

# Graduation Requirements and High School Redesign Task Report

*Guidelines for High School Redesign in Ohio  
December 2020*

## Introduction

The four years a student spends in high school are some of the most important for their path to success. These years are critical in building independent, motivated and empowered learners, ready to take on the world beyond the education system in which they have grown. For decades, high schools throughout the United States have almost solely been structured on lecture-based classroom experiences and the Carnegie unit. High schools are doing their job of awarding diplomas, yet there has been recognition that the high school experience is not all it could be.

Through years of study, Harvard Professor Jal Mehta found that the most successful classrooms were those that shed the standard model of education in favor of innovation and student interest. In those settings, students were “engaged and inspired by what they were learning—often in activities outside the classroom.” Professor Mehta, like many others to research this topic, found that there was no single answer to what makes high schools engaging and inspiring, but he did find that those high schools instilled a sense of purpose and identity.<sup>1</sup>

Certainly, there are many high school graduates that progress and succeed in college, in the workplace and in the military. At the same time, there are many who enter college and then drop out, cannot succeed in the workforce or cannot sustain military service. Students, post-secondary educators, and employers agree: the experience of high school does not match up to the success drivers of a student’s post-high school experiences. There is an expressed need among all three of these groups for students to experience, in high school, more of what they will experience after graduation.<sup>2</sup>

For this reason, the State Board of Education formed the High School Redesign Task Force to study how best to move Ohio’s high schools toward new models that engage and inspire students.

In approaching this work, the Task Force found its foundation in Ohio’s Strategic Plan for Education, [Each Child, Our Future](#). The redesigning of high school can make a significant contribution to achieving the strategic plan’s primary goal:

***One Goal:*** *Ohio will increase annually the percentage of its high school graduates who, one year after graduation, are:*

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<sup>1</sup> [Rethinking the American High School – Harvard Magazine](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Achieve Report on High School Graduate Preparedness](#)

- *Enrolled and succeeding in a post-high school learning experience, including an adult career-technical education program, an apprenticeship and/or a two-year or four-year college program;*
- *Serving in a military branch;*
- *Earning a living wage; or*
- *Engaged in a meaningful, self-sustaining vocation.*

The work reflected in this report specifically evolves from *Strategy 10* of the strategic plan:

***STRATEGY 10:*** *Ensure high school inspires students to identify paths to future success, and give students multiple ways to demonstrate the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary for high school graduation and beyond.*

## **Background**

The High School Redesign Task Force consists of school district superintendents, high school principals, counselors, career and technical center directors, State Board of Education members, parents, and elected representatives. The charge of the Task Force was to study and review information about the high school experience and make recommendations that could support new approaches and designs likely to be more beneficial and meaningful to students.

With the reconfiguration of Ohio’s [long-term graduation requirements](#) in 2019, the Task Force began its work by developing and finalizing guidance for their implementation. As members of the Task Force became familiar with the requirements and the options available to students, it became clear that these requirements could serve to motivate and nurture students’ aspirations and future plans. To fully leverage the options available in the new requirements, schools would have to broaden the opportunities available to students in high school.

In light of these new requirements and the need for change, the Task Force recognized the need to define the meaning of high school redesign, as well as the necessary framework to support the creation and implementation of new approaches in high schools.

The discussions of the Task Force included a review of the strategic plan’s *Attributes of a Graduate* (below) and how the recommendations should align to the attributes. In this way, the Task Force’s work attempts to capture the four equal learning domains— **foundational knowledge and skills, well-rounded content, leadership and reasoning**, and **social-emotional learning** — identified in the strategic plan.

## **Framework for Attributes of a High School Graduate (from *Each Child, Our Future*)**

To help school districts across Ohio think through their own frameworks for determining what their successful high school graduates will look like, the developers of *Each Child,*

*Our Future* consulted national research to create the following list. It is intended to both provoke and support local thinking and action.

- **Foundational knowledge and skills**—The graduate will have command of basic skills in mathematics, English language arts and technology—the building blocks that enable future learning. Specific to technology, the graduate will understand its global impact and use it to design solutions, communicate ideas and share information.
- **Well-rounded content**—The graduate will have exposure to social studies, sciences, languages, arts and physical education.
- **Critical-thinking and problem-solving skills**—The graduate will demonstrate strong decision-making skills, know how to analyze issues and approach complex challenges.
- **Resiliency, grit and work ethic**—The graduate will demonstrate follow-through and have the wherewithal to “stick to” challenging problems until a solution is identified.
- **Communication—oral and written**—The graduate will be an effective communicator who can clearly articulate his or her thoughts verbally and in writing.
- **Engaged citizens**—The graduate will productively contribute to society and engage in the democratic process (for example, vote on a regular basis).
- **Cultural awareness**—The graduate will hold a world perspective that values and respects diversity and the establishment of meaningful relationships.
- **Collaboration and teamwork**—The graduate will cultivate skills necessary to work with others and understand cooperation and compromise.
- **Adaptability and agility**—The graduate will exercise flexibility when necessary and seek to continuously learn and process new skills.
- **Social, emotional and interpersonal skills**—The graduate will express and manage his or her emotions and establish positive and rewarding relationships with others.
- **Curiosity, discovery and growth mindset**—The graduate will ask thoughtful questions, dig deeply into issues and understand that improvement results from his or her own learning.
- **Gathering information and discerning that information**—The graduate will be intentional about receiving information from multiple, reliable sources and making sense of that information.
- **Innovative and creative**—The graduate will think differently about problems—considering multiple angles of approach—and integrate skills and knowledge across disciplines to identify solutions.

## Guiding Principles for Engaging and Inspiring High Schools

The Task Force examined promising practices and national research<sup>3</sup> and created a list of principles to guide its high school redesign work. Promising practices included the innovative development of career pathways in Marion City schools and a program centered around student choice and self-monitoring at Mayfield High School. Through research, examination of these existing programs, and conversations as a Task Force, many attributes and themes emerged. These attributes and themes evolved into the principles listed below.

### High schools should:

1. **Personalize:** Recognize the individual needs, differences, and interests of every student;
2. **Customize:** Provide students with intentional options for coursework, aligned to their post-secondary goals;
3. **Promote Pathways:** Prepare students for success after high school with student centered and individualized pathways;
4. **Build Life Skills:** Prepare students for post high school life by teaching courses on financial literacy, life skills, and skills reflected on the [OhioMeansJobs Readiness Seal](#);
5. **Focus on Relevance:** Make education relevant to real world experiences;
6. **Prioritize Advising:** Provide strong career and college advising, including meaningful engagement with students on their academic plan, career plan, and financial plan.

The **process** of redesign should be guided by principles as well:

7. **Commit to a Culture of Continuous Improvement and Feedback:** Consistently seek and incorporate student and stakeholder feedback into the redesign work;
8. **Engage in Diverse and Persistent Communication:** Communicate regularly with students and stakeholders regarding the redesign;
9. **Invest in High-Quality Human Capital:** Organize the adults that impact students thoughtfully;
10. **Innovate Systems Thinking:** Cultivate innovation *throughout* the teaching and learning process for all students. Engage partners to challenge the status quo.

## Recommendations

As the Task Force began to apply these principles to Ohio's current high school model, the world moved into the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. School buildings in Ohio closed in March 2020 and schools were faced with a different type of high school "redesign." As schools quickly transitioned to remote learning models, and the 2019-

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<sup>3</sup> The Task Force reviewed three nationally recognized articles and reports. They also reviewed artifacts from the high schools showing promising practices. Links to these documents can be found in Appendix A.

2020 school year concluded in disruption, the Task Force reflected on this moment in education and the long-term impacts on redesigning high schools. A few realities became clear:

1. School administrators and teachers quickly adapted their teaching methods and models;
2. Schools would be redesigning their high school experience for the 2020-2021 school year over the summer of 2020; and
3. The Task Force would shift its work to focus on specific actions.

With the principles in mind, and informed by the realities facing Ohio's education system, the Task Force presents the following recommendations for the Ohio Department of Education and its statewide partners in supporting Ohio's K-12 education system.

### **Recommendation 1: Adopt the Johns Hopkins High School Redesign Framework<sup>4</sup>:**

Beginning in 2018, the Ohio Department of Education became a part of the Johns Hopkins University Cross State High School Redesign pilot program. Reviewing the framework of the Johns Hopkins pilot, it aligns very well with the Guiding Principles and key themes of this Taskforce. The Johns Hopkins pilot relies on **four levers of change** to drive action in schools. The Task Force recommends these four levers, and the resources and evidence-based strategies they align to, be the basis for guiding high school redesign in Ohio. According to Johns Hopkins, these four levers are:

- **Organizing Adults:** How adults are organized in a school is a foundational driver of its outcomes. If the daily interactions of teachers, counselors, administrators, partners, parents *and* students leave them more satisfied, more productive, more supported, more connected and more engaged, evidence shows that the school will achieve greater success.
- **Students at the Center:** Students must form the focal point of high school redesign efforts. Students can be important collaborators on the redesign process, and their perspectives and needs must inform the approach. Research identifies key objectives when redesigning high school experiences:
  - Increase student motivation
  - Increase student engagement
  - Increase student participation in the creation and directing of their own learning
- **Teaching and Learning:** An intense focus on the quality and approach to teaching and learning is the essential ingredient that forms the foundation of the

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<sup>4</sup> [John's Hopkins Cross State High School Collaborative](#)

redesign approach. Shifts in teaching and learning practices must occur. These can be grouped into **seven key domains**:

- Creating challenging and caring classrooms
  - Using the learning sciences
  - Using professional learning communities and instructional coaching for educators
  - Aligning standards, instruction, and assessments
  - Using formative assessments to tailor instruction and supports
  - Integrating social, emotional, and academic development
  - Developing and fostering cultural competencies.
- **Postsecondary Pathways:** Redesigned high schools support students with a deliberate vision of the path to their future. **Four core principles** must inform redesigning the high school experience to enable all students to graduate with a strong and supported pathway to postsecondary success. As schools design pathways they should view high school as a beginning and not an ending. The identified core principles are:
    - Provide universal access and use of postsecondary preparations and guidance supports
    - Keep students' options open
    - Ensure students and parents are selecting the preferred pathway
    - Collaborate beyond the school walls with families, employers, community partners and postsecondary education providers

### **Recommendation 2: Leverage the “Reframing Education” Platform and Network:**

The Task Force recommends that Ohio’s existing network of Educational Service Centers serve as the leaders for bringing the high school redesign work to schools and districts. Already, a team of educational service center leaders has developed the [“Reframing Education” platform](#), which served as a tool to help schools plan for remote and hybrid learning in the 2020-2021 school year. This team of leaders is well situated to continue this work into the post-pandemic world of high school redesign.

### **Recommendation 3: Use Ohio’s Long-Term Graduation Requirements as a Motivation for Redesign**

The High School Graduation and Redesign Task Force began its work with a critical look at Ohio’s graduation requirements, specifically the newly enacted long-term approach introduced in 2019. As the Task Force finalized guidance on these requirements, it became clear that the requirements would motivate schools and districts to expand options available to students. The Task Force recommends that as schools expand options for students, schools look more holistically at the structures in which those options are delivered. The “Reframing Education” network should

specifically promote the alignment of high school redesign efforts to the development of options included in Ohio’s long-term graduation requirements.

#### **Recommendation 4: Identify and Cultivate Promising Innovation**

The Task Force is committed to ensuring the principles outlined above are reflected in Ohio’s redesigned high schools. Working within the Johns Hopkins framework, the Task Force hopes that schools will reflect on the principles when making decisions about how specifically to redesign their high school experience. The Task Force recommends consideration of ***several specific innovations*** as key reflections of those principles.

##### *Creative and Flexible Scheduling*

Redesigned high schools will more creatively and intentionally break down the traditional model of scheduling students and schools into blocks of time dedicated to one specific subject. The Task Force encourages schools to look to tools and options, including [Credit Flex](#), [integrated coursework and simultaneous credit](#), and [work based learning opportunities](#), and take advantage of time in school and out of school to better meet the needs of students.

##### *Competency-Based Grading*

Redesigned high schools will explore moving to a method of grading that evaluates student learning based on subject-area mastery. Grading in this manner, often referred to as competency-based grading, can allow for more creative and student-centered awarding of credit that allows a student to learn at their own pace, rather than the pace established for a “typical” student. This, along with more creative and flexible scheduling practices, can allow students to build their own school day and high school education.

##### *Graduation Planning*

Each student in Ohio now must have a [graduation plan](#) as a part of the district’s policy for identifying students at risk of not earning a diploma ([Ohio Revised Code 3313.617](#)). Redesigned high schools will use these graduation plans as a support tool for all students to plan their high school experience around their specific needs and interests. This plan can be used as a common starting point for all students as a part of a larger, multi-tiered system of supports that includes progressively more intensive and personalized tools like student success plans and individualized education programs. With the understanding that student interests and plans will often change, a graduation plan can be an aid to school personnel, to students, and to the caring adults in a student’s life.

##### *Pathways through Graduation*

It is not enough for schools to help their students *to* graduation. Graduation is not the end. This Task Force understands the need for students to be planning for life after graduation and to make informed decisions about their high school

experience based on those plans. Ohio's redesigned, high schools that help their students set short-term and long-term goals for their life will be much more successful in helping their students to persist in whatever their post-high school plan may be.

### *Expanded Career Focused Education Opportunities and Collaboration*

As outlined in *Strategy 10* of the *Strategic Plan*, career-focused programming often integrates a student's interests with the development of specific skills and knowledge aligned to future goals and aspirations. These programs allow students to demonstrate their skills and knowledge in their area of interest. Acquired skills will follow them to their post-high school pursuits. Redesigned high schools will integrate career-focused components into student schedules to provide them with real world experiences. These career-focused options include, but are not limited to:

- [Industry-Recognized Credentials](#)
- [Work-Based Learning](#)
- [Career-Technical Education](#) options
- Career-Focused coursework (e.g. [College Credit Plus](#), career-focused electives, or [integrated coursework](#))
- [Pre-Apprenticeship and Apprenticeship](#)

Businesses and local programs will partner with schools to create experiential learning opportunities for students ([information can be found here](#)). It is also essential for local schools and districts to communicate and partner with their career-technical planning districts or other [career-technical delivery partners](#) to ensure alignment and increased access for students. The key to expanding career-focused education opportunities is the intentional establishment and nurturing of strong and meaningful school and district partnerships with career-technical education providers, business and industry, and community leaders.

### **Recommendation 5: Identifying Promising Practices and Further Innovations**

The Task Force recognizes there is more work to be done to identify current engaging and inspiring high schools and outline the steps needed to replicate and customize these examples. There is no one-size-fits-all when it comes to high school redesign, but examples can serve as inspiration and as sources of effective practices. The recommendations included in this report are also not meant to be a final, exhaustive list of redesign practices. The Task Force recommends that the Department, in collaboration with Educational Service Centers and the education community, continue to seek out innovative and quality practices, identify high quality exemplars in Ohio and elsewhere, and bring together those interested in taking on high school redesign work.

The Task Force recommends the "*Reframing Education*" website to be a host for sharing resources and examples. In the future, the website will be a place to share best

practices and provide examples of high schools already implementing this work as a resource for schools looking to engage in redesign.

## **Conclusion**

High school can be an exhilarating and joyful experience that supports a student's journey to adulthood, future learning and career success. The Task Force believes that the recommendations in this report can directly impact and improve Ohio's outcomes in meeting the goal to graduate more students who succeed beyond high school. Ohio's next generation of schools must personalize, focus on relevance, and build life skills for graduates. High school graduation is the culmination of thirteen years of growth, support, and guidance within Ohio's K-12 education system. It is a celebration of a student's high school experience and represents a significant achievement in their life. But it is only a step along a student's journey, and these recommendations will support Ohio's high schools to focus on supporting students *through* graduation, to their next steps and beyond.

## **Appendix: National Research**

[Going to school is optional: Schools need to engage students to increase their lifetime opportunities](#) – Brookings Institute

[How to Keep Kids Excited About School](#) – John's Hopkins Cross State Collaborative

[Reforming Underperforming High Schools](#) – MDRC

[All Access Learning](#) – Mayfield City Schools