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Secondary School Redesign: Designing for Middle and High Schools That Work

Today’s middle and high school students are immersed in a rapidly changing world marked by technological advances, shifting economic and workforce pressures, changing perspectives about the purpose of education, and a swelling desire for relevance, rigor, and innovation to catalyze the futures of New Mexico’s children and youth. In response to these pressures, there have been calls for a “redesign” of schools—certainly in recent years, but arguably for decades.

This brief will provide an overview of the imperative of school redesign, a review of related efforts to date, research about evidence and potential models that can support secondary school redesign, and policy and budget considerations for lawmakers to consider in deciding how to best support both the immediate and long-term success of New Mexico’s middle and high school students.

The Imperative of School Redesign

Redesigning schools is vital for at least two reasons: a lack of student engagement and a lack of readiness as students finish their 12th grade education. Low rates of engagement and the related, potentially resulting, gaps in readiness are a potent combination of evidence that for far too many students, the school system is simply not working.

A Lack of Engagement. Research shows that student engagement drops sharply as students get older—by the time students reach 12th grade, [survey](#) results show a mere 34 percent are engaged in school. School engagement peaks in fifth grade, when 74 percent of students report being engaged, but then declines, dropping a bit more each year as students move up through grade levels—sixth graders start their secondary school journey with about two-thirds (67 percent) being engaged but by 12th grade, this erodes to just about a third (34 percent) of students being engaged in school (34 percent). Students are also missing a lot of school. Current data shows about 40 percent of students in New Mexico are chronically absent.

A Lack of Readiness. Complicating this, students are often failing to leave high school ready for what comes next. This is evident in several data points: high rates of remediation if students do attend postsecondary schooling, low student

Key Takeaways

Middle and high school redesign matters to address two primary concerns: a lack of student engagement and a lack of readiness for what comes after high school.

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New Mexico leads the country in youth disconnection and lack of opportunity—19.6 percent of young people ages 16-24 are neither working, nor in school.

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New Mexico has invested in many promising, but discrete, initiatives to transform schools. A unified, long-term approach could be built into a comprehensive framework for school redesign.

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achievement rates, a lack of preparedness for available jobs, a lack of access to career pathways while in school, and low graduation rates. Among each of these data points, there are also gaps in *how* different student groups are doing.

Both a lack of engagement and readiness are also evident in high rates of disconnection—in a 2022 [report](#) published by Measure of America, a nonprofit, nonpartisan initiative of the Social Science Research Council, New Mexico was found to have the highest rate of youth disconnection—with 19.6 percent of teens and young adults ages 16 to 24 who are neither in school nor working.

The Necessity of Middle and High School Years

Secondary years are a pivotal time to engage students, provide rigorous and relevant academic, social, and emotional learning experiences, and ensure school systems are connected to the changing needs of the economy, workplace, and learning expectations that will serve the long-term success of students.

Schools must respond to the needs of today’s students to produce the college, career, and civic readiness so deeply desired by New Mexico’s youth, families, and communities. Well-designed schools and school systems offer engaging environments that foster learning, critical thinking, and personal development. Research also shows by tailoring educational spaces and methods to the needs of adolescents, we can enhance their academic performance, social interactions, and overall wellbeing, thus preparing them for the demands of higher education, diverse career paths, and active civic engagement.

Moreover, thoughtful school experiences can inspire a lifelong love for learning and equip students with the skills and resilience needed to thrive academically, professionally, and as responsible, informed citizens who contribute meaningfully to society.

A History of School Redesign Efforts

Middle and high schools today are rooted in a model designed for a much different era. At the time widespread middle and high school education emerged in the United States in the late 1800s and early 1900s, the country needed a much different workforce than it does today. And the world itself looked much different. In a country that once led the world in providing widespread secondary education, we have now fallen woefully behind in adapting our education system to meet the needs of today.

Instead, the United States continues to operate middle and high schools in a way that meets the needs of decades past. New Mexico businesses and higher education institutions have been telling us for years that they can’t find the workforce they need, or that remediation rates are too high. Similarly, students have been telling us that school isn’t working as evidenced by disengagement rates, poor school attendance, and a lack of preparedness for college, career, and civic life. A lack of statewide systems that lead to college and career readiness was also one of the key findings in the *Martinez-Yazzie* lawsuit.

Given all these concerns, “redesigning” schools, particularly high schools, is not a new policy concern. Both nationally and in New Mexico, a re-envisioning secondary schools has been a key part of the education zeitgeist for decades. The difference now is that the need for these changes is severely catching up to us. The skills gap, jobs of the future, 21st

century learning needs, and many related concerns that used to be challenges to solve for the future are here now.

Models to Reinvigorate Secondary Education

A review of approaches, school models, design choices, and frameworks that lead to meaningful student experiences reveals several common threads. In many of the schools that are working to address engagement and genuinely rethink the student experience, the school day has taken a departure from traditional structures such as the lecture format, what counts as learning (and where learning happens), and the six to seven period day with core academic courses, a handful of electives, and time spent on campus all day.

In its place, young people may instead show up to schools that look and function much more like workplaces with more dynamic experiences, schedules, and even buildings—some students are even spending part of their day in workplaces. There are innovative schools across the country, and in New Mexico. In thinking about the components of innovative school practices the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE), a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization focused on support state education board members, offers one framework that policymakers may consider as “[building blocks](#)” needed to rethink high schools, although these may also apply to middle schools. In its recent High Schools That Matter series, NASBE notes a need for the following:

- Learner outcomes that clearly articulate an expanded vision for student success;
- Well-defined, specific competencies to guide teaching and learning;
- Powerful learning experiences inside and outside of the classroom that align with those desired outcomes and competencies;
- Richer models of assessment rooted in a competency-based framework, which students, parents, and educators can use to accelerate learning;
- New kinds of transcripts that codify and clarify for postsecondary schools and employers what young people know and can do;
- Support for aspiring and incumbent teachers to help them fill new roles; and
- Designs for schools that are not tethered to minutes in chairs or preparation for an economy that no longer exists, but on developing the knowledge and skills young people need for success in this century.

Similarly, the XQ Institute, a national organization focused solely on rethinking the high school experience, offers six “design principles” to articulate what a rethink looks like in action:

- Strong mission and culture;
- Meaningful, engaged learning;
- Caring, trusting relationships;
- Youth voice and choice;
- Smart use of time, space, and technology; and
- Community partnerships

And finally, Knowledge Works, a national organization focused on personalized, competency-based education, offers a [State Policy Framework](#) for Personalized Learning centered on four ideas:

- Creating a student-centered vision;
- Incentivizing district innovation;

- Giving credit for all learning that occurs; and
- Rethinking accountability and assessment.

Beyond these organizations, there are also state models that lawmakers in New Mexico can look to as examples of how the state might coalesce around a long-term, intentionally designed model to improve student outcomes. As the LESC has previously heard about, for example, Maryland undertook a years-long process of reimagining its entire education system that has resulted in the [Blueprint for Maryland's Future](#). In an effort that began with the legislative body convening a study commission, known at the time as the [Kirwan Commission](#), the Blueprint is a culminating product of recommendations made by that commission. The Blueprint is designed to transform the state's prekindergarten through postsecondary systems and includes extensive policy changes, partnership, and investment of state and local resources that are designed to be implemented and studied over the next decade. This state led process is oriented around five pillars:

- Pillar 1: Early Childhood Education
- Pillar 2: High-Quality and Diverse Teachers & Leaders
- Pillar 3: College and Career Readiness
- Pillar 4: More Resources for Students to be Successful; and
- Pillar 5: Governance and Accountability

Through this approach, the commission, which met for three years beginning in 2017, set forth a plan for the state that extends well into the 2030s. This strategy includes a combination of legislative changes, strategic partnership with the Maryland State Department of Education, built in evaluation of the state's initiatives, an implementation board to oversee the reforms, and ultimately, a long-term plan designed to close Maryland's student achievement gaps and transform their state's education system.

In addition to these research-based and state-led examples, numerous other models exist that point to the factors that reinvigorate middle and high school years—as LESC staff have looked at this topic, common themes have emerged, which are embedded into the policy recommendations noted later in this brief.

A Note on Middle School Grades

While secondary school redesign encompasses both middle and high school grades, there are distinct needs and potential policy implications for both middle and high school. Middle school students—often inclusive of children in grades six through eight—are experiencing a particularly important time in adolescent development with distinct needs that differ from both their younger and older peers. Middle school students experience rapid physical growth, changes in brain development, and growth in self-identity. Youth at this age also experience an increased need for autonomy and agency and undergo a neurobiological shift that creates more attunement to social information—as a result, they often have a heightened sensitivity to status and respect.

All these changes require a developmentally informed approach that fosters critical thinking, problem solving, and social skills. Additionally, school designs that support a safe and inclusive school environment, encourage positive relationships with peers and adults, and provide access to mental health and social-emotional learning supports are particularly important to support middle school aged students.

Student engagement can be supported by supporting students' sense of belonging, feelings of competence, and increasing student opportunities for autonomy. School practices such as teaming among educators, advisory periods, robust social-emotional learning curriculums, beginning career exploration, and shared planning time for educators remain crucial best practices for middle school students.

New Mexico's Efforts and Investments

The Role of Partnership

School innovation inherently requires partnership to become a reality. Entities important for the Legislature to consider as having unique and valuable roles in school redesign include state agencies such as the Public Education Department (PED), educators and school leaders, young people themselves, New Mexico's families and communities, industry partners, postsecondary partners, community organizations, and likely more. This points to the vested interest that many have in supporting schools to genuinely ready learners for what comes after middle and high school.

Legislative Investments.

While a notable number of innovations are currently underway—or have been tried—by many of the partners listed above, this brief will focus next on the legislative investments that have been made to support quality learning environments for middle and high school students.

Career and Technical Education Funding. For FY24, the Legislature appropriated \$40 million for CTE programs (including the NextGen CTE pilot project), Innovation Zones, and work-based learning initiatives and equipment through the General Appropriation Act (GAA) of 2023. This funding is being used to support several initiatives and approaches that align with research recommendations on school innovation:

- **NextGen CTE Pilot Project.** \$14.4 million is being used to support the NextGen CTE pilot project with \$13 million in awards to 99 local education agencies, and \$1.4 million in awards to seven Bureau of Indian Education funded schools. The NextGen CTE Pilot Project was created as a seven-year pilot by the Legislature in 2019, intended to support quality CTE programs statewide. While this project has increased state funding for CTE programs, it is structured as a pilot and as it nears the end of its intended lifespan, it may be worthwhile to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the initiative and determine the components needed to sustain CTE funding and ensure access to this funding statewide.
- **Innovation Zones.** \$11.4 million is being used to support Innovation Zones with 47 schools (across 44 local education agencies) receiving awards. The Innovation Zones initiative, started by the Public Education Department in FY23, is an initiative intended to bolster and braid strategies such as graduate profiles, CTE, work-based learning, and personalized supports for students.
- **Work-Based Learning.** \$8 million is being used to support work-based learning. This funding is supporting two work-based learning programs. Additional details about these are not currently available.

- **Additional Support, Initiatives, and Technical Assistance.** The remaining \$6.2 million is being used for a wide range of additional college and career readiness initiatives including contracting with REC9, career technical student organization supports, staff and bureau support at PED, training, dashboards, and technical assistance.

Infrastructure Development. Chapter 199 (House Bill 505), the direct capital appropriations bill from the 2023 legislative session, also appropriates \$65 million to school districts to invest in CTE infrastructure. In the case that schools classify other needs as higher priorities than CTE, these funds may also be spent on prekindergarten facilities or other local maintenance priorities. LESC staff have found that all these funds have been allocated, however details of how these awards have been used will not be available until next year.

Modernizing Graduation Requirements. During the 2023 legislative session, the Legislature passed House Bill 126 (HB126), a bill designed to modernize high school graduation requirements, although the measure was ultimately vetoed. The bill would have incorporated practices such as allowing PED-approved work-based learning and CTE courses to count toward graduation requirements, the development of graduate profiles, and a strengthening of Next Step Plans to bolster students’ career, education, and personal goals.

A Framework to Clarify and Foster Innovation

School redesign has been a significant conversation for years, perhaps decades. Despite this, many initiatives and investments have been made in a way that lacks a guiding framework and approach to fully scale, understand the impact of, and support widespread innovation so *all* of New Mexico’s young people may have a chance to benefit from these changes. A unified approach and framework could bolster these efforts, provide quality benchmarks, and allow the state to understand what provides the most impact to students.

Policy and Budgetary Components to Consider

As the LESC has studied secondary school engagement and redesign, it has become clear that many promising practices are currently underway—however what may be missing is the untapped potential of combining these discrete parts into a comprehensive statutory framework tied to a long-term vision and driven by agreed upon metrics of student success. The Legislature may want to consider how to blend legislative investments to date, while also building upon needed components, resulting in a comprehensive approach. Such a framework could include the following:

- **Modernized graduation requirements** that both provide a strong academic foundation and allow students opportunities to explore interests and develop skills in robust ways.
- **A quality education, career, and personal goal plan** for each student. While New Mexico’s graduation requirements do require the development of “Next Step Plans” for all students, these could be improved to evolve into a more robust, usable, and concrete plan.
- A statewide, **comprehensive approach to school counseling and advising** and investment in this segment of the workforce. Research shows adolescents benefit

from both choice *and* quality advising and counsel as they make decisions about their future. Despite this, many schools lack a workforce to provide this counsel. To move students' plans forward and support the social, emotional, and academic needs of students, the state could consider the development of a comprehensive school counseling strategy that includes both adults that focus on guidance and adults that focus on behavioral health.

- **Sustained funding** to allow for longer term strategic planning is often required in multi-year school redesign efforts. School redesign takes a strong vision and often, years of effort to begin to see outcomes. Schools in New Mexico may struggle to implement redesign efforts because of the lack of funding that exists beyond one year. While many streams of funding have been made available, these are often disconnected from a cohesive investment strategy.
- **Statewide measures of student success** and an approach to engage not just school communities, but families, in understanding how students are progressing toward these measures. Mutual accountability is possible when student success metrics are defined, agreed upon, and oriented around by all education stakeholders—included in this is families, who may benefit from more regular updates about how their children are progressing and measuring up to agreed upon metrics of success. *Note: Another of LESC's current workplan items is centered on developing student success metrics, which LESC staff will be doing in partnership with Harvard's Strategic Data Partnership Fellowship from fall 2023 to spring 2025.*
- Additional **flexibility with what counts as learning time** and where learning can happen. One common theme in school redesign models is counting all learning that happens, often through experiences such as job training programs, internships, work-based learning, and other applied learning.
- Investments in **infrastructure, capacity building, and access**. Access to quality learning environments is uneven across the state, both in terms of quality of school environments themselves and depth of programming available to students. For all students to have access to modernized instruction, lawmakers may want to consider how to scale up infrastructure improvements and ensure all students, regardless of their zip code, have access to opportunities aligned with a modernized approach to middle and high school years.