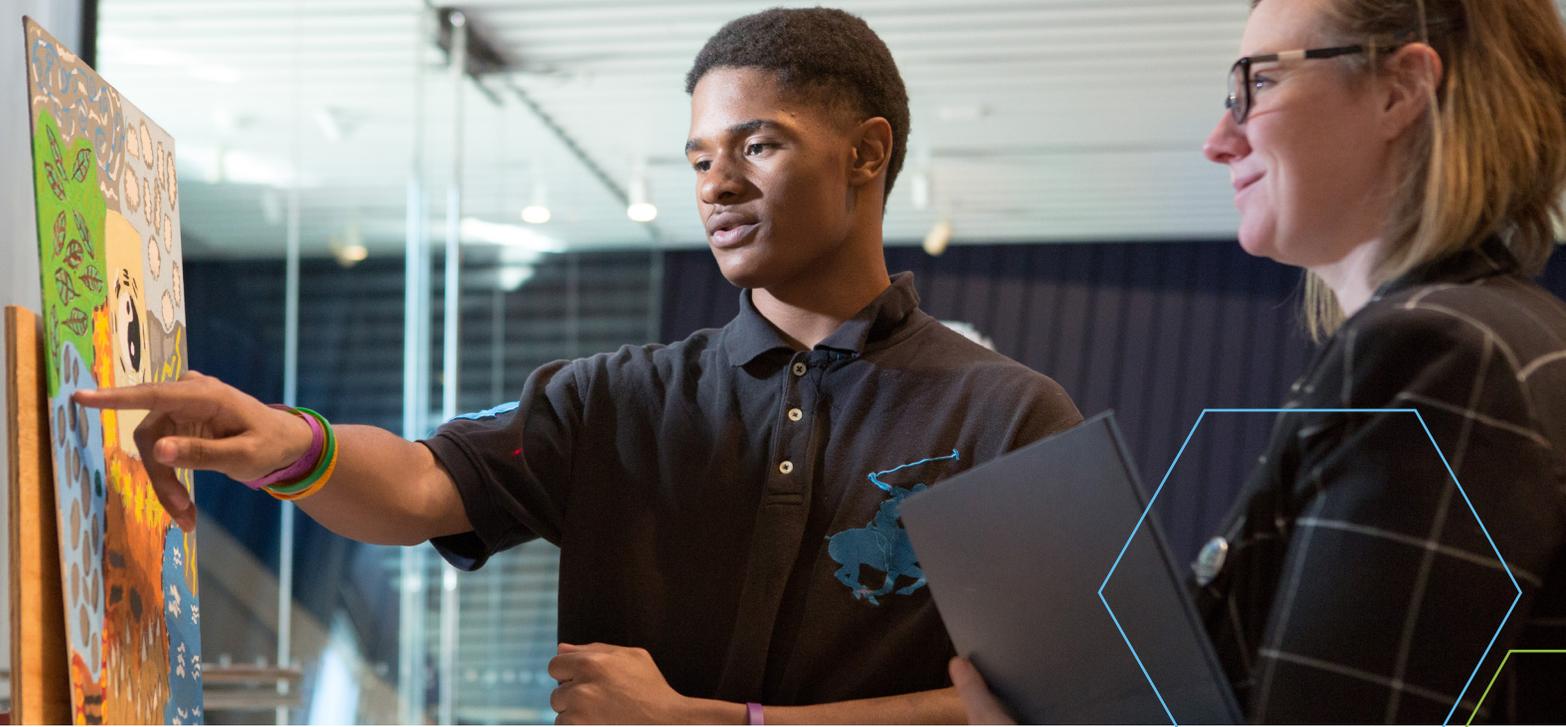
First, a clear, school-wide vision and mission that permeates the school's design can make change efforts feel less like a hamster wheel. One school in our study benefited from a grounding in the charter network's longtime mission, and several others had adopted [Portraits of a Graduate](#)—with substantial input from students, families, and educators—in an effort to align school design

to a coherent shared vision for student success. But sustaining momentum appeared more challenging in schools where innovation was grounded in a particular initiative, rather than a broader, widely shared sense of purpose and mission.

Additionally, ensuring leaders and staff teams understood and believed in the school's mission and design benefited all six schools in one way or another. All six schools in our study had leaders—and in some cases, successive chains of leaders—with longer tenures and a consistent, strategic vision that had been embraced school-wide over time. Relatedly, some schools in the study benefited from the ability to make autonomous school-level hiring decisions, and to invest in building staff culture around the vision and mission. The two schools in our study that struggled the most with staff turnover found that orienting new staff to the school's approach, and losing institutional knowledge, meant that innovation progressed more slowly or faced resistance because new staff didn't understand what had been tried before, why, or with what consequences.

Schools also benefited from being able to document, share, and celebrate progress. At two schools, attendance rates have risen tremendously after investment in student-staff relationship strategies for outreach and mentoring. At another school, a concerted effort to enroll marginalized students in advanced courses resulted in dramatically increased participation and set the stage for a focus on differentiated support to ensure students succeed in those courses. Schools with stronger systems for knowledge management were better able to track and share what's working and determine why. Schools struggled to track and share progress when they lacked knowledge management capacity and access to data that actually illustrated the change they hoped to see.<sup>15</sup>

15. "Knowledge management" refers to the set of processes a school system or other organization uses to create, organize, share, and use knowledge to make decisions and improve practice.



Without systemic capacity for learning and adapting, schools' change efforts can easily fizzle out or create unintended effects. In other words, both central offices and schools must embrace a philosophy of testing hypotheses, rather than implementing static plans. Doing so means building adaptive capacity to revisit assumptions and change course, as well as managing resistance. One school leader said, "We have to change our practices in order to meet the needs of the ever-changing adolescent." Doing so requires regularly gauging what students', families', and educators' evolving needs are, and evaluating whether the changes schools make are meeting those needs.

Finally, schools built endurance for the long road of redesign by encouraging teacher leadership and administrator-teacher partnerships, and embracing small steps, not just giant leaps. At one school, the principal's philosophy of what

high school should be has driven how the school has evolved, but she said she tries "not to be top-down with decisions" and relies heavily on department heads and lead teachers to propose and lead new work. Another school principal reflected that when we began interviewing him at the height of the pandemic, he would have said that innovation meant "outside of the box" solutions that buck the status quo. At that time, the school was making major changes to how students earned credits, how courses were staffed, and how student services were structured. A year and a half later, he said, "I'm becoming more comfortable with the idea that iteration can be an innovation." With the core elements of the school's unconventional approach in place, the work is more about fine-tuning to drive improvement, with fewer dramatic changes.

## Part 6: Conclusion and recommendations

In these six schools and thousands of others across New England and the country, the work of adapting and innovating to put opportunity and success within every student’s reach will continue to be difficult. High schools have proven remarkably resistant to change, and past efforts to transform them have seen limited results at best. The efforts we observed to overcome the instructional and systemic barriers described in Part 4 offer some reasons for optimism. At the same time, our research provides a stark reminder of the formidable roadblocks that schools face when undertaking innovation.

Our analysis clearly suggests that empowering every student to maximize their potential and achieve a good life on their own terms requires new designs for high school. To succeed, high schools will need to carry forward their pandemic-era willingness to innovate and rethink long-held assumptions in four key areas:

**1. Instructional models that support and challenge every student.** As schools introduce more flexibility and robust support, they will need to remain laser-focused on setting and maintaining high expectations for every student, even if the endgame for those expectations—traditionally, a bachelor’s degree—is shifting. No student should be given an “easier” high school experience based on their perceived potential or stated aspirations; all students need a challenging one that supports them to maximize their potential.

**2. High-quality, individualized postsecondary plans.** Enabling every student to achieve a good life on their own terms necessitates that schools support each student to develop a high-quality, individualized postsecondary plan that aligns with their individual goals and priorities—as well as a sense of a plan B. Doing so is only possible if schools expose students to a far more diverse range of education, training, work, and mentorship opportunities, and build capacity for robust advising beyond college counseling.

**3. Systemic capacity to leverage (the right) data.** Schools’ goal of helping every student achieve a good life requires attention to new kinds of data—including but also beyond traditional success indicators—so teachers can provide students with differentiated supports and help them achieve individualized goals.

**4. Sustainability and improvement.** Schools committed to equity-driven innovation must build capacity across their communities to sustain momentum for innovation and adaptation over the long term. Doing so requires a clear vision, visible progress, systemic capacity for learning, and an iterative approach to change.

Expecting schools to do this transformative work alone would be unrealistic. School and system leaders need partnership and support from both policymakers and community partners. The recommendations below, emerging from our 20 months of research as well as literature on school redesign and improvement, are intended to guide state leaders and policymakers, school and system leaders, community partners, and others seeking to support high schools to sustain their redesign journeys.



# Recommendations for state leaders and policymakers

**Articulate a vision for a good life.** First, state leaders and policymakers should support school and district communities to articulate clear, shared beliefs about what it means for students to lead good lives, and which high school experiences and outcomes enable every student to graduate prepared to achieve a good life.

This may take the form of district-level [Portraits of a Graduate](#), or even municipal, regional, and state-level shared visions that prioritize input from families, students, educators, and community members. With this shared vision in place, state leaders and policymakers should:

## Instructional models that support and challenge every student

- Summarize and share information about high-quality implementation of evidence-based and equitable instructional practices and policies. For example, help translate the promising ideas about [grading for equity](#) alongside evidence about how changing grading policies can [unintentionally disadvantage](#) lower-performing students. Where existing research and evidence is limited, convene stakeholders to build statewide knowledge of what's working, common challenges, and areas in need of further research.
- Make funding and learning opportunities available for schools and districts wanting to help educators improve [“warm demander”](#) and [culturally responsive and sustaining](#) pedagogical practices, as well as [restorative approaches](#) to discipline. Simultaneously, invest in strategies to grow the pipeline of racially diverse educators, and to build the capacity of white educators to understand how racial identity and background impact their work with students of color.
- Facilitate bridge-building between high schools and higher education to ensure students, especially those historically marginalized or the first in their families to attend college, receive individualized support.

## High-quality, individualized postsecondary plans

- Offer districts resources and guidance for defining concepts that lack clarity, such as “career readiness” and what makes a “high-quality” postsecondary plan. Draw heavily on the experiences of recent high school graduates, who can share firsthand experiences of what helped or hindered their transitions into higher education, work, and adult life.
- Create resources for high school counseling and guidance teams, such as [tools](#) to support students’ postsecondary planning and identify and track progress toward ambitious individualized goals. Supplement these tools with comprehensive checklists on pursuing career pathways (much like those that exist for the college process), as well as guidance on how to talk to students about future education and training, even if college isn’t part of their immediate plans.
- Update statewide standards and provide funding for schools to infuse career-connected learning across their curriculum, and review existing seat-time requirements to ensure outdated rules don’t prevent students from pursuing career-oriented courses.
- Facilitate cross-district collaboration and partnerships with businesses and the higher education community to increase the number and quality of work-based learning programs available to students. For instance, strengthen the role of [state-sponsored nonprofit intermediaries](#) that can serve as brokers among employers, schools, and individual students.

**Leveraging  
(the right) data**

- Provide schools with new measurement tools, strategies, and guidance on data systems that reflect the student experiences and outcomes that matter to communities. For example, help districts collect and disaggregate data on where high school students end up after graduation, [as some colleges do](#).
- Redesign existing accountability systems to include new metrics that help schools gauge their success at supporting students, including those historically marginalized, to go on to lead good lives. These new metrics should complement (not replace) existing effective measures for academic learning, and draw on the shared community vision for high school experiences and outcomes that matter most.
- Audit the overall data collection burden on districts to ensure that it is manageable and as embedded as possible into existing curricula.

**Sustainability  
and  
improvement**

- Convene district leaders, school leaders, families, and students to build relationships, share effective practices, help schools conserve precious research and development resources, and hold one another accountable for persevering on their innovation journeys from one year to the next.

# Recommendations for school and system leaders

**Articulate a vision for a good life.** First, school and system leaders should engage their communities—including families, students, educators, and other community members—to articulate clear, shared beliefs about what it means for students to lead good lives, and which high school experiences and outcomes

enable every student to achieve a good life. This may take the form of district-level Portraits of a Graduate, or draw on existing frameworks at the municipal, regional, and state level. With this shared vision in place, school and system leaders should:

## Instructional models that support and challenge every student

- Align on a shared definition of “good instruction,” including what it looks like at the classroom level to maintain high expectations for every student while also ensuring that students have appropriate support and flexibility tailored to their needs.
- Review existing curricular materials for rigor, ensuring that students in every course have [opportunities](#) for deeper learning, higher-order thinking, and mastery of grade-level material designed for college and career readiness.
- Conduct regular classroom observations to help educators and staff reflect on their instructional practice, aiming to ensure every student is supported enough to engage with the learning material but not so much to remove productive struggle.
- Design courses that engage students in [purposeful, meaningful learning](#) by applying knowledge in multiple ways and drawing connections between academic concepts and their utility in the wider world.

## High-quality, individualized postsecondary plans

- Define the characteristics of a high-quality postsecondary plan, shift existing college counseling infrastructure to [embrace broader postsecondary exploration and planning](#) (including a range of degree and non-degree pathways), and leverage community assets to create additional mentorship opportunities.
- Systemize career-connected learning alongside college preparation by ensuring that all students—including those with plans to enroll in college—can progress along a [three-phase journey](#) from career awareness to career preparation and career launch.
- Partner with stakeholders to ensure that new career pathways programming matches both students’ interests and the local and regional economy.

### Leveraging (the right) data

- Shift local-level data systems to better assess and make transparent (1) the information that students and communities care about and (2) the information educators need to disaggregate and evaluate student progress and support students' individual learning needs. Involve students, families, and educators in defining and designing new measurement and data systems.
- With school boards, adopt local graduation policies on top of state requirements to prioritize the kinds of experiences and skills that will help each student design a path toward a good life of their choosing.
- Support a cultural shift among educators about how data “for learning” differs from data “of learning,” and offer individualized coaching and professional development to build educator fluency collecting and analyzing formative student data (both qualitative and quantitative).

### Sustainability and improvement

- With school boards, direct long-term and sustainable district funding toward promising high school redesign efforts to ensure they are not contingent exclusively on grants or temporary state funding.
- Adopt a process for treating new strategies as [hypotheses to be tested and continuously improved upon](#); celebrate progress and monitor for unintended consequences.
- Embrace effective and equitable [family engagement strategies](#) that create ongoing opportunities for stakeholders to provide input and feedback—not just at set points of the school year but on an ongoing basis as new conditions and challenges emerge.

## Recommendations for community partners

**Articulate a vision for a good life.** First, community partners and advocacy groups should actively engage with school, district, and state leaders to help articulate clear, shared beliefs about what it means for students to lead

good lives, and which high school experiences and outcomes enable every student to achieve a good life. With this shared vision in place, community partners should:

### **Instructional models that support and challenge every student**

- Advocate for every student's right to high-quality, grade-level instructional materials and effective, diverse teachers and staff equipped to support every student's learning and growth.
- Host conversations in partnership with community-based organizations, schools, and districts to agree on the most important supports and points of flexibility for high school students and what historically marginalized students need to succeed without being underestimated.
- Organize in support of initiatives that educators and students say are the biggest barriers to young people's engagement and success in school. For example, students may need access to free mental health counseling, childcare, transportation, or work space outside their homes.

### **High-quality, individualized postsecondary plans**

- Conduct community conversations, in partnership with schools and districts, to collectively align on a shared vision for student success and a districtwide Portrait of a Graduate, as well as definitions for "college and career readiness" and the elements of a high-quality postsecondary plan, whether or not it includes higher education. These conversations should focus on the skills, habits, and mindsets that are important for students to live good lives as adults, including being able to meet expectations in the workplace, in higher education, and as members of families and communities.
- Mobilize assets from the community to help students gain career exposure, work experience, and support to develop postsecondary plans. For example, caring adults could volunteer as mentors; business representatives can offer internship and job shadow opportunities; and recent high school or college graduates could support current students as near-peer advisors.

**Leveraging  
(the right) data**

- Advocate to school and district leaders that a broader vision for student success—and multiple pathways to success—should guide how schools assess desired outcomes for every student.
- Ask education leaders about data showing students’ well-being and success beyond traditional metrics like graduation rates or test scores. Alternative evidence might show, for example, the strength and diversity of students’ relationships with adults in the community, their career aspirations, or their engagement in learning. Community demand for what makes a “good” school can help leaders recognize the limitations of exclusively relying on existing measures of success.

**Sustainability  
and  
improvement**

- Form, or join, coalitions and collective action initiatives with long-term strategies to advocate for high schools that support every student’s individualized pursuit of a good life.
- Support efforts to diversify boards of education and ensure that board members have access to relevant research and community-specific data needed to support long-term redesign efforts focused on supporting marginalized students.
- Contribute and amplify stories of progress and positive change in schools while still remaining focused on critical issues of equity.

# Appendix A: Full list of resources and references

## Instructional models that support and challenge every student:

- Adelman, Chad. "Schooling vs. Learning: How Lax Standards Hurt the Lowest-Performing Students." *The 74*, October 30, 2023. <https://www.the74million.org/article/https-www-the74million-org-article-schooling-learning-lax-standards-hurt-low-income-students/>.
- Feldman, Joe. "Grading for Equity." Corwin, 2018.
- Hammond, Zaretta. "Culturally Responsive Teaching & The Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students." Corwin, 2015.
- Kirsch, Nathalie. "Restorative Practices for School Discipline, Explained." *FutureEd*. December 5, 2022. <https://www.future-ed.org/restorative-practices-for-school-discipline-explained/>
- Loschert, Kristen et al. "Science of Learning: What Educators Need to Know About Adolescent Development." *Alliance for Excellent Education*. September, 2019. [https://all4ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/05-SAL-What-Educators-Need-to-Know-About-Adolescent-Development\\_FINAL.pdf](https://all4ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/05-SAL-What-Educators-Need-to-Know-About-Adolescent-Development_FINAL.pdf)
- Mehta, Jal and Fine, Sarah. *In Search of Deeper Learning: The Quest to Remake the American High School*. Harvard University Press, 2019.
- Mineo, Liz. "Searching for deeper learning: A recipe for how high schools can foster more analytical, critical, and creative thinking." *The Harvard Gazette*. August 23, 2019. <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2019/08/a-recipe-for-how-high-schools-can-foster-deeper-learning/>
- Osher, David et al. "Thriving, Robust Equity, and Transformative Learning & Development: A More Powerful Conceptualization of the Contributors to Youth Success." *The Readiness Projects*. June, 2020. <https://soldalliance.org/partner-post/thriving-robust-equity-and-transformative-learning-and-development-a-more-powerful-conceptualization-of-the-contributors-to-youth-success/>
- Ware, Franita. "Warm Demander Pedagogy: Culturally Responsive Teaching That Supports a Culture of Achievement for African American Students." *Sage Journals* 41, 2006. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085906289710>
- "Making High School Meaningful: A Vision for Transformative Learning Experiences." Springpoint, n.d. <https://www.springpointschools.org/making-high-school-meaningful/#make-high-school-meaningful>

- "The Opportunity Myth: What Students Can Show Us About How School Is Letting Them Down - and How to Fix It." TNTP, 2018. <https://opportunitymyth.tntp.org/>

## High-quality, individualized postsecondary plans:

- Bay, Joshua. "Gen Z's Declining College Interest Persists - Even Among Middle Schoolers." *The 74*, August 24, 2023. <https://www.the74million.org/article/gen-zs-declining-college-interest-persists-even-among-middle-schoolers/>.
- Bierly, Chris and Smith, Abigail. "Taking Flight: How to maximize the potential of career-connected learning." *Bain & Company*, 2022. [https://www.bain.com/globalassets/noindex/2022/bain-report-taking-flight\\_career-connected-learning.pdf](https://www.bain.com/globalassets/noindex/2022/bain-report-taking-flight_career-connected-learning.pdf)
- Cerullo, Megan. "More U.S. Companies No Longer Requiring Job Seekers to Have a College Degree." *CBS News*, December 5, 2023.
- Elsen-Rooney, Michael. "As NYC teens rethink college and career options, counselors are trying to adapt." *Chalkbeat*, October 30, 2023. <https://www.chalkbeat.org/newyork/2023/10/30/23938550/pandemic-changes-college-career-counselors-social-media-tik-tok-trade-school/>.
- Forman, Benjamin and Ngongi-Lukula, Simone. "Early College as a Force for Equity in the Post-Pandemic Era: Discussion Paper." *MassINC*, April, 2021. <https://massincmain.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/MassINC-Early-College-as-a-Force-for-Equity-Report-Apr-14.pdf>
- Harris, Douglas N. and Chen, Feng. "How Has the Pandemic Affected High School Graduation and College Entry." *Brookings*, May 10, 2022. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-has-the-pandemic-affected-high-school-graduation-and-college-entry/>.
- Hunter Quartz, Karen. "Framing, Supporting, and Tracking College-For-All Reform." *The High School Journal* 102, 2019. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26757722>.
- Liang, Belle and Klein, Timothy. "How to Navigate Life." *St. Martin's Press*, 2022.
- Marcus, Jon. "The College Degree Gap Between Black and White Americans Was Always Bad. It's Getting Worse." *The Hechinger Report*, May 15, 2023. <https://hechingerreport.org/the-college-going-gap-between-black-and-white-americans-was-always-bad-its-getting-worse/>.
- Tough, Paul. "Americans Are Losing Faith in the Value of College. Whose Fault is That?" *The New York Times Magazine*, September 5, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/05/magazine/college-worth-price.html>.

- Welding, Lyss. “U.S. College Enrollment Decline: Facts and Figures.” *BestColleges*. August 16, 2023. <https://www.bestcolleges.com/research/college-enrollment-decline/#fn-1>
- “About CareerWise: Mission, Vision, and Values.” CareerWise Colorado, accessed January 2, 2024. <https://www.careerwisecolorado.org/en/story/>
- “Fall 2020 College Enrollment Declines 2.5%: Nearly Twice the Rate of Decline of Fall 2019.” National Student Clearinghouse, December 17, 2020. <https://www.studentclearinghouse.org/fall-2020-college-enrollment-declines-2-5-nearly-twice-the-rate-of-decline-of-fall-2019/>.
- “My Career and Academic Plan (MyCAP).” Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, August 9, 2022. <https://www.doe.mass.edu/ccte/ccr/mycap/>

### Leveraging (the right) data:

- Gross, Ali. “14 New England Communities to Build a ‘Portrait of a Graduate.’” Barr Foundation, December 11, 2019. <https://www.barrfoundation.org/blog/14-new-england-communities-to-build-portrait-of-a-graduate>
- “Revising the Definition of Formative Assessment.” The Council of Chief State School Officers, 2024. <https://ccsso.org/resource-library/revising-definition-formative-assessment>
- “The NACE First-Destination Survey.” National Association of Colleges and Employers, Accessed January 2, 2024. <https://www.naceweb.org/job-market/graduate-outcomes/first-destination>

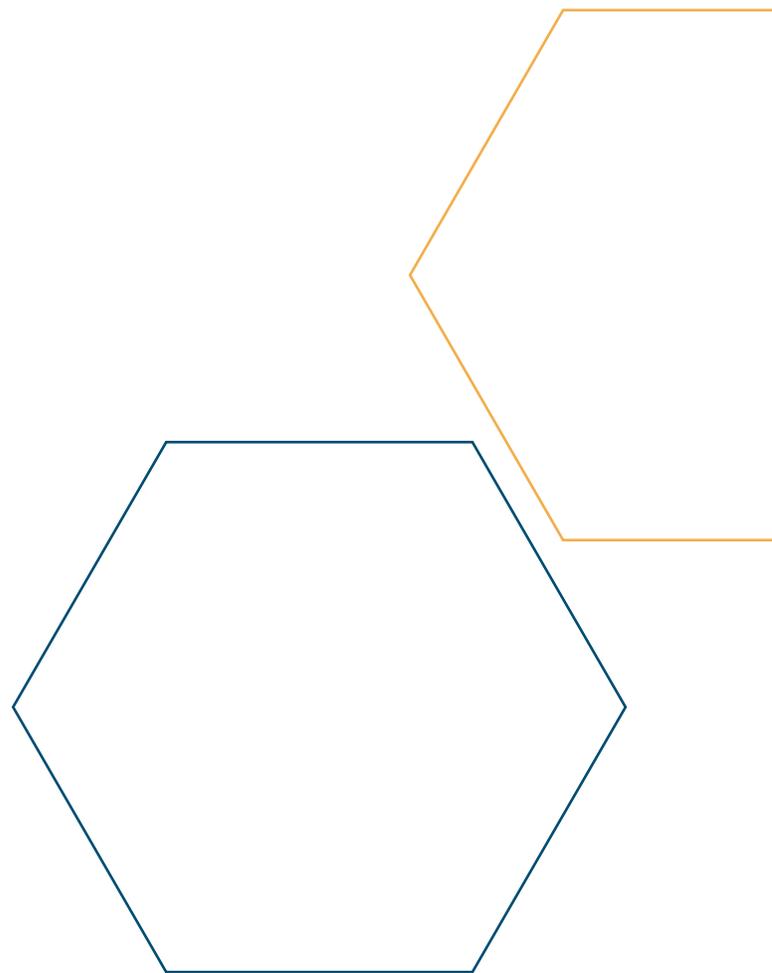
### Sustainability and improvement:

- Cuban, Larry and Tyack, David. “Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform.” *Harvard University Press*. March 25, 1997.
- Mapp, Karen L. and Bergman, Eyal. “Dual capacity-building framework for family-school partnerships (Version 2).” *Dual Capacity*, 2019. <https://www.dualcapacity.org/>
- Stanford, Libby. “More States Are Creating a ‘Portrait of a Graduate.’ Here’s Why.” *EducationWeek*. December 11, 2023. <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/more-states-are-creating-a-portrait-of-a-graduate-heres-why/2023/12>
- “The Leading Through Learning Playbook: Strategy As Learning.” *Center for Public Research and Leadership*, n.d. <https://www.leadingthroughlearning.org/strategy-as-learning/>

### Additional references:

- Armstrong-Carter, Emma et al. “The United States Should Support and Recognize Caregiving Youth.” *Society for Research in Child Development*, July 2021. <https://srcd.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/sop2.14>.
- Barnum, Matt. “The Teaching Profession is Facing a Post-Pandemic Crisis.” *Chalkbeat*, June 27, 2023. <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2023/6/27/23774375/teachers-turnover-attribution-quitting-morale-burnout-pandemic-crisis-covid/>.
- Baumgaertner, Emily. “Students Lost One-Third of a School Year to Pandemic, Study Finds.” *New York Times*, January 30, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/30/health/covid-education-children.html>.
- Berkowitz, Steven. “The Youth Mental Health Crisis Worsens Amid a Shortage of Professional Help Providers.” *Scientific American*, August 18, 2023. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-youth-mental-health-crisis-worsens-amid-a-shortage-of-professional-help-providers/>.
- Blad, Evie. “Educators See Gaps in Kids’ Emotional Growth Due to Pandemic.” *EdWeek*, February 22, 2022. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/educators-see-gaps-in-kids-emotional-growth-due-to-pandemic/2022/02>.
- Dorn, Emma et al. “COVID-19 and Education: The lingering effects of unfinished learning.” McKinsey & Company, July 27, 2021. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/education/our-insights/covid-19-and-education-the-lingering-effects-of-unfinished-learning>.
- Finn, Chester E. “New American Schools: A Short, Opinionated History.” *Education Next*, June 3, 2019. <https://www.educationnext.org/new-american-schools-short-opinionated-history/>.
- Fulton, Richard. “Failing Grades.” *Inside Higher Ed*, March 7, 2021. <https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/views/2021/03/08/more-high-school-students-are-failing-courses-creating-problems-colleges>.
- Graham, Patricia Albjerg. “Schooling America: How the Public Schools Meet the Nation’s Changing Needs.” *Oxford University Press*, February 19, 2005.
- Gross, Bethany and McCann, Sarah. “The Promise and Challenges of Pandemic Innovation in High Schools.” Center on Reinventing Public Education, February, 2022. <https://crpe.org/the-promise-and-challenges-of-pandemic-innovation-in-high-schools/>
- Klein, Alyson. “No Child Left Behind: An Overview.” *EdWeek*, April 10, 2015. <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/no-child-left-behind-an-overview/2015/04>.

- Labaree, David. "Public Goods, Private Goods: The American Struggle over Educational Goals." *American Educational Research Journal* 34, 1997. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1163342>.
- Lumpkin, Lauren. "Schools brace for challenges as once-in-a-lifetime cash runs out." *Washington Post*, April 18, 2023.
- Pressley, Tim. "Factors Contributing to Teacher Burnout during COVID-19." *Educational Researcher*, 2021. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1300409>.
- Qargha, Ghulam O. and Markovich Morris, Emily. "Why Understanding the Historical Purposes of Modern Schooling Matters Today." *Brookings*, May 22, 2023. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/why-understanding-the-historical-purposes-of-modern-schooling-matters-today/>.
- Viner, Russell et al. "School Closures During Social Lockdown and Mental Health, Health Behaviors, and Well-being Among Children and Adolescents During the First COVID-19 Wave." *JAMA Pediatrics*, January 18, 2022. <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/article-abstract/2788069>.
- Welsh, Ralph S. "Delinquency, Corporal Punishment, and the Schools." *Sage Journals* 24, 1978. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001112877802400307>
- "Coping in Hard Times: Fact Sheet for Youth High School and College Age." The National Center for Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2020. <https://www.nctsn.org/resources/coping-hard-times-fact-sheet-youth-high-school-and-college-age>.
- "School Counselor Roles and Ratios." American School Counselor Association, 2021. <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/About-School-Counseling/School-Counselor-Roles-Ratios>
- "The State of the American Student. We are failing older students: Bold ideas to change course." Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2023. <https://crpe.org/the-state-of-the-american-student-2023/>
- "The Turning Point: Why We Must Transform Education Now." *UNESCO*, June 27, 2022. <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/turning-point-why-we-must-transform-education-now>.



## Appendix B: Methodological details

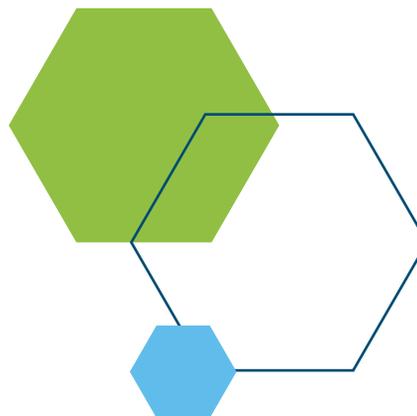
### Research design

Our research design employed longitudinal, nested case studies of six high schools in the New England region. We selected schools to invite to the study using a purposive sampling process. We sought to recruit schools with several characteristics: a) each school should have a student population where most students experience one or more factors that have historically marginalized young people and families in education systems (e.g., economic disadvantage, racial/ethnic identity, multilingual learners, students with disabilities, disrupted formal education, or pregnant and parenting students); b) each school should have some history of high school redesign and ongoing efforts underway; c) the overall sample of schools should represent diverse public education contexts (e.g., traditional district and charter schools, comprehensive high schools as well as alternative schools, a range of urbanicity, etc). We limited the sample to high schools serving grades 9-12, though some schools enrolled adult students as well.

Once a school administrator agreed to a school's participation, we proceeded to recruit study participants. Our case studies in each school drew on semi-structured, mostly virtual interviews with samples of students, their caregivers, teachers, and administrators (see more on participants below). We conducted four waves of interviews over the course of 20 months (from April 2022 to December 2023).

### Participants

We worked with school administrators to recruit study participants. We asked administrators to recommend other staff and teachers who were involved in key innovation initiatives in the school, as well as students who were juniors as of April 2022 and who had diverse experiences of success in high school (e.g., students who experienced different degrees and types of challenges in high school, and students who may follow different pathways after graduation). Because most (though not all) students were minors at that time, we contacted both the students (for their assent) and their caregivers (for their consent) to have the student participate. We also invited a caregiver or "support person" (e.g., a relative, mentor, or partner) associated with each student to participate in the study. We aimed to involve five participants of each type (administrator, educator, student, caregiver) in the study. We were not always able to meet that recruitment goal, nor to interview every participant in every wave (see Table 2 as well as "Limitations" on page 47).



**Table 2. Number and type of participants in each wave of interviews**

Site	Wave 1 (Spring-Summer 2022)	Wave 2 (Winter 2022-23)	Wave 3 (Spring-Summer 2023)	Wave 4 (Fall 2023)
School 1	5 Students 4 Caregivers 6 Administrators 5 Educators	5 Students 4 Caregivers 4 Administrators 2 Educators	4 Students 2 Caregivers 0 Administrators 0 Educators	3 Students 3 Caregivers 4 Administrators 2 Educators
School 2	4 Students 4 Caregivers 5 Administrators 1 Educator	6 Students 0 Caregivers 2 Administrators 1 Educator	5 Students 2 Caregivers 0 Administrators 0 Educators	5 Students 3 Caregivers 4 Administrators 5 Educators
School 3	1 Student 1 Caregiver 6 Administrators 2 Educators	6 Students 1 Caregiver 5 Administrators 2 Educators	0 Students 0 Caregivers 3 Administrators 2 Educators	2 Students 0 Caregivers 2 Administrators 2 Educators
School 4	4 Students 5 Caregivers 2 Administrators 5 Educators	4 Students 4 Caregivers 2 Administrators 3 Educators	4 Students 3 Caregivers 2 Administrators 4 Educators	4 Students 2 Caregivers 2 Administrators 3 Educators
School 5	4 Students 2 Caregivers 5 Administrators 2 Educators	4 Students 1 Caregiver 5 Administrators 2 Educators	2 Students 0 Caregivers 2 Administrators 2 Educators	3 Students 0 Caregivers 1 Administrators 1 Educator
School 6	8 Students 0 Caregivers 4 Administrators 2 Educators 2 Board Members	1 Student 0 Caregivers 2 Administrators 2 Educators 0 Board Members	1 Student 0 Caregivers 2 Administrators 2 Educators 0 Board Members	5 Students 0 Caregivers 4 Administrators 2 Educators 1 Board Member

### Informal school visits

Because of the pandemic, we did not rely on any on-site observations or in-person interviews. However, as time went on, opportunities arose for our researchers to visit each school in person. In most schools we visited, we toured the school campus, visited classrooms and observed class time, and spoke informally with students, educators, and leaders. These were informal visits to provide background context, and we did not use formal observation protocols or analyze observation data. (Importantly, we did not formally evaluate instructional quality in our observations of class time because our visits afforded only limited time in classrooms.) We

took field notes about what we did, heard, saw, felt, and wondered on these visits; we reviewed those notes in our analysis for additional relevant information, such as factual details that hadn't come up in our interviews, or anecdotal stories that we heard in informal conversations. In some cases, we conducted in-person interviews during school visits.

### Analytic approach

Our analytic approach was primarily inductive. We created a "summary sheet" for every school after each wave of interviews, and used matrices to identify key themes across summary sheets. We coded interviews for key themes to get a deeper understanding of them.

Because we spoke with study participants multiple times in each school, we were also able to triangulate different perspectives on themes that came up in our analysis, and to pressure-test our emerging conclusions with study participants. Lastly, we also used our school visit notes and desk research on strategies each school employed to complement our analysis.

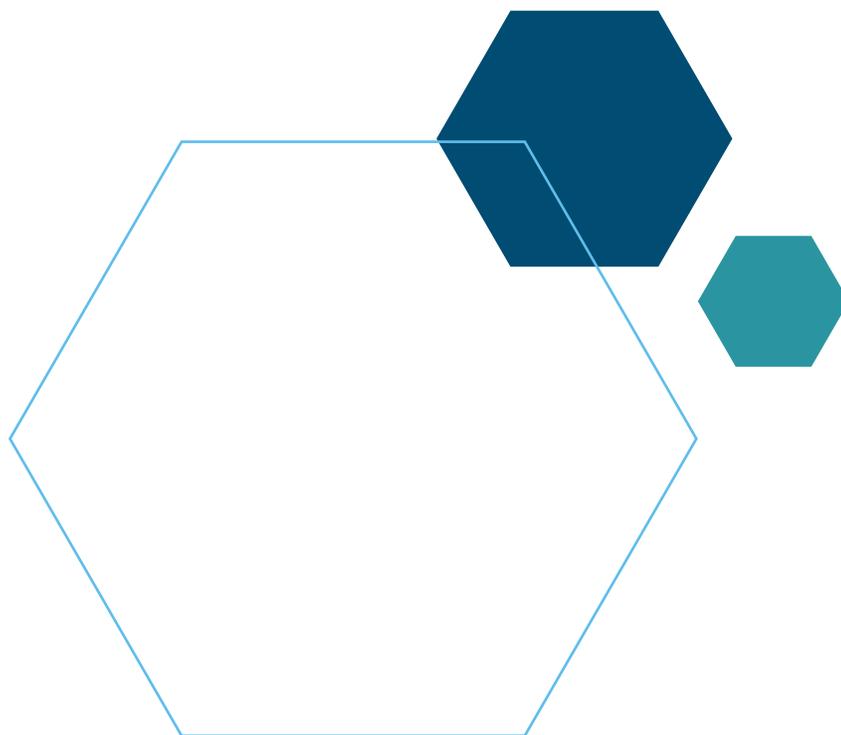
### Limitations

One limitation of our study stems from our sampling and recruitment process. In reality, our study participants did not always perfectly meet our goals for recruitment. Some of the students we enrolled in the study were not juniors in April 2022, though all were within one grade level of that target. We had marginal success recruiting students with diverse experiences of high school. Although our eventual sample of students was composed predominantly of students of color whose experiences were rich and varied, we suspect that, compared to schools' overall populations, our sample likely overrepresented students who are academically ambitious and highly involved in student life. For this reason, we endeavored in our data collection and analysis to elicit and highlight perspectives from those students who told us about fraught past experiences in school and major challenges

to their success. Lastly, we struggled to enroll a caregiver associated with every student we interviewed, so caregiver perspectives are underrepresented in our final results compared to what we had hoped.

A second limitation relates to participation over time. While we did conduct four waves of interviews in each school, we were not able to interview every study participant in each wave. Some study participants fell out of touch or left the school, so in several cases we recruited new participants midway through the study to ensure we continued learning from varied perspectives in the school. In our analysis, we made note of when a participant's perspective evolved from one interview to the next, versus when a new participant's perspective was introduced.

Overall, this research aimed to reveal rich and varied perspectives from administrators, teachers, students, and caregivers, but our research design and sampling methods do not represent all perspectives. Similarly, we aimed to illustrate rich and varied stories of innovation and pandemic recovery in New England high schools, but our research does not portray a representative picture of all high schools or all innovation efforts in New England.



# About this report

## About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) is a nonpartisan research organization at Arizona State University’s Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College. We rigorously examine and test transformative ideas, using our research to inform action. We are truth-tellers who combine forward-thinking ideas with empirical rigor. Since 1993, we have been untethered to any one ideology but unwavering in a core belief: public education is a goal—to prepare every child for citizenship, economic independence, and personal fulfillment—and not a particular set of institutions. From that foundation, we work to inform meaningful changes in policy and practice that will drive the public education system to meet the needs of every student.

## About the Center for Public Research and Leadership

The Center for Public Research and Leadership (CPRL) at Columbia University develops the next generation of leaders while supporting the education sector in transforming public school systems into learner-centered organizations that provide each and every student exceptional learning experiences. Since its founding in 2011, CPRL has developed nearly 700 leaders from dozens of law, business, education, policy, and data science graduate programs, and provided research, policy, and legal expertise to hundreds of school systems and education organizations across the United States and internationally.

## Acknowledgments

A team of researchers, writers, editors, project managers, and designers contributed to this report. In addition to the authors, CRPE researchers Christine Campbell, Heather Casimere, Lisa Chu, and Cara Pangelinan, as well as CPRL researcher Naureen Madhani and CPRL project associates Cai Mains, Joanna Pisacone, and Julia Skwarczyński, participated in research design, data collection, analysis, and review of this final report. Sarah McCann served as research project manager. Sarah Carr, Chris Horan, Jill Grossman, Kimberly Austin, Robin Lake, David Lewellen, and two external peer reviewers—Joel Tolman and Eric Toshalis—all contributed excellent feedback and edits. Michelle Afentoulis designed the report. Emily Prymula supported communications and design.

We are particularly indebted to the administrators, educators, students, and caregivers who contributed valuable perspectives to this research. This report would not have been possible without their candor and thoughtfulness.

We are grateful for the support of our philanthropic partner, the Barr Foundation, which began supporting CRPE’s research in New England in 2020. Conversations with Education program staff at the Foundation have enriched our analysis and our understanding of the New England region. However, this independent research report does not necessarily reflect the views of the Barr Foundation.

