

Chapter 6

Conclusion

High Schools on the Move (HSOM) celebrates those who are already on the journey to high school renewal and innovation and offers those who are not the encouragement to take the first steps. In this final chapter, we reflect on Vermont's readiness to embrace a long-term, systemic, secondary school change effort and on the voice of Vermont's secondary students and youth.

Despite a decade long standards-based K-12 reform movement, Vermont's secondary schools have not engaged as easily as its elementary schools. Secondary school change contains its own issues and challenges. The Task Force believes that *HSOM* adds a fresh perspective to secondary school change and offers a framework through which to engage in this worthy effort. The report lends support to *Vermont's Framework of Standards and Learning Opportunities*. Vermont's current school improvement strategy is centered upon the *Framework* and can be greatly enhanced by *High Schools on the Move*.

Vermont has developed most of the capacity needed to implement and refine a statewide process to guide high school renewal by personalizing the experience for each student. The Vermont Department of Education looks forward to collaborating with its partners to build capacity for this journey.

Recommendations for Long Term, Systemic Change

Based on the Task Force's work, the Department of Education is working to establish a Center for High School Renewal and Innovation and a network of schools moving toward systemic secondary school change. This center and network will have three purposes:

- To recognize, support and reward high schools that implement any of the Twelve Principles or that adapt existing systems to increase student engagement in learning
- To form a network of schools learning from each other and serving as demonstration sites and models for systemic change
- To organize a statewide movement that continuously renews Vermont's commitment to quality secondary education by connecting related initiatives at different schools, providing technical support for local adaptation and publishing the results of promising strategies

Appendix B, Assessment Rubric for the Twelve Principles, includes a set of indicators for assessing school functioning in relation to the Principles.





Vermont's Change Strategy

The High School Task Force asserts that the high school experience cannot be personalized through a series of minor adjustments. Changing any component of the high school experience requires changing the whole structure. Consequently, Vermont's challenge is to work with every community to change the structure of every high school. The Task Force has identified four strategies to initiate this statewide change:

- **Publication and distribution of *High Schools on the Move: Renewing Vermont's Commitment to Quality Secondary Education*, which informs schools and communities about the need for change and provides the Twelve Principles as a framework for that change**
- **Creation of and support for a network of schools engaged in change as well as administration of grants that support comprehensive change efforts**
- **Establishment of a High Schools on the Move network to foster experimentation and cross-school interaction among participating schools**
- **Formation of a Center for High School Renewal and Innovation to support statewide change, coordinate education policy and facilitate long-term adaptation and growth**

These strategies for change are already in motion. Publishing this document is the first step toward implementing the Task Force's vision, and the Department of Education recently issued a first solicitation for career academy grants, funded through the Federal High School Reform State Grant program. The River Valley Consortium (which includes Bellows Falls Union High School, Green Mountain Union High School, Black River High School, River Valley Technical Center), Peoples Academy, South Burlington High School and Mount Abraham Union High School each received a grant.

As schools try to incorporate the Twelve Principles, they will need places to visit where they can see change happening. This fall, Peoples Academy in Morrisville, Vermont will host design studios highlighting effective practices in place at their school that support the principles.

A design studio is a carefully planned visit during which the visiting team engages in strategic planning. Instead of simply sending a team to visit, a high school going to a design studio identifies a focus for their visit, based on materials sent by the host school. The visiting team analyzes the gap between current practices in their school and the vision for the practices that they would like to implement before attending. During the design studio, visiting teams reflect on what they are learning. The host school shares "lessons learned" from its reform journey as well as some of the history of its reform effort. This sharing helps the visiting school prepare for change. We hope that in the future more schools will host design studios to share their promising practices, facilitate learning and encourage change.

Additionally, the Department of Education is developing a secondary school focus team, which will promote the recommendations in *HSOM* and coordinate and support secondary change efforts at the department. Work is also beginning to create the Center for High School Renewal and Innovation.

These first steps are encouraging and offer great hope for the future. More than one-third of Vermont's high schools worked with department staff members to develop proposals for career academy grants. Many high schools that applied for a career academy grant reported that the process of examining the Twelve Principles in relation to current practices at their schools was extremely useful; most said they look forward to reading this report and continuing their exploration into high school renewal. This provides compelling evidence that Vermont's high schools, and their leaders, are ready for change. The Vermont Department of Education will work diligently to pursue future funding for its high school renewal and innovation vision.

As the Task Force worked, its members tried to keep in mind students' voices in answering so many fundamental questions about the high school experience: What do secondary students want? What do they fear? What are their hopes, dreams and aspirations? In the Task Force's work with Vermont students and youth, seven themes emerged:

Relevancy and application: High school students want to be able to connect the knowledge they gain in school to the challenges they will face as adults. In short, they want to be engaged learners.

Caring adults: High school students want daily contact in small classes with adults who understand their interests, respect their talents and care as much about students' personal experiences as their academic achievements.

Safety: Students want to pursue their aspirations free from fear of oppression and/or persecution because their values make them different from others.

Being known and valued: Students want to be recognized by adults and other students for their unique contributions to the school and community.

Respect: Students want to be granted respect for their individuality, not just their membership in a group, class or achievement level. They want to return respect to those who treat them with respect.

Personal Interests and Aspirations: High school students want to pursue their own investigation of learning, not a prescribed regimen of unrelated classes determined by rules, requirements and obscure traditions. They want to experience personalized learning and instruction, and they want opportunities to develop leadership skills.

Multiple pathways: Students want multiple avenues to achieve graduation. They do not want a one-size-fits-all experience.





Some Final Thoughts

For final emphasis, this report closes with statistics that illustrate the potential costs if leadership is not provided for high school reform. More than 50 percent of the schools identified for technical assistance in 2001 were secondary schools; there is no indication this figure will decrease. The dropout rate in Vermont, although lower than the national average of 26 percent, hovers at 20 percent. This means that one out of every five Vermont students who starts high school does not finish with his or her class. Ninety-five percent of youth incarcerated in Vermont dropped out of high school. It is abundantly clear that without a high school credential, young people face diminished futures.

This report outlines the pragmatic wisdom and inspiration needed to help renew secondary education in Vermont. It contains tools and strategies to assist communities and schools to meet the needs of their diverse learners. We know that, developmentally, the secondary years are a time of great transition for youth. In Vermont, we want each one of our young people to transition to adulthood successfully. The Task Force urges you to use this report in the hopes of achieving that goal.