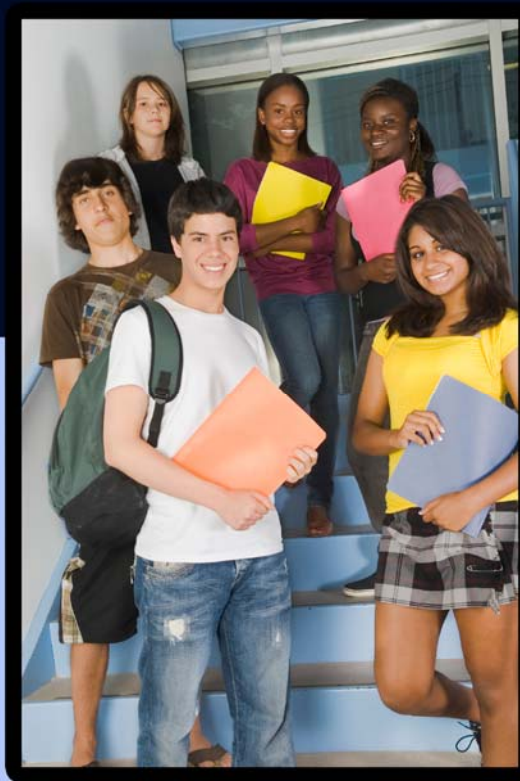


Navigating Change

Massachusetts High School Reform
in Challenging Times



By
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Teachers²¹

Dear Colleague:

Navigating Change, Massachusetts High School Reform in Challenging Times, represents the voices and insights of practitioners grappling with the complexity and challenge of reforming high schools to better serve the needs of students. The themes that emerge in this study help to illuminate the path forward for all those who are working to strengthen and improve secondary education. This study also represents the kind of public discourse that Teachers²¹ embraces as part of its mission to ensure that educational practice, research, and policy are coordinated to create stronger conditions for professional learning. We look forward to continuing this exchange about what we learn from our collective efforts to improve secondary education. Teachers21 welcomes the opportunity to work with districts as they reshape teaching and learning for high school students.

Regards,

John D'Auria, Ed.D.
President, Teachers21

Forward

Susan Freedman, Former President, Teachers²¹

Secondary school educators face many competing demands as they work to redesign their schools to improve student learning, address the NEASC Standards of Accreditation, meet with success on various state initiatives and assessments, and assure that young adults are ready to enter the world of work. In the study that follows, we explicate the demands and the challenges that educators encounter, and the promising practices they have discovered as they move forward in their reform efforts in these difficult times.

Since our founding in 1993, Teachers²¹ has worked with more than 300 school districts in New England to support teachers and administrators as they continuously strengthen their knowledge and skills. Also, Teachers²¹ has provided strategic planning, consultation, and process facilitation that supports school districts as they engage in systemic school and district improvement. Drawing on these diverse experiences and our considerable background in systemic reform efforts, as well as our knowledge of promising models and practices across the nation, Teachers²¹ has worked to create an integrated and holistic approach to redesigning secondary schools that prepare students for the 21st century. Our conceptual framework for secondary school reform is one that we believe brings together all the essential components of effective reform and, importantly, recognizes the need to align these efforts with one another (see the Appendix for an overview of our model).

Furthermore, our work in schools and districts has led us to four additional principles that must undergird any successful reform effort. These principles are reinforced by the data generated by this study and, in my experience, appear to be universal truths in educational change initiatives.

(1) Integration of Reform Elements

As one superintendent we interviewed noted, “We have all of the threads, but we need the loom.” Districts often work diligently on a range of restructuring initiatives, but the initiatives are undertaken independent of each other. Several committees work simultaneously but these committees are not aware of each other’s work and their efforts are not coordinated. In order to ensure the sustainability of comprehensive reform, it is essential that all reform efforts, from scheduling, to curriculum and assessment, to parent involvement, to community partnerships are interwoven and interrelated.

(2) Top-down and Bottom-up Reform

Successful reforms are neither entirely grassroots in their development nor are they mandated by the district leadership. Rather, successful reform must be both top-down and bottom-up in order to garner the necessary support and facilitate the needed coordination for effective reform. Reforms cannot depend on one

charismatic leader or one particularly enthusiastic teacher; they must be led by a cross-section of educational stakeholders who are committed to shaping district-wide policies and practices that enable school change.

(3) Reciprocity in Central Office and Building-Based Roles and Responsibilities

The success of school reform often depends upon the reciprocal exchange of information and accountability at the district and building levels. Early in the planning process, it is essential to identify and delineate the reciprocal roles and expectations of district and building leaders. As district leaders implement policies and guidelines, they must recognize their responsibility to ensure that educators at the building level have the information they need to achieve the desired outcomes. Similarly, building leaders who are implementing new approaches in their schools may need to “educate” district leaders about their practices and goals. When there is inconsistency or conflict in the policies and practices for the district and buildings, leaders at both levels should share responsibility for ensuring that there is continuous, open dialogue that identifies and addresses these concerns.

4) Data-informed Decision Making

It is critical that reform efforts are guided and informed by data. This is no easy task: districts gather a lot of data but learning how to employ the data gathered to effectively make decisions requires training and diligence. Too often, educational leaders refer to data-driven decision making but do not move beyond the jargon to really define how decisions are made, at every level, based on good and reliable data.

In order to successfully prepare all students with the 21st century skills our world demands, educators need policy makers and an informed public to understand and advocate for the reforms that are suggested in this report. We are calling on district and building leaders, as well as teachers, parents, and the community, to use their resources and time to engage in meaningful planning and program implementation that acknowledges the realities in school systems, takes responsibility for them, and addresses them with thought and wisdom. Each of the elements in the Teachers21 Framework for Secondary School Design can help to bring coherence, accountability, and improvement that will strengthen learning experiences for students and educators. When meshed with the four principles that underlie reform efforts, these elements have the potential for enabling district and school leaders and teachers to enhance instructional expertise and to promote reforms that strengthen curriculum, instruction, and assessment. There are many stories of success and good beginnings in this report. It is the responsibility of all of us to build on and enhance these good practices for the sake of all of our children.

Executive Summary

This study investigates the state of high school reform in a sampling of districts across Massachusetts, and highlights promising practices and key challenges. Between February and May of 2010, Teachers21 interviewed educational leaders from 20 districts across the Commonwealth to investigate what reform efforts are currently underway, and what the educational leaders in these schools and districts identify as key areas of interest and concern. The interviews revealed common themes that cut across the districts, regardless of their size, location, or demography. The research revealed that the districts and high schools (1) use time and resources deliberately to enhance teacher capacity and improve instruction; (2) define 21st century skills broadly, beyond simply improving access to technology, and promote their attainment in many ways; (3) work to personalize learning for students and meet their intellectual and emotional needs, promoting increased choice and responsibility; (4) build partnerships by engaging diverse partners in concrete goals and activities and long-term investment in outcomes; and (5) face several challenges to broad-based, comprehensive reform. Implications for policy include the need for more support and coordination state-wide related to 21st century skills, continued attention to how to strengthen supervision and evaluation of teachers and leaders, and significant support to engage all stakeholders in comprehensive secondary school reform.

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I. INTRODUCTION

For years, school districts and educational reformers have sought ways to reform the traditional high school. Despite many reform efforts and promising practices across the nation, the kind of large-scale redesign that will be necessary to provide a rigorous and relevant curriculum for all students has generally not been realized. This study was designed to understand what reform efforts are currently underway in a diverse sampling of high schools across the Commonwealth, and what the educational leaders in these schools and districts identify as key areas of interest and concern. The study was small in scope but does suggest some important avenues for further research, as well as promising practices and implications for policy.

A. Massachusetts Secondary Schools: Context

Massachusetts 371 secondary schools serve approximately 290,000 students. Eighty percent of students across the Commonwealth graduate from high school after 4 years, and approximately 57% go on to 4 year colleges. Another 23% go on to 2-year colleges. These numbers indicate that Massachusetts students, overall, fare relatively well compared to students in other states across the country. However, the gap in outcomes for low-income students and students of color as compared to their white peers persists. On the 2009 10th grade ELA MCAS, Only 11% of white students received a needs improvement and

only 3% received a failing score, whereas 28% and 8% of African American students in the Commonwealth received these scores, respectively. Similarly, 45% and 25% of Limited English Proficient (LEP) students received needs improvement and failing scores, respectively. In addition, graduation and post-secondary attendance rates remain unequal for white students and their low-income and non-white peers. For example, whereas the graduation rate for White students in 2009 was 86.9%, the graduation rate for African American students was 69.1% and for Hispanic students was 59.7%. The graduation rate for LEP students was only 57.5%. These disparities suggest that while Massachusetts may be rightfully proud of its successes, in aggregate, on the NAEP and other international assessments, significant gaps in outcomes persist among our various subgroups of students.

Several studies, locally and nationally, have outlined the work of exemplars in secondary education, highlighting effective schools and/or organizations, particularly in large urban environments. Undoubtedly, there is much to be learned from these successful models, yet it is critical to understand how districts across the state, from small towns to large urban districts, navigate the challenges of high school reform every day. Research that investigates the impact of aggressive reform efforts in a small group of schools, particularly focused on the large urban centers, has only limited relevance to the many schools and districts across the

Commonwealth, in urban, suburban, and rural settings. In this study, we set out to understand the state of high school reform in a sampling of districts, and highlight promising practices and key challenges. We believe the results of this study offer both important insights about high school reform across the Commonwealth as well as suggest several directions for research, practice, and policy.

B. Overview of Study

Teachers21 and Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education hosted a summit in March of 2009 entitled *Moving from Discourse to Action: Revolutionizing Secondary Schools*. Districts were invited to participate based on their demonstrated commitment to educational change and to preparing all students for postsecondary success. The goal of the summit was to bring together cross-stakeholder teams from each district to build momentum for redesigning the high schools. These districts were contacted again in January, 2010 to participate in interviews about the state of their reform efforts. The interviews were not designed as evaluations of the summit's impact as we recognize that these districts have a long history of high school reform that predated the one-day summit and continued after it. However, participation in the summit did provide us with a core group of districts to interview, and some common language for discussion.

Of the 27 districts that sent teams to the summit, we conducted interviews

with individuals or groups of educational leaders from 20 districts (note that in the two largest urban districts, our focus was on a specific secondary school). The districts were located in urban, suburban, and rural contexts, from Cape Cod to Western Massachusetts. The secondary school populations were as large as 1900 students and as small as 766 students. The tables below illustrate the high school student populations in each district/school as well as some important demographic information.¹

Secondary School Populations

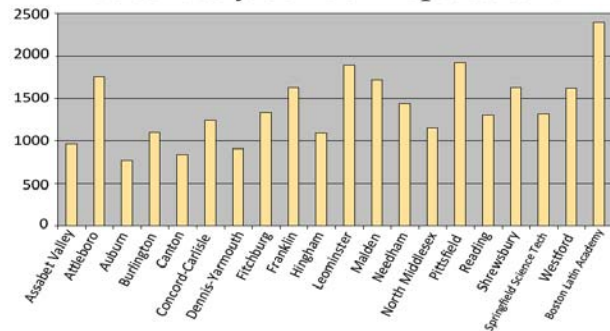
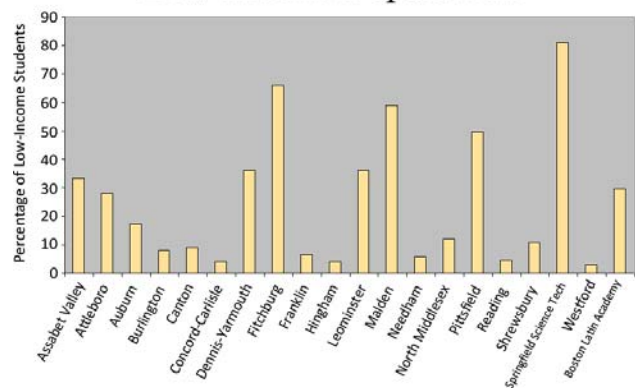


Table 1: Secondary school populations in interviewed districts and schools²

Low-Income Populations



¹ All data on these pages retrieved from the Massachusetts Department of Education website: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/>

² The populations here include all 9th-12th grade students except in the case of Boston Latin, which includes 7th and 8th grade students.

Table 2: Percentage of low-income students in interviewed districts and schools

The interviews took place over the phone and, in most cases, were conducted with superintendents, assistant superintendents, and/or principals. In some instances, the interviews also included teacher leaders. The themes discussed in the interviews included several key elements of secondary reform, such as use of time and resources; curriculum, instruction, and assessment; personalization of learning; school structures and governance; and 21st century skills, which has been a focus of secondary reform in recent years and was a central element of the summit in March 2009 (see appendix with the complete interview protocol).

C. Overview of Findings

The interviews revealed common themes that cut across the districts, regardless of their size, location, or demography. In fact, several promising practices, as well as challenges, were shared among many of the participants. In particular, the following themes emerged. Districts and high schools:

- Use time and resources deliberately to enhance teacher capacity and improve instruction for all students;
- Define 21st century skills broadly, beyond simply improving access to technology, and promote their attainment in many ways;
- Work to personalize learning for students and meet their intellectual and emotional needs, promoting increased choice and responsibility;
- Build partnerships by engaging diverse partners in concrete goals and activities and long-term investment in outcomes;
- Face several challenges to broad-based, comprehensive reform.

In the pages that follow, we provide specific examples of what districts are currently doing, and how they are navigating change in these challenging times.

II. EVIDENCE FROM DISTRICTS: PROMISING PRACTICES, CHALLENGING TIMES

It was clear from our interviews that the educational leaders we interviewed are passionate about reforming high schools to serve the needs of the whole range of students who come through their doors. The examples they provided suggest many promising practices related to improving instruction, engaging students in meaningful learning, and creatively responding to the needs of the many students they serve. We also learned that they face challenges accomplishing these goals and engaging in broad-based, coordinated reform.

A. Moving Beyond Silos: Using Time and Resources Deliberately to Enhance Teacher Capacity

The leaders we interviewed expressed a strong desire to bring teachers together to do substantive work such as examining student data, creating common assessments, and aligning curricula with 21st century learning goals.

Scheduling Solutions: Many of the leaders we interviewed described scheduling strategies that open up

teachers' time and access to one another during the school day. Several participants described this as a key part of building a professional culture. Teachers do not spend their time during the school day checking hall passes but rather, their time away from teaching class is spent reviewing student data, looking at curricula and standards, and planning projects together, as professionals. As one district leader explained:

“ When we took them off lunch duty and hall duty and bathroom duty, and said, “You’re now going to meet,” the expectation was much higher that...you’re going to meet to rewrite curriculum, create rubrics, which we’ve never had before, create common assessments. So the expectation was there would be products produced, there would be outcomes, and I think teachers appreciated the fact that they weren’t spending their time sitting in front of a bathroom checking off who was going in and out. ”

Districts have developed several scheduling strategies to create time during the school day for teachers to meet around these substantive goals:

- Delayed Start Days: A few districts we interviewed have implemented delayed openings on a monthly or bi-monthly basis that allow departmental and interdisciplinary teams additional time at the beginning of the school day to work on common curricular objectives and professional development.

- Common Planning Time: A key element of building the professional culture in schools has been to develop time during the school day for teachers to collaborate on planning and assessment goals. In several schools, an entire block is reserved for common planning each week, or in some cases each day, so teachers may work together during the school day to develop common standards and assessments, and look at data to inform curricular decision. As one Superintendent explained, “giving them the time was like giving them a million dollars.”

It is important to note that the districts that seemed to have the most success with these efforts did more than simply carve out the time for teachers, though that alone is not a small task. Rather, several districts we interviewed set up fairly high expectations for how the time would be used and invested in professional development and support for teachers to collaborate effectively around substantive goals such as developing common assessments, coordinating curricula, and so forth. Investing both the time and the resources to bring teachers together to work on these goals contributes not only to the quality of instruction but also lends coherence to reform efforts.

Data-driven Collaboration: District and school leaders made many references to the use of data to inform instruction. However, how schools use data, or more specifically, how different subject area departments employ data in their decision-making,

appeared quite variable. In several of the districts we interviewed, new technologies are being employed to help teachers use data to inform instructional decisions, particularly in math and English departments. Yet, several leaders suggested that the use of data varies considerably from department to department. When asked about the use of student data to inform supervision and evaluation of teachers, although there was general reference to various types of student data (e.g. grade reports or district assessments) informing teacher evaluations, none of the districts and schools we interviewed use student MCAS data as part of teacher evaluations. In short, our data suggest that the idea of “data-driven instruction” is a bit of a black box with regard to what is actually going on in schools; this is an area in which we believe further investigation might highlight promising practices and areas for additional support.

B. Moving Beyond Information Access to Critical Thinking and Global Competency: Defining and Promoting 21st Century Skills

The educational leaders we interviewed have embraced a definition of 21st century skills that emphasizes attainment of a wide range of competencies, of which the ability to use technology is just one piece of the whole picture of 21st century knowledge. Across the state, many creative strategies are being enacted to provide students with exposure to and opportunities to practice these skills.

More specifically, when leaders were asked how they defined and promoted 21st century skills, rarely did they point to technology as their key initiative. Rather, these leaders spoke about critical thinking, problem solving and communication skills, civic knowledge and responsibility, collaboration, inquiry, and global awareness as aspects of 21st century skills that they endeavor to promote across all their courses and learning opportunities. These educational leaders recognize that knowing how to use technology appropriately is an essential skill in the 21st century, but see it as a tool for promoting the critical thinking that they identify as the heart of their work with students. As one educational leader we interviewed explained, while the 20th century brought us greater access to information, the 21st century is focused on developing capacity to analyze, synthesize, and use information.

Effective Communication: Two districts responded to the question posed about 21st century skills by referencing their schools’ participation in the Poetry Out Loud program. Poetry Out Loud is a national poetry recitation contest in which students select a poem, interpret it, and perform it for audiences of their peers. The leaders in these districts described Poetry Out Loud as a critical vehicle for promoting the 21st century skills of effective communication and public speaking. One of the Superintendents explained:

“ You could hear a pin drop when our kids are reciting poetry in front of

an auditorium full of their peers. Complex communication is a 21st century skill...I think speaking in front of your peers and communicating feelings and thoughts and actually being an audience member and being empathetic to someone who you may not know or identify with, is also a skill. So I think not only are the kids who are reciting learning, I think our kids who are in the audience listening are also learning. ”

Project-based Learning: Many school and district leaders referred to project- or problem-based learning as a critical part of 21st century learning. Particularly among the technical school leaders we interviewed, project-based learning is at the heart of their 21st century learning approach. The students learn technical skills and are exposed to real world problems to solve and present to a panel of experts. For example, at one Regional Technical School, the students in the Design and Visual Technologies program work with the Young Entrepreneurs of America to generate new product ideas, develop prototypes, and present these ideas to a panel of business leaders. In addition, they work with their academic teachers to develop a technical paper and oral presentation. At a Science and Technology High School, the STEM coursework is integrated into the academic coursework such that students have exposure to real-world problems within the context of their academic subjects. For example, in Physics, students in the Biomedical/Biotechnology and

Forensic Science Academy participate in a series of forensic science labs that expose them to the kind of real world problems that professionals in the field encounter while also introducing them to the physics concepts they are expected to learn in their science coursework.

Community Connections and Global Awareness: Several district and school leaders referenced student internships and civic engagement opportunities as critical to 21st century learning. In fact, more than half of the districts we interviewed specifically cited internship opportunities and service learning as another way that they advance 21st century skills. For example, in one district we interviewed, approximately 30% of seniors participate in a 4th quarter externship and additional students are part of the state-funded school to career program. In addition, all students at this school participate in community service as part of their graduation requirement.

Several of the districts we interviewed are interested in developing a global competency or global literacy certificate as an additional qualification that students may earn in high school. For example, one district has partnered with the non-profit Primary Source to develop an interdisciplinary program that includes coursework, independent projects, and experiential learning opportunities to earn this additional qualification.

In all these cases, students are exposed to the world outside the

classroom, whether that world is a local business, a community-based organization, or a foreign country. The objective of these initiatives is in keeping with some of the current thinking about exploding notions of the “classroom” where students learn. Creating opportunities for students to experience the world outside the classroom, and earn credit for doing so, drives these efforts. Of course, there are challenges associated with creating these opportunities: they require flexible schedules, rethinking traditional credit-earning activities, and appropriate resources to support the kinds of partnerships that make these opportunities possible. In many districts, staff time has been committed to coordinating these efforts and additional grant money has been solicited to make these efforts possible.

Embedded Technology for Teachers and Students: All of the districts referenced technology as an essential aspect of their work to achieve 21st century learning for all students. What was notable among several of the interviews was the emphasis on embedding technology into the teaching and learning across the school. For example, one district has focused considerable resources on identifying appropriate technological resources and preparing all teachers to be effective users of these technologies. A key aspect of this initiative has been to establish “embedded tech leaders” in each department. Often, departments develop a “go-to” person for technology simply by virtue of that teacher’s interests and comfort using technology. The district has taken this

natural occurrence and made it a formal role in each department. In doing so, they hope to infuse each department, from science to the language department, with technology tools to enhance classroom practice. In order to coordinate this work, the effort is led by a “Tech Specialist Leader” who is a well-respected math teacher in the school; this teacher coordinates the work of the department level leaders and investigates possible tools and applications they might consider implementing throughout the school.

As the principal explained:

“*We really need to be focusing on...how...students use technology to show us what they know. How can teachers implement project-based learning using technology? And I think it fundamentally informs every aspect of curriculum, instruction, and assessment...how could teachers provide more creative versions of each of those things? And again technology is a means, it’s a tool.*”

Reflecting this focus on using technology to access and demonstrate learning, districts are in the midst of instituting several strategies to bring new technologies to students to enhance their learning opportunities and provide new ways to demonstrate mastery. For example, about a third of the districts we interviewed are members of Virtual High School, a program that provides students access to online coursework to supplement the offerings the school provides on site. Students may, for example, take an AP Engineering course online—

something that their school might not offer. In addition, Virtual High School also solves scheduling conflicts such that students may take all the courses they want to take because they don't have to try to fit everything into their daily school schedule.

In addition, districts are also drawing on technology to improve their student assessments in a range of ways. For example, one district is beginning to develop electronic portfolios for 9th-12th grade as an element of the students' graduation requirement. In other districts, as noted above, the use of new databases and technologies allows teachers to gather data and evaluate student performance on an ongoing basis. A few districts specifically referred to the Galileo Instructional Data System which allows teachers to formatively assess student performance, identify trends in students' understanding (both as individual learners and as a group) and modify curriculum appropriately. As the Superintendent described:

“ *The Galileo program gave [teachers] explicit details on the MCAS and where the kids were projected to land, question by question, strand by strand, topic by topic, so if you were one of those teachers, you have 100 kids who were going to take the MCAS, and this computer program breaks down every single kid for you. And now we met, and we're going to meet again next week, to talk about the strategies we need to move each of those kids because some are individual moves and some are group moves.* ”

Thus, technology is utilized in districts as a tool for evaluating and improving instruction at all levels; from providing teachers with new and creative ways to think about instruction, to offering teachers a very clear picture of where their students are in terms of their learning and understanding, to broadening the ways students may demonstrate mastery. It is clear, however, that the districts we interviewed do not see the attainment of new technologies as an end in and of itself. Rather, determining the appropriate technologies, and preparing teachers and students to use them effectively to improve teaching and learning, is the approach we heard from educational leaders again and again.

It is worth noting that, although the leaders we interviewed shared several common ideas regarding how to define and promote 21st century skills--and envisioned something far beyond simply obtaining technology--there was a reasonable degree of variation among their responses. This suggests that, although there are common areas of interest, there does not appear to be a clear and shared definition of what 21st century skills are and how students are best prepared to achieve 21st century success. This indicates the need for further investigation, including examining current research and policy related to this increasingly popular idea of “21st century skills.”

C. Moving Beyond Traditional School: Personalizing Learning and Meeting Student Needs

Many of the districts with whom we spoke have worked over the last

several years to create systems that support students' academic, social, and emotional development. In particular, leaders want to create good transitions for students from middle to high school and from high school to post-secondary education or the workforce. In addition, the leaders we interviewed expressed a desire to increase student choice and responsibility for their learning and have implemented many ways for students to have more choice in what, how, and where they learn. Finally, a few of the districts we interviewed have alternative programs or pathways in place for students and these relatively small programs tend to present very interesting possibilities for reforms that might be scalable to larger groups of students.

Transitions: Several districts have worked to smooth the transition for students from middle to high school, using 9th grade academies, 9th grade advisories, and other supports to help prepare students for academic success in secondary school. For example, one of the districts we interviewed welcomes students from 7 different townships and, in preparation for their arrival, the high school hosts students for two days in the spring so they can get a sense of the school and how it functions. In addition, during their freshman year, all students participate in advisory groups of ten students with a teacher and an older student as facilitators. In addition to small group and one-on-one teacher support, some districts place a particular emphasis on close analysis of freshman students' performance to be sure that students who present a risk of dropping out are identified

early and supported to continue in school. As the principal explained, the goal is to keep students engaged in school, even if that requires making some modifications to the traditional school model:

“ We’re looking at 9th graders after the first and second quarter and figuring out what’s not working, or what is working, and we’re creating individual school plans for about 20-25 kids. Right now we have 9th graders doubling up in some subjects, being withdrawn from other subjects, doing internships down in the middle schools during the school day, doing internships with our highly disabled special needs kids during the school day, working with the local [agencies]. So we’re trying to create individual plans for these kids to keep them excited about being alive and coming to school and it might not be the traditional 7-period schedule but they’re coming to school, their attendance is better, and we hope we can get them to the 10th grade. ”

Districts are also working to improve the transition for students from high school to post-secondary education. For example, one district described a strong partnership with a local community college: they co-host a “decision day” for seniors in which community college admissions representatives come to the high school and conduct interviews and application workshops, and make a decision on the spot about admission of seniors. In 2010, 125 seniors were accepted.

Advisory: Supporting and keeping a close eye on students' progress does not end with freshman year. Many of the districts we interviewed have advisory systems in place or are experimenting with various advisory models for all students. For example, a few of the districts have developed advisory programs that include specific curricula for each grade level, to match up with the key academic and social issues facing students during their high school careers. Several leaders expressed interest in establishing an advisory system to support students and build important connections with adults, yet there seem to be challenges associated with establishing an effective advisory system that meets the needs of teachers, students, and schools. Specifically, scheduling challenges as well as challenges associated with identifying appropriate curricula and staff to lead the advisories seemed to serve as barriers for some of the districts interviewed. This appears to be an area where districts might benefit from support regarding effective models and approaches.

Increasing Academic Choices: In addition to the increased academic options presented by Virtual High School, as described above, several of the districts we interviewed referenced dual enrollment programs with local post-secondary institutions. For example, one district described their on-site community college night classes, which are open to their high school students as well. Similarly, in other districts, students may take courses either at the community college or on site at the high school.

These arrangements are mutually beneficial as the schools gain access to additional curricular choices and the community colleges are able to have a satellite operation in a community site. In addition, as mentioned above, several districts include internship opportunities as part of their 11th and 12th grade programs. These internship opportunities provide exposure to the working world, either in community-based organizations or companies, and allow students to earn credit for this learning.

Several districts referred to experiential coursework as well. At one school, a new course, "Leadership and Social Change" provides 11th and 12th grade students the opportunity to learn about social issues and develop action plans and activities for responding to some of the issues they find most compelling. In one district, Physical Education options have been expanded such that students may earn credit for participating in a community dance class or horseback riding in addition to the P.E. offered at school. These examples illustrate that district leaders are thinking about how to both creatively provide real world experiences within the context of the school day as well as find more room for the students' experiences outside of school to blend with their curricular goals.

Alternative Programs: A few of the educators we interviewed referred to alternative programs or alternative schools within their districts. These alternatives are designed to provide options for students who have dropped out, who are overage or under-credited, or who have, for other

reasons, not been successful in the traditional high school setting. These programs provide alternative credit-earning options, more flexible schedules, and off-site learning opportunities. As such, their aim is to make earning a high school degree a viable option for a wider range of students. Interestingly, these programs also provide a testing ground for particularly creative initiatives. For example, one district offered social studies credit to a student in an alternative program for working for the U.S. census and another district has experimented with different time-configurations and off-site learning options in the alternative program. These alternative programs may serve as important testing ground for new ideas, particularly related to new approaches to curricula and credit-attainment.

A key objective underlying all these personalizing initiatives is the goal of increasing student ownership and responsibility for their own learning. Several leaders referred to their hope that teachers will play a facilitative role in student learning and open the door for students to take greater charge of their experience in school. As one principal explained, building student ownership for their learning is a necessary challenge high schools must embrace:

“ *It's just [about changing the whole mindset and releasing the responsibility of the activity that goes on in the classroom to the students as opposed to the teachers so desperately trying to hold onto that responsibility.* ”

As the principal explained, making this kind of change will require teaching both teachers and students how to do this, and creating opportunities to practice this kind of increased student ownership. The examples above all represent promising practices for creating more student responsibility for learning. However, the research participants stressed again and again that these programs require careful thinking, monitoring, and evaluation in order to achieve the broad goals of increased student responsibility.

D. Moving Beyond Traditional Roles: Building Meaningful Partnerships for Reform

Many of the districts we interviewed engage a wide-range of stakeholders in the work of school reform by focusing on concrete goals and activities. The opportunities that leaders create for teachers, parents, students, community members, and business leaders allow these diverse participants to lend their knowledge and expertise and contribute to the long-term goals of the district. The local nature of Massachusetts' school governance makes these relationships a crucial part of school change efforts. However, bringing diverse local voices into the decision-making process is not an easy task; it takes time to build and nurture all these relationships.

[Building Teacher Leadership and Collaboration](#): All the districts we interviewed engage teachers in reform efforts. Professional learning communities, teacher leadership teams, and critical friends groups

seem to have become the norm across the districts we interviewed. Several leaders referred to the cultural change they have observed take place in their districts as structures have been established to engage teachers in meaningful planning and decision making about curriculum, scheduling, programming, and so forth. Thus, instead of standing around the proverbial “water cooler” and talking about what’s wrong with the school, teachers are deeply engaged in school improvement efforts. One leader explained the importance of identifying meaningful goals for teachers to work together to achieve:

“ *If you just get people together, and you don’t have some meaningful work to do when you’re together, then it’s kind of more like the [congeniality] thing rather than real collaboration that you need to see for schools to make progress. Obviously, our goal is for our schools to make progress whether it’s improving on our MCAS scores or it’s making sure that more of our kids get into college. Or it’s making sure that we’re reducing our dropout rate.* ”

The leaders we interviewed recognized the importance of building strong partnerships with and among teachers in order to achieve the big goals of school reform. Several leaders referred to reform efforts that had come about as a result of the initiative of an individual or group of teachers. For example, at one high school, a group of teachers took the initiative to design a small learning community modeled after the Washington DC School for Arts and Learning. This new

Small Learning Community emerged out of collaboration between arts and academic teachers, new teachers and veterans, and will begin in the fall of 2010 with 30-40 students. In other schools, collaborative teacher teams have been the driving force behind scheduling reforms, project-based learning initiatives, and new supervision and evaluation systems.

Building Engagement of Parents and Students: Most of the leaders referred to the traditional structures for engaging parents in the life of the school: parent councils, school site committees, and so forth. Similarly, with regard to student engagement, leaders referred to the traditional avenues for students to participate: student and school councils. However, in some districts, these groups are doing far more than the traditional roles supporting school events and participating in parent nights. In some cases, students and parents, through these traditional venues, are engaged in reform efforts. For example, a few leaders referred to parents and students sitting on hiring committees for school leadership positions. In one district, the leadership turned to the student council to develop a strategy for shaving \$8000 off the student activities budget.

Parent engagement is another hard nut to crack. Engaging parents in meaningful reform requires, in some instances, a primer on what school is like today. One of the high schools, a STEM school, has responded to the need for engaging parents by hosting a series of STEM Saturdays in which parents and their children come to the school together to participate in

courses that represent the kind of skills and content that a STEM school delivers. As the STEM coordinator described:

“ We offered 8 different workshops for parents and students in the district to come in and sit side by side...as they take part in the STEM workshops that supports our academy. We feel it's real important for the parents because many parents don't know what the careers are in STEM so how can our children, our young people, know about it if the adults don't know about it so they sit side by side with the students in each workshop. So that's one of our major outreaches and it's quite successful. ”

In other districts, parents serve on specific committees and taskforces. For example, at one school, a homework task force, composed of teachers, students, and parents, is researching different homework policies in order to reform the high school's policies, with the support and buy-in of the groups who will be most effected by the change.

Connecting Effectively with Higher Education: There were many examples, across the interviews, of higher education partnerships with school districts, related to providing dual enrollment opportunities as well as serving as a site for teacher preparation. In a few cases, institutions of higher education were identified as key reform partners, working together with the district to apply for grants and collaborating on some fairly large reforms of

curriculum and assessment. Interestingly, none of the districts referred to partnerships with higher education focused on research into programs or best practices.

Building Bridges to Business and Community Leaders: A central goal of the summit was to build cross-stakeholder engagement in educational reform, specifically emphasizing alliances between the business community and the schools. The interviews revealed that businesses contribute to local school efforts in a variety of ways, from serving as sites for internships to promoting and supporting particular programs such as a scholarship program or a specific initiative like a robotics course. However there were not many examples of sustained engagement of business leaders in whole school reform efforts. One exception is that the schools with vocational or technical tracks engage business leaders in their advisory councils. These councils make critical and ongoing contributions to the curricula in the technical areas in which they have expertise. These advisory councils lend their insight about the needs in the field, the skills students need to master, and the role of secondary education in preparing the students for success in the particular field. Advisory councils may be an interesting model to explore in order to bridge the district and business community around more general teaching and learning goals.

A final note of interest: in a few districts where new school facilities are planned, the district leaders have convened broad groups, including key

business and community leaders, to participate in facilitated “visioning” exercises. These cross-stakeholder groups have met several times and are tasked with rethinking the goals of secondary school and how a new facility might support that vision. It is interesting to consider how to engage such a broad group around reform without the immediate need presented by the plan for a new facility.

E. Roadblocks: The Challenges Facing High School Reform Today

Above, we have highlighted many promising practices that affirm what we suspected: districts across the state continue to forge ahead with new programs, promising initiatives, and creative responses to the demands of the 21st century. However, some of our concerns regarding models of comprehensive reform were also reinforced in these interviews. Although the leaders provided many examples of important initiatives, we wondered how comprehensive, coherent, and connected all these activities are to one another. Very few districts seem to have pulled together the many promising “threads” of reform into a thorough, wide-reaching, and comprehensive approach. While we were heartened by the important work occurring in districts across the state, we also heard many notes of frustration and disappointment that comprehensive reform faced several significant roadblocks. The educational leaders we interviewed identified several clear challenges to comprehensive reform. These are outlined below.

Limited Resources: Several district leaders referred to the budgetary constraints they face and how this influences their reform agendas. For example, in some cases, district leaders referred to schedule change decisions that were driven in part by financial constraints. Although, these schedule decisions are certainly intended to support instructional reforms, in some instances, these schedule changes also make smart economic sense, whether or not they represent the best decision for the district. In fact, in some cases, districts have taken a step backward in that they have had to limit teachers’ common planning time due to budget cuts. These cuts have led to a reduction in the number of teachers and therefore not enough coverage to allow for the kind of common planning time they had just begun to rely on. Budget constraints have also impeded districts’ efforts to partner with other institutions. As one Superintendent explained, in difficult economic times, every position at the district is needed just to get the essential work done. This leaves very little time to get out of the building, seek partnerships, and build the relationships necessary to foster meaningful collaborations over time. These are just a few examples of the struggles facing districts’ reform efforts in this economic climate.

Leadership Void: According to one Superintendent we interviewed, the challenge facing district reform efforts is neither access to resources nor good curriculum. Rather, the success of reform depends upon getting the right people to lead these initiatives.

In other words, districts and schools need strong and consistent leadership to ensure the success of any reform effort. Related to this, there is a powerful need to provide leaders with the appropriate training to support and guide complex reform efforts. In fact, many of the leaders we interviewed had been in their positions for just a few years, and this constant leadership turnover presents serious challenges to the sustainability of reform efforts. When asked about the kind of support that the district leaders might like Teachers21 to provide, a few leaders referred to the need for distributed leadership training and support. These leaders recognize the need to teach leadership skills, clarify leadership roles, and spread leadership throughout the high school in order to ensure some continuity and consistency despite turnover.

In addition, several leaders explained that they operate in silos and do not have adequate opportunity to learn from other leaders in their position (either at the principal or superintendent level), or work together on common problems. This lack of support around district-level reform leaves a different kind of void. As one Superintendent described, educational leaders need to go to the “well” sometimes to get new ideas and support for their efforts. She explained:

“ We’re working on [reform] with our teachers...but sometimes administrators really need to be refreshed as much as teachers do. You get bogged down in the day-to-day stuff that you’re doing. You just

poke your head up, and there’s air up here! So I just think it’s difficult to sustain momentum when there’s not a place to go back to the well. ”

Tensions about Change: Several of the educational leaders we interviewed expressed concern that the changes they wanted to institute were, at times, met with resistance. They recognized that resistance is natural but also felt stymied, in some instances, by the reaction to reform efforts. Specifically, several leaders expressed concern that their districts’ efforts to modify schedules, introduce advisory programs, or move some curricula beyond the school doors met with resistance from some educators. In some cases, the educational leaders pointed to the challenges they encountered negotiating these changes with their local teachers’ association. As one Superintendent explained:

“ We have to bargain salaries, benefits, and working conditions. I think that negotiating salaries and benefits makes perfect sense. But because we have to bargain working conditions, that means every minute we change in the day, any of the stuff we’re talking about gets slowed down to a crawl and that all human tendencies sort of focus towards inertia... ”

It is important to note that the leaders we interviewed had many positive things to say about teachers, their leadership, and participation in reform efforts. However, in several of the interviews, there were also references to teacher contracts as

barriers to reform. This suggests not that unions are an impediment to reform but rather, that the tensions related to change efforts are complex and must be met head on. The challenge of implementing reform is, in no small part, about determining how to bring everyone to the table to develop a shared vision of school improvement and common goals regarding teaching and learning. With this inclusive approach, all parties will be a part of determining what will be best for teachers, students and schools. In other words, the negotiation should not be about the contract but rather, about how best to serve the needs, sometimes competing, of all relevant parties to reform. As one of the leaders we interviewed explained:

“ *It’s naïve to think that you institute a reform and it’s over. Reform is really an ongoing process and it’s going to continue. The reform may not look right now as it was envisioned and that’s because the high school has moved along, they’ve morphed into some other ideas that worked for them. So it’s constantly trying on a hat, seeing if it fits. If it doesn’t fit, trying on something a bit different.* ”

IV. IMPLICATIONS

A. Implications for Professional Development

Across the interviews, it was clear that leaders in these districts are working diligently to enhance instructional expertise, provide professional development to support generic and

subject-specific pedagogical skills and promote instructional reforms. However, we also recognized some additional areas for support. Underlying these professional development directions are the dual themes of increasing school and student responsibility for student learning and expanding learning opportunities. The leaders we interviewed want to develop the structures and expertise to take more responsibility for student learning, and in turn, they want to establish structures for students to take more responsibility themselves. Furthermore, as the study was designed to understand how 21st century learning goals are defined and what activities districts identify as 21st century learning, this was also an area in which support is needed.

Data-based instruction: Supporting districts, schools, and teachers to use data effectively to inform curriculum and instruction is a key area for support. Although many of the district leaders referred generally to data-based decision making or data teams, in many districts, these efforts are nascent, uneven from department to department, and an area for increased attention and support.

Personalizing and Diversifying Student Opportunities: The districts’ struggles to establish strong advisory systems suggest this is an area in which many districts would benefit from more support and direction. In turn, linking the advisory system to an overall approach to student academic, social, and emotional support is certainly needed. Advisory, ideally, would not be an add-on service but a

fully integrated part of the school structure and agenda. Similarly, many districts are experimenting with alternative educational opportunities like internships, community service learning, and dual enrollment programs. Again, these efforts present a terrific opportunity to provide support to districts to structure these opportunities such that they are integrated into the larger vision of reform.

Comprehensive 21st century skills:

Our interviews indicated that, although district leaders have a strong sense of the diverse and broad-ranging goals of 21st century learning, there does not appear to be a collective or comprehensive vision for how to embed these goals across subject areas and throughout the K-12 curricula. Therefore, targeted support to districts to evaluate their 21st century goals and integrate them into the K-12 curricula seems like an area for technical support as well as possible policy directions.

B. Implications for Research

Ours was a small study, meant to follow up with the districts that participated in the summit in 2009 as well as to capture some of the high school reform work underway across the Commonwealth. This study has raised many questions that need further investigation in order to gather a more comprehensive picture of the best practices and challenges facing high school reform. There were several specific areas that we believe would benefit from more thorough investigation. A few areas for further investigation are suggested below:

Data-based Instruction: How does the idea of ‘data-based decision making’ actually play out in secondary schools? Who is doing it and how are they approaching the use of data to inform instruction? What are the promising practices and the impact of these practices and teaching and learning?

Best Practices in Alternative

Programs: In light of the role that alternative programs and schools seem to play as a testing ground for creative ideas and solutions to keep students engaged in school, this is an area where research might uncover promising practices. What are alternative programs/schools doing to increase student responsibility for learning and diversify opportunities? How are these opportunities structured? How successful are these strategies?

Coordination of Reform Efforts: Our study did not explore the structures, strategies, and roles different parties play in reform efforts. However, this emerged as an interesting question related to the relative success of reform. Specifically, what is the relationship of the central office to the high school regarding leadership of reform efforts? How are roles delineated and what are the strategies or protocols for deciding and implementing reforms? What role do the teachers associations and school committees play in these efforts? Particularly in Massachusetts, where local control is such a part of district culture, this seems like an important avenue to explore.

C. Implications for Policy

Although this study had a limited focus, a few areas emerged as central topics for further policy consideration and action. Specifically, we identified three policy implications that we believe are important to the Commonwealth's success meeting the needs of all students.

21st Century Learning: Several of the leaders we interviewed expressed a desire for the state to provide more direction, and more incentive, to secondary schools to engage in a comprehensive approach to restructuring curricula for the 21st century. They referred to the guidelines in the 2008 task force report³ and explained that although these guidelines are helpful, as is the incentive provided by the NEASC accreditation, more active direction and support from the Department of Education would help to initiate more comprehensive curricular reform.

Supervision and Evaluation: In the districts and schools we interviewed, a key area of concern was the lack of adequate resources to provide thorough supervision and evaluation to all teachers. The state requirements for supervision and evaluation are fairly meager: teachers without professional status must be evaluated at least one time per year and, with professional status, they must be evaluated once every two years⁴. District and school leaders have limited time to conduct even these bi-annual evaluations. In fact, in many

cases, administrators have 40-50 teachers to supervise and evaluate in a year and, with this kind of load, the quality of supervision and evaluation is considerably compromised. Supervision and evaluation of teachers and leaders is an area that is receiving a good deal of attention right now and, if Massachusetts is to succeed in preparing all students for success in the 21st century, policies and practices that help to ensure quality teachers in every classroom must be a priority for state policy and regulation.

Cross-stakeholder engagement in reform: Despite Teachers21's commitment to change efforts that involve key stakeholders in every stage of reform, we saw a particularly limited role for community and business leaders in the reform efforts in the districts we interviewed. This may be in part due to difficult financial times, such that community and business leaders may have pulled back on some of their engagement efforts. However, if we are to achieve the goal of relevant and innovative high schools that graduate creative thinkers who are productive and global citizens, then we need the expertise of community and business leaders--as well as higher education, student, and family involvement--in systemic reform. ♦

³<http://www.doe.mass.edu/boe/docs/1108/item1.pdf>

⁴<http://www.doemass.org/lawsregs/603cmr35.html?section=06>

Appendix A

Teachers21 SSR Research Study Interview Protocol

- **Current SSR Work**
What efforts are currently underway to redesign the high school/s in your district? How long have these projects been underway? How effective have they been?
What have been the successes so far in implementing this work? What have been the major challenges?
- **Use of Time and Resources**
Have there been any changes to the way the secondary school organizes its time and resources? Have there been any reforms to the school day or the schedule as a part of this larger reform agenda?
- **Student Learning**
How have reforms focused on personalizing learning for students? Can you describe a current example?
How would you describe your 21st century learning goals? Can you describe a current example of teachers implementing these goals?
Do grad requirements meet or exceed MassCore requirements? What are your plans if they do not?
- **Student Outcomes/Assessments & Teacher Quality**
In what ways do your assessments impact curriculum and instruction? How do you use these assessments to inform your overall reform efforts?
Another idea that came up in many of the district-based team breakout sessions was the interest in connecting teacher quality and student outcomes. Is this something your district is working on? How do reforms in your district link teacher quality and student outcomes?
- **School Culture & Shared Governance/Collaboration & Teacher Engagement**
A theme that ran through the different groups had to do with the importance of engaging teachers in the reform efforts. What role have teachers played?
Are there opportunities for collaborations among teachers and between teachers and other educational stakeholders in the school/s? Do teachers or others in the school play a role in leadership and governance?
- **Partnerships**
Another critical part of the summit had to do with fostering cross-stakeholder partnerships to reform secondary schools. What partnerships has the district/high school implemented? How successful have they been? What have been the challenges associated in building partnerships? (with parents, business, etc.)
- **Next Steps**
What would you find most useful in terms of support from Teachers21?
- **Are there other things you think it's important I know about your work?**
Accomplishments? New Directions? Challenges?

Appendix B

1. Shared School Governance

- Redesigned vision, mission, values and goals , embraced by the entire community, that support learning success for all
- Shared leadership committed to providing skills and competencies that ensure college and career readiness and provide for engaged and productive citizens and employees in our competitive global society

2. Culture of Professional Development

- Operational professional learning communities that utilize collective inquiry to refine and reflect their practices
- Courses, institutes, outside learning options to expand knowledge base and skill level
- Work embedded PD to build internal capacity

7. Community Partnerships

- Provision for meaningful family involvement to promote an atmosphere of shared responsibility
- Collaboration with higher education, businesses and community agencies to clearly establish the real world connections for 21st century student preparation

Teachers²¹ Secondary School Redesign Model

3. Personalization

- Sense of shared responsibility for all of our students built on a climate of trust and respect
- An emphasis on the social and emotional needs of adolescent learners to nurture each student's voice and competencies
- Frequent and meaningful opportunities for each student to plan and assess their learning in a smaller personalized setting

6. Use of Time and Resources

- Flexible use of time to assure that the diverse needs of learners are met
- Resources allocated so that teacher collaboration and reflection is on-going

5. Curriculum/Instruction/Assessment

- Relevant, rigorous, and equitable standards that encompass the needs of 21st century students
- Research based, technology enhanced and differentiated instructional best practices
- Multi-faceted systematic assessment that is grounded in pre-assessment, guided by common formative assessment and revised grounded on data based results
- Collaborative teams that engage in ongoing discourse about teaching and learning

4. Equity

- A safe and engaging learning environment for each student
- A community of educators committed to the attitudes, behaviors and skills that ensure inclusive, respectful and effective interactions
- Policies that provide for challenging programs for each individual learner

Acknowledgements

Teachers21 is grateful to the following districts and organizations who attended the summit (*and to those who participated in our study):

Assabet Valley*
Attleboro*
Auburn*
Burlington*
Canton*
Concord-Carlisle*
Dennis-Yarmouth*
Fairhaven
Fitchburg*
Franklin*
Hingham*
Holliston
Leominster*
Lowell

Malden*
Medway
Needham*
North Middlesex*
Pittsfield*
Reading*
Sandwich
Shrewsbury*
Somerville
Springfield Science Tech HS*
Westford*
Blue Hills Regional
Boston Community Leadership Academy
Boston Latin Academy*

We are grateful to Linda Noonan and Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education for their co-sponsorship of the summit. We are also grateful to Linda Hayes, Massachusetts Association of Secondary Schools; and Stafford Peat, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, for their contributions and insights about secondary school reform. Thanks also go to Susan Freedman, former president of Teachers21, John D’Auria, president of Teachers21, and Dr. Patrick McQuillan, Boston College Lynch School of Education, for their thoughtful analysis of this study, and to Megan Rohr for her graphic design work.

About Teachers21. Teachers21’s mission is to ensure that effective and caring teachers support every student to learn and achieve at high levels and that skillful and persistent leaders provide knowledgeable and insightful guidance for every school and district. Teachers21 works to strengthen teacher and leader expertise through the provision of robust professional development opportunities and research into promising practices. We pursue policy initiatives with the goal of establishing rigorous standards, professional supports, and accountability for all educators.