

THE RESEARCH SITES AND THEIR STUDENT-CENTERED DESIGNS

It is impossible to estimate how many U.S. high schools embrace student-centered learning—and execute it well. Ben Levin, Amanda Datnow, and Nathalie Carrier (2012) suggest the very limited extent to which that philosophical bent appears on the radar of school districts, including those ranked by some measure as “high performing.”

kind of microclimate: subject to the conditions of its topography; the sun, shade, and rain of its resources; the winds of its politics; and the life that its local soil supports, or fails to support.

It is no accident that five of our research sites are small high schools, with under 500 students. Data from a variety of studies have shown that, especially for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, smaller school size is conducive to effective student-centered practice (Howley, Strange, & Bickel 2000). With notable exceptions—including one school in this study—teachers in small schools are more likely to know their students well, focus on their individual strengths and needs, focus on student work over time, and collaborate on instructional strategies that help students engage with rigorous work (Steinberg & Allen 2002).

Related Paper in the *Students at the Center Series*¹

Changing School District Practices, by Ben Levin, Amanda Datnow, and Nathalie Carrier



series

In choosing our research sites, we looked for a range of models for enacting student-centered learning. The schools we selected embrace the following designs: Big Picture schools, which individualize student learning via their internship experiences; early college high schools, of which there are now 270 nationwide; the International Schools Network, with its effective approach to teaching English language learners; “hybrid” schools that integrate high tech into highly personalized instruction; and schools with long track records of putting into action the student-centered principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools.²

We simultaneously targeted schools where almost all of the students were low-income and minority—or rural, in one of our six choices. In every school in our study, the majority of students would be the first in their families to attend college.

We also sought—and found—substantial diversity in how individual schools take these proven models for student-centered learning and make them their own. We came to see each of our six research sites as a

ALIEF EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL

www.aliefisd.net/groups/alief-early-college-high-school

In partnership with Houston Community College, Alief Early College High School opened with a freshman class in 2009 and by 2011 included 240 ninth and tenth graders. It will eventually enroll 480 students in grades 9-12, drawn from the Alief Independent School District in southwest Houston. The district’s rapidly growing student population of 45,000 is 4 percent white, 36 percent black, 48 percent Hispanic, and 12 percent Asian (including large numbers of immigrants from Vietnam, China, and the Philippines); 70 percent



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are economically disadvantaged, and this district has the highest percentage of Hurricane Katrina refugees in the Houston area. Community-wide, local tensions center on a recent rise in gang violence.

Located on Houston Community College's new Alief campus, the school aims to serve low-income students who would be first-generation college-goers, giving them the opportunity to earn college credits while still in high school. Students can earn an Associate's degree and a high school diploma in four years. As one of the newest early college high schools, Alief has the chance to apply lessons learned from its progenitors.³ For example, in admitting applicants, the school weighs five factors most heavily: whether students are learning English as a second language, would be first in their families to go to college, are African-American or Hispanic, are considered "at risk" of dropping out, and qualify for free or reduced lunch. Once enrolled, all students take four years of AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) academic enrichment and support classes, which focus on inquiry, critical thinking, and other key college skills.⁴

BRONX INTERNATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL

www.bronxinternationalhs.com

Founded in 2001 as the third member of what is now called the Internationals Network of Public Schools, Bronx International High School is one of several small schools that occupy the building of a large, failing comprehensive high school that the city closed in 2002. The school's mission is to serve English language learners (ELL) and students who have recently immigrated to the United States. It embraces the core beliefs of International Schools: heterogeneous and collaborative structures; experiential learning; language and content integration; localized autonomy and responsibility within the learning community; and one collaborative learning model for students and faculty alike.

The Bronx is the nation's poorest congressional district. Aside from poverty, students at Bronx International face the special challenges of language acquisition and (for 30 percent) the interruption of their formal education due to war or other

conditions in their countries of origin. In 2010-11, the 359 students in grades 9 through 12 represented over 20 countries and spoke 14 languages; some were not literate in their native languages. Seventy percent of students have been separated from one or both parents during their families' immigration to the United States, almost all come from low-income families, and many students work to support themselves. They may also miss extended periods of school to visit relatives in their countries of origin. Documentation issues can obstruct students' access to college financial aid.

Despite these challenges, Bronx International has demonstrated impressive success with its unusually high ELL population. Student scores on the state Regents high school exit exams have steadily increased, with about half of its 2010 graduates earning a Regents diploma. Its four-year graduation rate stands at 65 percent (with 28 percent of students staying for a fifth year, it rises to 74 percent), compared to a citywide 23 percent for English language learners. Attendance has also steadily risen (86 percent in 2009-10) and the dropout rate is 4 percent, compared with 12 percent citywide. Every student applies to postsecondary education, and 14 percent attend classes through College Now, a free City University of New York program designed to prepare public high school students for college.⁵

THE DAYTON EARLY COLLEGE ACADEMY

daytonearlycollege.org

Established in 2003 under the Early College High School Initiative, with support from the Cincinnati-based KnowledgeWorks Foundation, the Dayton Early College Academy serves roughly 400 junior high and senior high school students who are mostly underrepresented in higher education, unprepared academically to meet college readiness standards, and unable to pay for college. Located on the campus of the University of Dayton, DECA was the first early college high school in Ohio and among the first nineteen in the nation. It began as a public school, the result of a partnership between the University of Dayton and the local urban school district, then reorganized to become a charter in 2007. Eighty-eight

percent of DECA's enrollment is students of color, 87 percent are "first generation college-bound," and 70 percent qualify for free and reduced lunch. Many enter DECA with test scores that put them one to three years below grade level.

DECA students graduate by completing a series of six "gateways" in which they demonstrate college-preparatory skills, personal growth, and a commitment to the community through service, job shadows, and internships. There is a core curriculum, along with a multitude of special courses and learning opportunities before, during, and after school and on weekends. Starting in the junior year, students can take classes at the University of Dayton or Sinclair Community College. All DECA students immediately enroll in college upon graduation, compared to 56 percent of African-American and 23 percent of low-income students statewide. The first-to-second-year college retention rate for DECA students stands at roughly 84 percent, compared to a national average of 54 percent. A new middle school aims to address the lack of academic preparation of the students DECA serves, which should raise the percentage of students who succeed in the high school program even further.

METWEST

www.metwest.org

Opened in 2002 as one of the first "new small autonomous schools" in the Oakland (California) Unified School District, MetWest is one of sixty public high schools nationwide pioneering the Big Picture Learning's vision of educating one student at a time, in a tight-knit community of peers, family, teachers, and community mentors. Like other Big Picture schools, MetWest holds that learning must be based on the interests and goals of each student. A student's curriculum must be relevant to people and places that exist in the real world, and a student's abilities must be authentically measured by the quality of her or his work. Working with mentors at a succession of community internships of their own choosing forms the core of each student's individualized learning plan.

MetWest enrolls 136 students in grades 9 through 12; 50 percent are Latino, 30 percent are African-American, 13 percent are Asian-American, 7 percent are white, and 70 percent qualify for free or reduced lunch. In a district characterized by poverty, gang violence, and a high dropout rate, MetWest has the highest attendance rates, the highest pass rates on the California High School Exit Exam, and the lowest suspension rates of all Oakland Unified high schools. Some 40 percent of MetWest students have parents who did not graduate from *high school*—yet at least 90 percent of them graduate and immediately go on to two- or four-year colleges. That compares with the district's graduation rate of 69 percent, with only 38 percent of graduates meeting the eligibility requirements for the California state college and university systems.

NYC ISCHOOL

www.nycischool.org

Started in 2008 with support from N.Y.C. Schools Chancellor Joel Klein and in collaboration with Cisco Systems, NYC iSchool integrates technology with learning that prizes students as autonomous and critical thinkers. Students take interdisciplinary "challenge-based modules" that engage them in the "big ideas"—and problems—of 21st-century society, as well as "core experience" courses that satisfy New York State standards. They work independently online on state Regents prep materials and foreign languages and take Advanced Placement classes using distance learning technology. Each student also participates in an internship outside the school. Students and staff have ubiquitous access to technology, from the Moodle learning management system to laptop computers and other digital equipment. The school is a flagship for N.Y.C. Department of Education's new Innovation Zone (or "iZone").⁶

With roughly 100 students per grade, NYC iSchool enrolls students in grades 9 through 12 (as of the 2011-12 school year), attracting 1,500 applicants for its latest entering class. The student body, which represents all five boroughs of the city, is roughly

40 percent Latino, 28 percent African-American, 21 percent white, and 10 percent Asian-American; half of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch. The school boasts a 95 percent attendance rate. With its “anytime, anywhere” approach to Regents preparation, students in the first three grade cohorts have worked through the required Regents material at a faster pace, and with a higher exam pass rate, than students citywide.

NOBLE HIGH SCHOOL

nhs.msad60.org

Noble High School is a rural comprehensive high school in southern Maine, serving the towns of North Berwick, Berwick, and Lebanon, with a combined population of roughly 12,000. While all but 5 percent of the approximately 1,000 students who attend Noble are white, they reflect a diverse mix of rural, working-class families, and 20 percent qualify for free or reduced lunch. Many of the students come from multiple generations of families who have never watched a son or daughter march in a high school or college graduation: 83 percent of the population in North Berwick, 86 percent in Berwick, and 91 percent in Lebanon have not earned a college degree.

In 1994, Noble joined the Coalition of Essential Schools, and the CES guiding principles have since shaped its efforts to know each student well. It moved into a new building in 2002, designed to support its philosophy. Its practices—including heterogeneous grouping, interdisciplinary teams, block scheduling, and exhibitions—are rare among large rural comprehensive high schools. With bold leadership from its principal, a substantial changeover in faculty over the years, and the backing of its school committee and local families, Noble has won a national reputation for practicing student-centered learning approaches. Seventy-nine percent of the class of 2010 were headed to four- or two-year colleges, and proficiency scores on the Maine State Assessment were on par with state averages at all grade levels and subjects.