

# Shaping Our Future together

December 2014

## RESOURCES

for Building Public Understanding  
of School Redesign in Vermont



Jane Feinberg works with Hazen Union's Shaping Our Future Together communications team.

# Dear Community Leader,

Vermont has always been a national and international leader in education. The current implementation of Legislative Act 77, and movement toward proficiency-based learning serve as testimony to our commitment to innovation as a means to ensure the highest quality education for our communities.

Strong policy implementation must be coupled with a strong communications approach to build public understanding and support for change. Toward this end, the Agency of Education, working in partnership with the Vermont School Board Association, is collaborating with three organizations to develop tools and strategies to support Act 77 implementation: UP for Learning, Full Frame Communications and the School Project Foundation\*. Our change paradigm is grounded by an evidence-based communications approach, implemented on the local level by youth-adult teams who engage their schools and the larger community in creating a shared vision for educational redesign through deep dialogue.

During the first year of the communications campaign, we are focused on a strong grassroots effort, supporting five Vermont high school youth-adult teams to design and implement their own campaigns (Colchester, Harwood Union, Hazen Union, Otter Valley, Twinfield). In the meantime, we are also launching a statewide campaign, Shaping Our Future Together, which is intended to build a movement for change over a period of years.

Additionally, with funding from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, we are building a web-based toolkit that will serve not only Vermont, but also the entire New England region. The Public Understanding & Engagement Toolkit will reside on the Foundation's "Students-at-the-Center Hub," a high-profile virtual gathering place for those who support student-centered approaches to learning. Simultaneously, we are developing an independent website for Shaping Our Future Together. Both sites will be launched within the next few months; we will be sure to let you know when they go live.

The desire for tools and strategies to support deep community dialogue about educational change was readily apparent at the recent Green Mountain Imperative Summit held on November 17 and 18 in Burlington. In response, The Shaping Our Future Together leadership team is offering this preliminary Resources for Building Public Understanding of School Redesign. This packet of materials is meant to help jumpstart an effective evidence-based communications approach for community dialogue, particularly as it relates to the implementation of Act 77 and proficiency-based learning strategies. The packet includes Frequently Asked Questions and Talking Points, an Act 77 "elevator speech," a sample press release, prototypes for brochures and written media, and School Reform Initiative protocols. Think of it as a "sneak preview" of the Toolkit.

The more unified we are in our approach to communicating about school redesign, the stronger the movement for change will become. Please do not hesitate to contact any one of us should you have any questions about these tools or the statewide campaign, Shaping Our Future Together. We will be back in touch with you in 2015.

With best wishes for the coming year,

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# RESOURCES

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of School Redesign in Vermont

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# *Vermont's Vision: Shaping Our Future Together*

## General Talking Points

### Part 1: Why is change needed?

Vermont's education system must change in order to meet the demands of the 21st century and the inevitable challenges and opportunities that our community and our society will be facing in the next decades.

In the past, our schools prepared young people to live and work in an economy that was based in our state's natural resources: forestry, farming and the granite industry. Until the 1950s, Vermont schools also prepared young people to take their places in a once-booming economy.

Now, we must prepare our young people for a global economy in which many of the jobs of Vermont's past have become automated, and in which many of the new jobs of the future have not yet been defined.

This new reality requires providing students not only with "the basics"—reading, writing, and arithmetic—that have defined our educational system since agrarian and industrial times, but also with a whole new set of skills to succeed in an information-age economy and innovation-driven society.

These new skills are not just related to advances in technology; they relate to the way workers and thinkers in our society and businesses operate. Very soon, the vast majority of jobs will require more independent thinking and problem solving. Collaboration with people and teams across the aisle and in offices around the globe will be the norm. For people and teams both locally and across the globe, there will be a need for more advanced critical thinking skills. This will be true for all jobs in the workforce.

To prepare our young people and our community for a bright and hopeful future, we must "remodel" our educational system, much as one would remodel a house. When you remodel a house, you do more than just repaint it: you make substantial changes, keeping the previous shape of the house, but updating old parts, and making the house more modern and efficient.

Right now Vermont's educational system—like many school systems around the country—is an older house that isn't "up to code" when it comes to preparing Vermont and its young people for the new world. The bad news is that remodeling creates temporary dust, noise, and inconvenience, but the good news is that when you remodel you don't have to start from scratch—you strengthen what's working and fix what's not. To be more successful in providing students with what they need to build our society and our democracy, we must remodel the way we deliver education to our young people.

This remodeling will be most successful when we all work on the project together. Like an orchestra, Vermont's educational system has many groups of players: students, families, taxpayers, business and community leaders, teachers, principals and administrators. The orchestra sounds best when each musician is skilled, the instruments are well tuned, and the sections work together in harmony toward the common goal of playing the best music they can.

No orchestra becomes great overnight. The beauty of the music depends on dedicated practice by musicians who strive for continuous improvement.

Vermont's vision is creating the plans for the remodeling of our educational system, and ensuring that the orchestra—our entire community—is working together to create a system that is world-class and second to none.

The opportunity we have to remodel teaching and learning, enabled in part by new precedent setting legislation entitled Act 77 along with Vermont's new Education Quality Standards, comes around only once in a generation; we must seize it fully!

We now know a great deal from science about how the brain learns. This information allows us to better remodel education in keeping with these new insights. This will help educators ensure that all learners can succeed.

## **Part 2: What is being remodeled?**

### **Shaping Our Future Together: TIME**

Currently, the school day consists of short blocks of time within a six-hour day. This is problematic, because science has now validated what many of us have always suspected: learners learn in different ways and in different time frames. In the new system, students will be able to move at their own pace—with guidance from staff and parents—through a set of learning experiences. Those who want to zip ahead can do so; those who need more time will have it.

### **Shaping Our Future Together: PLACE & SPACE**

Currently, students come to a school building every day, and spend most of their time at desks inside classrooms that seat 15-25 people. This is problematic for a couple of reasons. First, we know that physical activity promotes better learning, and that students who are sedentary for most of the day do not learn as well. Second, the classroom, and even the school building, is cut off from the larger world, making the learning seem not relevant to many students.

In the new system, some of the learning will take place beyond the walls of the schoolhouse and beyond the hours that the school is open. Students will be given the opportunity to determine for themselves what they are interested in learning and may choose to get credit for real-world, relevant and authentic learning experiences—whether as part of a service-learning project, or an extended learning opportunity in a local business. Of course, students will still spend time in classrooms but even then, classrooms will look and feel different from how they have in the past.

### **Shaping Our Future Together: STUDENT LEARNING**

The basics will always be important because literacy and numeracy are the foundations of a quality education. In the old days, these skills were necessary and sufficient: one could get a well-paying job and have a comfortable life. Today, the 3R's are necessary, but insufficient. Today, young people must know how to collaborate and work in teams, how to analyze data and synthesize ideas, how to be adaptable and creative, and how to apply their learning in real-life situations. They must be technology literate and savvy, and they must be comfortable working with diverse groups of people.

We also want students to have a voice in how they learn because that creates a greater sense of motivation and hence a greater sense of ownership for their learning. Ultimately, we want to help build self-directed, interdependent learners who will continue to learn throughout their lifetime.

### **Shaping Our Future Together: TEACHER LEARNING**

In a traditional school, the teacher is a sole practitioner who closes the door and stands at the head of the class, creating a world that is unto itself. Research now demonstrates that student learning depends a great deal on teacher learning and that teachers learn best when they are working together. Moreover, in order to help students learn the skills necessary for success in a global society, teachers must be able to model those skills.



In addition, while direct instruction will always be a legitimate educational strategy, teachers will target that instruction to smaller groups of students working on the same learning goal. In sum, teachers will shape the learning environment in customized ways for each learner. Toward that end, teachers will learn how to be coaches and mentors to students and each other, as well as facilitators of quality learning experiences in and out of the classroom.

### **Shaping Our Future Together: TESTING & ACCOUNTABILITY**

Research also tells us that students learn better when they are offered choices about what and how they will learn, as well as how and when they will demonstrate their learning. Some young people prefer conventional tests; others prefer to “show what they know” through projects or demonstrations. Schools are currently developing varied means to assess and track each individual student’s learning progress.

All learners will be expected to achieve proficiency in the learning targets that are established. In other words, there will be no more D’s and C’s. Students will continue learning until they have reached proficiency.

### **Shaping Our Future Together: COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT**

In a 20th-century school district, schools were expected to “deliver” an education to the students on behalf of the community. In the 21st century, the school is considered part of the community, and the community is considered part of the schools. This interdependence requires that the community be involved in decisions about the schools, that the schools invite members of the community to become teachers and learners, and that all are united in a common quest to build a bright future for the community and beyond.

## **Part 4: What is Act 77: Flexible Pathways?**

Act 77 is legislation that was passed into law in July of 2013 to ensure that all Vermont students have access to high-quality educational experiences that best prepare them for life after graduation. In the words of the Agency of Education, “We are placing students at the center of the construction and implementation of their own learning experience. Our role as educators is to facilitate that experience in a way that maximizes the opportunities for students... to graduate college and career ready.”

Act 77 consists of high-quality academic and experiential components leading to high school completion and postsecondary readiness. They include community-based learning, internships, college courses, online coursework, independent studies, and career and technical education.

A student’s choice of his or her individual “pathway” will be built upon individual goals, learning styles, interests, and abilities. The “pathway” will be captured in a “Personalized Learning Plan” (PLP) that is co-created on an annual basis by the student, teachers and parents/guardians. This plan will evolve over the course of the student’s middle and high school years. There will be as many pathways as there are Vermont students, each customized to create the most enriching set of experiences for each respective student.

All students in grades 7 and 9 will have Personalized Learning Plans by November of 2015. By the 2018-19 school year, all students in grades 7 through 12 will have PLPs. Personalized learning and instructional approaches are also acknowledged as critical from kindergarten through grade six as well.

Act 77 has identified the following examples of types of experiences that may be included in a PLP, designed to create opportunities for students to pursue flexible pathways to graduation:

- ♦ Applied or work-based learning opportunities, including career and career technical education and internships.
- ♦ Virtual learning and blended learning opportunities that take advantage of technology to expand the range of learning experiences and enhance personalization.
- ♦ Dual enrollment opportunities, in which college courses are made available to high school juniors and seniors. Students participating in dual enrollment receive both high school and college credit for the given course. Eligible students may access up to two vouchers for use at participating colleges.
- ♦ The Early College Program, which enables students to simultaneously complete their 12th grade experience, earn a secondary diploma, and complete the first year of college. The Vermont Academy of Science and Technology has historically offered this option. Other postsecondary public and private institutions are now encouraged to develop similar programs.

Students, teachers and parents/legal guardians all participate in the creation and evolution of a student's Personalized Learning Plan. They work together to assess and design the best path to graduation based on the student's evolving interests and goals. Educators serve as guides in this process, helping students choose opportunities grounded in their knowledge of postsecondary school and career preparation.

## **Part 5: What does a student-centered, proficiency-based environment look like?**

1. Proficiency-based or “competency-based” learning refers to a shift in the traditional movement of students through the grades based on their age and “seat time” in a classroom. Instead, students move ahead when they have demonstrated mastery of content. If an individual masters course content faster than his or her peers, that person can continue to progress to more challenging content. Alternately, if an individual requires a bit more time to learn content, they will be afforded the time and support necessary to master the material.

There are a number of key features that one can look for in a student-centered, proficiency-based environment:

- ♦ The environment is welcoming, caring and safe because learning involves taking risks and making mistakes.
- ♦ Students share responsibility for their own learning, rather than the teacher or the parent taking responsibility for them.
- ♦ Students have a voice in determining how they will learn and demonstrate their learning.
- ♦ Assessments are customized for students.
- ♦ “Rubrics” or scoring guides are used to assess whether students have met the standards. These keep performance levels high even though the specific demonstrations of learning may vary.
- ♦ Students are allowed to move at different paces through the learning process.
- ♦ Students understand the learning goals and the level of thinking required to demonstrate proficiency.
- ♦ Students are grouped and regrouped as needed, depending on what they need to learn next.



## Part 6: What are Vermont’s Education Quality Standards?

### History

The 2014 Education Quality Standards (EQS) replace the former School Quality Standards (SQS). Established by the State Board of Education, these standards “ensure that all students in Vermont public schools are afforded educational opportunities that are substantially equal in quality, and enable them to achieve or exceed the standards approved by the State Board of Education...These rules are designed to ensure continuous improvement in student performance, instruction and leadership to enable students to attain rigorous standards in high quality programs.” These revised standards signal the intentional shift from inputs to outcomes; from a focus on courses and Carnegie units (seat time) to a focus on mastery of content.

### Relationship between Act 77 and the Education Quality Standards

The alignment between the EQS and Act 77 is highly intentional. While Act 77 is primarily about the shift to personalization in the educational experience, EQS is primarily about the shift to the demonstration of proficiency. This alignment recognizes that personalization and proficiency complement and reinforce one another.

## Part 7: Why is the implementation of Act 77 called “Shaping Our Future Together”?

The quality of our education system is inextricably tied to the strength of our state—now and in the years to come. Therefore, all residents of Vermont have a stake in the remodeling of our education system to meet the demands of a rapidly changing world. In the past, education was an endeavor that occurred primarily inside the four walls of a school; today student learning is connected to real life and the real world young people will be entering upon graduation. Within the context of the community, youth have an opportunity to co-design their education and increase their roles and responsibilities as learners and authentic contributors. The skills they master are the very skills needed to succeed in work and in life: communication, collaboration and problem solving. When young people and adults mutually invest in shaping the highest quality education possible for all students, when learning is an act of civic engagement, we are shaping the most hopeful future possible for Vermont.

Shaping Our Future Together is also a challenge to the community at large, urging citizens of all backgrounds to view themselves as life-long learners, and as full participants in the continuous shaping of a bright and prosperous future for the state.

# Shaping Our Future Together

## Frequently Asked Questions

### 1. Why is Vermont taking on such a large change effort?

To prepare for our future as a community in an increasingly global, complex, and fast-changing society, dramatic change in our educational system is needed. We have left the Industrial Age and mass production, and yet education in most places an assembly line approach to education still prevails. There is broad agreement in our society that change is necessary.

Fortunately, we are not starting from scratch. Perhaps the best way to put it is to say that we are “remodeling” our educational system, much as one would remodel a house. When you remodel a house, you do more than just repaint it: you make substantial changes, keeping the previous shape of the house, but updating old parts, and making the house more modern and efficient.

Right now Vermont’s educational system—like most school systems around the country—must be brought “up to code” to meet the demands of our rapidly changing society. The bad news is that remodeling creates temporary dust, noise, and inconvenience, but the good news is that when you remodel you don’t have to blow anything up—you strengthen what’s working and fix what’s not. It takes some time and patience, but the results will benefit our state for generations to come.

### 2. What kind of “remodeling” are we talking about?

Some of our remodeling efforts will be structural in nature, for example, creating a late start one morning a week at high school so that teachers can collaborate, which research has shown improves teaching in dramatic ways.

Other changes are meant to ensure that students develop mastery of content and skills, not based on “seat time,” but rather on whether they have learned to the level that will prepare them for post-secondary opportunities.

The role of the teacher will also be changing—from content purveyor to facilitator and guide. Youth will be offered different kinds of learning opportunities, both in and out of the classroom.

Moreover, the role of the community is changing. From partnerships with local businesses that offer rigorous learning experiences for our students, to deep dialogue with taxpayers, faith leaders, and community and civic organizations, the community becomes an important stakeholder in shaping a bright future for our schools and communities.

### 3. What does the research say about learning that we haven’t known previously?

The changes taking place in Vermont are informed by the most up-to-date theory and research on how young people learn and what makes them eager to learn. One of the important findings from neuroscience and developmental theory is that students learn and demonstrate what they have learned in very different ways. Learning is also enhanced when it is relevant. Learning, therefore, must be customized or personalized to the strengths and needs (and interests) of each student. We are exploring ways to put this research into practice in orderly and creative ways that will ultimately benefit all of our students.

In addition, we know that meaningful learning occurs when experiences are more active and hands-on, so we offer our students a range of non-traditional learning experiences such as internships, service learning, job shadowing, and after-school enrichment. Students can demonstrate proficiency of standards through these experiences, which are designed to be at least as rigorous as traditional classroom coursework.

Finally, we know that learning is enhanced when students are able to participate in its design, building greater insight into the learning process, promoting shared responsibility and increased ownership of the outcomes.

#### **4. What does “proficiency” mean?**

Our 21st century economy and society demand that we have a much bigger talent pool of graduates than ever before. All young people must become “proficient”—or thoroughly knowledgeable in a wide-range of subjects. In a proficiency-based system, graduation is based not on how much time students have spent in school, but rather, what they can demonstrate that they have learned.

Proficiency-based learning also encourages students who have mastered a subject and are ready for new challenges to move forward; students who need extra time to reach proficiency will be given that extra time. Students typically work with their teachers to design how to measure their progress—whether via a test, an exhibition or portfolio, or some other regular form of feedback.

#### **5. How is this different from tracking, in which students are sorted into ‘smart’ and ‘not-so-smart’?**

We are all “smart” at some things and “not so smart” at other things. Proficiency-based learning is grounded in the understanding that all students can and will learn the same important knowledge and skills needed for future success, but some will take more time and some will need different ways of learning and demonstrating that learning.

In a proficiency-based system, students will know what they need to accomplish to reach proficiency, but they are afforded the opportunity to choose the order in which they want to reach their learning targets and they will also have some say over how they will reach proficiency.

#### **6. What is the history of education reform in Vermont leading up to Act 77?**

Vermont has a long and rich history of education redesign, most recently culminating in the passage of Act 77 in 2013. The roots of this legislation can be traced back to Vermont resident John Dewey, born in Burlington in 1859. He was a dominant figure in American education, founding the progressive education movement nationally and internationally. His belief in the importance of active learning has informed school redesign for the past century.

“High Schools on the Move” (2002) captured Twelve Principles of redesign that remain at the heart of this new legislation. This publication was the culminating document of a State Board of Education taskforce that was asked to address “the critical issues facing Vermont high schools.” This was followed by Act 44 in 2009, which referenced “Flexible Pathways to Graduation” and focused on increasing graduation rates in the state to 100 percent by 2020. In 2011, the Agency of Education conducted an informal study to further both flexible learning pathways and proficiency-based graduation models, resulting in a Policy Research Team Final Report.

Governor Shumlin elevated education redesign as a priority in the 2012 opening session of the Vermont Legislature. This set in motion a two-year process to enact Act 77, which became law in July of 2013. Vermont has one of the most advanced, research-based education agendas in the country.

## **7. Can you describe some of the elements of Act 77?**

Yes! Act 77 highlights include:

- ✦ Real-life learning opportunities through internships and other similar hands-on experiences.
- ✦ A personalized learning plan that enables a student to identify his or her strengths and challenges, and set specific goals, in partnership with teachers and parents.
- ✦ The opportunity to enroll in both virtual and college level courses while in high school.
- ✦ Meaningful career development and post-secondary planning for all students.
- ✦ Increased access to Career and Technical Education.

## **8. How do you know that these are the right strategies for giving our children a quality education? What are they based upon?**

Recent breakthroughs in technology make research in human biology and cognitive science more relevant for education than ever before. With powerful brain imaging tools, neuroscientists can for the first time study how the brain learns—while it's learning! New technologies in genetics are revealing the complex interactions between a learner's genetic makeup and the external environment, while cognitive scientists are tracking the development of alternative learning pathways. Such advancements have led to the emergence of the field of mind, brain, and education.

So, for example, we know that:

- ✦ The brain is continually changing, as learning experiences shape its architecture; students' abilities are always developing. We will be using a variety of ongoing assessments to monitor learning and tailor instruction to promote learning.
- ✦ The brain is learning virtually all the time, in both formal and informal contexts. We can capitalize on this through a range of nontraditional learning experiences, such as afterschool enrichment, extended learning opportunities, and service learning.
- ✦ The brain changes that underlie learning occur when experiences are active, not passive. Act 77 empowers students to engage in active learning experiences that are relevant to their lives and goals.
- ✦ Learning and emotion work together in the brain. Act 77 addresses emotion's central role in education by nurturing positive relationships, teaching emotional regulation skills, and providing shelter from harmful stresses.

## **9. I thought that people were born with certain talents and that some folks just aren't good students. Are you saying that this is not the case?**

Perhaps the most important insight for education from the field of neuroscience is that the brain is highly adaptive, a property called "plasticity." As a result of experiences in different environments, students' brains change continuously, from pre-school through high school and beyond. Students learn not only at school but also at home, at work, in community centers, and in other settings.

As students engage in various activities—from mastering reading to playing online chess to practicing word processing—these experiences gradually sculpt the physical architecture of their brains.

A significant body of research now contradicts the longstanding notion that individual abilities are fixed at birth. Indeed, the brain's plasticity means that individual abilities develop continuously. The more a student learns in a particular area, the more intelligent the brain becomes in that area.

The continually changing nature of the brain underscores the potentially negative effects of certain traditional educational practices, such as tracking. Sorting students into rigid tracks based on their current levels of ability could deny lower-tracked students the rich learning experiences their brains need to reach their full potential.

## 10. Who is responsible for enacting the changes?

The responsibility for enacting Flexible Pathways and more student-centered practices is shared across many stakeholder groups. Legally and administratively, the responsibility falls to our schools to enact this legislation. The Agency of Education is providing training and support for schools. They are also committed to building public understanding of the redesign process. But we know that for such a large change to happen, we need the engagement of every sector of the community.

## 11. How long is it going to take?

Act 77 became law in July 2013. Students in grades 7 and 9 will have Personalized Learning Plans by the fall of 2015. By 2018–19, all students in grades 7–12 will have Personalized Learning Plans. Development of work-based and virtual/blended learning opportunities, dual enrollment and early college options are currently underway. Many schools are also establishing or revamping their teacher advisory systems in order to implement Personalized Learning Plans, ensuring that many adults in the school will be able to serve as coaches and guides. Simultaneously, the state is supporting a large number of high schools as they move toward a proficiency-based system.

## 12. Who else is doing this? Who else in New England? Who else in the U.S.?

Vermont has been at the forefront of national school redesign efforts. The following are but a few of the student-centered innovative programs in Vermont schools currently serving students:

- ♦ **Montpelier High School:** [Community-Based learning program](http://mpsvt.org/index.php/mhs-academics/community-based-learning)  
mpsvt.org/index.php/mhs-academics/community-based-learning
- ♦ **Mount Abraham Union:** [Personalized Learning Department](http://mtabvt.org/home/crews-programs/personalized-learning)  
mtabvt.org/home/crews-programs/personalized-learning
- ♦ **Northfield High School:** [Implementation of Personalized Learning Plans](http://edline.net/pages/Northfield_Middle_High_School/News/Personal_Learning_Plans_make_t)  
edline.net/pages/Northfield\_Middle\_High\_School/News/Personal\_Learning\_Plans\_make\_t
- ♦ **Otter Valley Union:** [Moosalamoo Program](http://sites.google.com/a/rnesu.org/moosalamoo-center)  
sites.google.com/a/rnesu.org/moosalamoo-center
- ♦ **South Burlington High School:** [Big Picture School](http://bigpicturesb.net)  
bigpicturesb.net

- ♦ **Twinfield Union: Renaissance Program**  
[washnesu.org/twinfield/high-school/renaissance-program](http://washnesu.org/twinfield/high-school/renaissance-program)
- ♦ **U-32: Branching Out Program**  
[u32.org/grades9-12/academics/branching-out](http://u32.org/grades9-12/academics/branching-out)
- ♦ **Winooski High School: I-lab**  
[partnershipvt.org/progress-point/winooski-ilab](http://partnershipvt.org/progress-point/winooski-ilab)
- ♦ **Cabot Schools**  
[cabotarts.org/resources/project-based-learning-resources](http://cabotarts.org/resources/project-based-learning-resources)

Twenty-two Vermont high schools are active members of the New England Secondary School Consortium's League of Innovative Schools network, fostering student-centered learning practices throughout the state. Additionally, a growing network of schools statewide have also been preparing to move toward proficiency-based learning over the past several years, with the support of the Agency of Education.

In Maine, there are quite a few school districts that are engaged in school redesign efforts. Many of them are a part of the Maine Cohort for Customized Learning (MCCL) a statewide coalition of school systems, organizations, and individuals committed to supporting performance-based education in Maine school systems. <http://mainecustomizedlearning.org/>

Across the New England region, school districts in Pittsfield, New Hampshire, and Burlington/Winooski, Vermont were awarded grants from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation to move toward student-centered approaches to learning.

Nationally, a number of efforts have been underway—some, for many years, and others more recently. For example, The Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) has been at the forefront of creating and sustaining personalized, equitable, and intellectually challenging schools. The CES Network includes hundreds of schools and more than two-dozen Affiliate Centers. They focus on helping all students use their minds well through standards-aligned interdisciplinary studies, community-based “real-world” learning and performance-based assessment.



# Elevator Speech

*Hey, what is Act 77, anyway?*

The world is changing and so must our education system. Act 77 is a new piece of legislation that jumpstarts the state's efforts to "remodel" education and learning, so that Vermont can fully meet the challenges of the 21st century. We know more than ever about how students learn, and it's time to bring this new knowledge into our classrooms and communities. Act 77 strives to bring the highest-quality educational experiences to all young people in Vermont. It highlights the importance of real-life opportunities, the power of a personal learning plan for each student, the chance to take both virtual and college-level courses while in high school, and meaningful career development and post-secondary planning for every student.

# Champlain Valley Union High School

## Opinion Editorial

For 50 years, CVU has served its community proudly. Thousands of graduates have taken what they have learned and become thoughtful, engaged, and caring citizens. As we begin our next 50 years, CVU is charged with preparing students for an increasingly complex and challenging world. We become more and more knowledgeable about learning (thanks to education research and neuroscience) almost every day; it is our responsibility to use this knowledge to improve what we do. We are concerned that students are leaving high school without all the tools they need for continuing their education and beginning careers in this quickly evolving society.

When a home ages, the homeowners take stock of what to keep and what to remodel. How is the roof? The flooring? The heating system? Do the kitchen and baths meet the changing needs of a family? Many parts of a CVU education will continue to serve us well and should continue to be celebrated. With the growing knowledge of what learners need to be successful, CVU has embarked on a remodeling effort so that all students can LEARN actively and collaboratively, THINK creatively and critically, LIVE responsibly and respectfully, CONTRIBUTE positively to the community, and DEVELOP EXCELLENCE in individual interests.

We are in the midst of understanding how to effectively use standards-based learning as proficiency-based will soon be required by the state. We are also beginning our work to effectively meet the state mandate, Act 77, which requires personalized learning plans and encourages flexible pathways for engaged students who are empowered as equal partners.

The job of educating our students can no longer be limited to the walls of CVU. Shaping our next 50 years together will require all members of our community to play important roles—as students embrace real-life opportunities and choose meaningful career development experiences. Students, educators, administrators, school boards, parents, business leaders, higher education representatives, and every CSSU citizen must join together to reshape what it means to offer all of our young people a meaningful education, so that we can continue to benefit for another 50 years from graduates who become thoughtful, effective, and knowledgeable neighbors.

*—initially drafted by Andre LaChance, CVU faculty member, September 2014; edited by Jane Feinberg.*

# Brochures & Text-Based Examples

The following are examples of products that have been created over the past few years in New England to build public understanding of student-centered approaches to learning. They are meant to serve as templates for your own work in communicating about Act 77 and related work.

*Note: The Glossary of Education Reform, created by the Great Schools Partnership, is an excellent resource to decode educational jargon. It can be found at [edglossary.org](http://edglossary.org).*

## **SAMPLE 1: Shaping a Bright Future Together: Partnership for Change in a Nutshell (Burlington and Winooski, Vermont)**

The Burlington and Winooski districts received a Nellie Mae Foundation grant in 2011 to implement high school redesign efforts, moving toward a student-centered learning model. To support remodeling efforts, the districts created the Partnership for Change. A research and innovation arm of the districts, the Partnership serves as a bridge between the districts, an incubator of ideas, a disseminator of best practices, and a convener of community conversations. This pamphlet provides an overview of their vision and implementation plan.

# Shaping a Bright Future Together

Partnership  
for Change  
...in a nutshell



Since 2011, the communities of Winooski & Burlington have been engaged in a conversation about how to remodel our educational system for the needs & demands of 21<sup>st</sup> century life.



## Our goals are clear

We will shape a hopeful and prosperous future for our two communities, and ensure that all young people in Winooski and Burlington have the knowledge, skills, and habits they need to thrive in a complex, global society.

A generous grant from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation has enabled us to jumpstart this work. We share with the foundation a common framework that puts students at the center of everything we do.



## PARTNERSHIP FOR CHANGE

OUR SCHOOLS • OUR COMMUNITIES • OUR FUTURE

To support the work of remodeling our educational system, the Winooski and Burlington school districts created the Partnership for Change. A research and innovation arm of the districts, the Partnership serves as a bridge between the districts, an incubator of ideas, a disseminator of best practices, and a convener of community conversations.

### Our vision

We will create innovative, collaborative, and equitable learning organizations that inspire all learners to lead their communities to a dynamic and sustainable future.

## Aligned with statewide efforts

In 2013, the state of Vermont passed Legislative Act 77, "An act relating to encouraging flexible pathways to secondary school completion." The legislation supports the creativity of school districts as they develop and expand high-quality educational experiences through several concrete strategies:

Personal learning plans

Community-based learning

Virtual learning

Dual enrollment

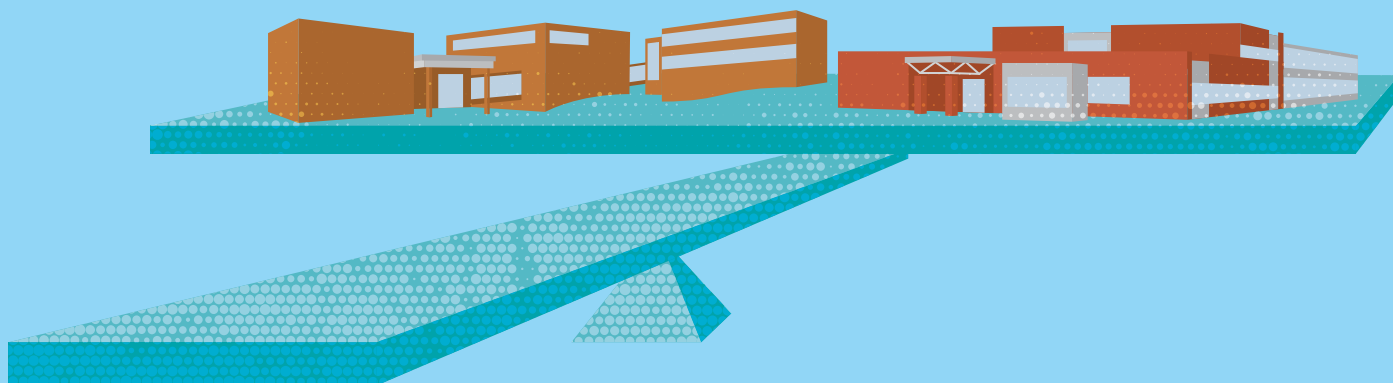
Proficiency-based graduation pathways

The legislation is aimed at increasing high school completion rates and postsecondary continuation in Vermont, as central to maintaining and strengthening the quality of life in our communities. The work in Winooski and Burlington is fully aligned with these statewide efforts.



# Implementing our vision

Winooski and Burlington School Districts are focusing the remodeling efforts on five key levers for change. We identified these levers based on input from our local communities, as well as cutting-edge research and cumulative data.



## Strengthening youth leadership and engagement

Research and best practices suggest that when young people have an authentic role in shaping their education, they succeed at much higher levels. We also know that students are more motivated to become engaged in school when they

feel their voice is valued. One important tool toward these ends is the Personal Learning Plan, in which students create their own learning profile and articulate their personal goals and interests throughout their middle and high school careers.



## Reshaping teaching and learning

Today, we know more than ever before about how people learn—and we have an abundance of new tools to support teaching and learning. For example, brain research shows that learning works best when students have the opportunity to ask their own questions. Thanks to sophisticated new technology, giving all students the opportunity

to ask and answer their own questions is now possible. Meaningful learning also depends on trusting relationships. To support relationship building and learning across disciplines, Winooski and Burlington Schools are exploring new structures for grouping students and teachers.





## Moving toward a proficiency-based system

In order to thrive in the 21st century, all students must graduate with a broad set of skills, knowledge, and dispositions that are applicable to any career. Educators call these “proficiencies”—implying that all students must demonstrate mastery in order to graduate from high school. Winooski and Burlington

teachers are working to reshape curriculum with the mastery of specific proficiencies in mind. The move to proficiency will not happen overnight because, in many ways, it involves a dramatic shift for teachers in the way they manage the classroom.



## Bridging school and family

Although parent involvement in education has long been limited to parent-teacher conferences once or twice a year, recent research shows that engaging families more deeply in their child’s learning leads to even greater outcomes.

By working in partnership with educators, our students’ families can help ensure that all young people leave high school prepared for today’s world. We are deeply committed to working with families of all backgrounds in Winooski and Burlington.



## Bridging school and community

The best way to build skills for college, career, and citizenship is through real-life experiences in a real-world environment.

Fortunately, Winooski and Burlington are cities unusually rich in resources for learning: five distinctive colleges and universities, a diverse business landscape, a range of non-profit organizations and social services, and a vibrant arts culture.

Opportunities can include getting credit for independent career exploration and bringing experts into the school building. Municipalities, local businesses, and community organizations benefit from the collaboration because it gives them an opportunity to help shape the next generation.

How YOU can help...

SHARE  
your ideas

CONNECT  
your organization to our schools

OFFER  
your talent and resources

For more information:

[partnershipvt.org](http://partnershipvt.org) [facebook.com/partnershipvt](https://facebook.com/partnershipvt) [@partnershipvt](https://twitter.com/partnershipvt) [info@partnershipvt.org](mailto:info@partnershipvt.org) 803-363-2342

## **SAMPLE 2: Redesigning Pittsfield Schools for 21st Century Success (Pittsfield, New Hampshire)**

In 2008, the Pittsfield, New Hampshire school district launched a significant community-wide effort to remodel their schools. This publication introduces their vision and mission. It then details the five focus areas that have grounded their redesign efforts: 1) Student ownership of learning, 2) Core knowledge, skills, and habits for success, 3) 21st Century Skills and Habits of Mind, 4) The Changing Role of Adults, and 5) Community Engagement.



# Redesigning Pittsfield Schools for 21st Century Success

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194

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190

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# introduction

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Since 2008, the Pittsfield NH School District has been engaged in a community-wide effort to significantly remodel our schools for the needs and demands of 21st century life. Our goals have been clear from the beginning: to shape a hopeful and prosperous future for our town, and to ensure that all young people in Pittsfield have the knowledge, skills, and habits they need to thrive in a complex global society.

We are on a journey of discovery about how best to educate our young people for college, career, and citizenship in an era of unprecedented social and economic change. In the past, some students excelled in school and others did not, but every student still eventually passed from one grade to the next. This system worked in an industrial economy because there were jobs for everyone, whether on the assembly line or in the office suite.

Today, our 21st century economy requires that every young person master a broad set of higher level skills and abilities that were previously expected of just a few: for example, the ability to write and speak well, to analyze and synthesize information, to solve problems as part of a team.

As part of our efforts to redesign our schools to accommodate a rapidly changing global society, the School District has secured a series of large government and private foundation grants that have provided the additional time and resources needed to shift the way we teach and learn. We continue to tap the considerable talent within the Pittsfield schools and the community at large, as we engage in an ongoing community conversation about what our young people need to succeed. We also rely on state, regional, and national experts who specialize in various aspects of school redesign.





# Putting Students at

We are proud to be part of a growing movement in New England and beyond to make education more “student-centered,” in contrast to “teacher-centered” environments that have typified the vast majority of classrooms in the United States during the last century. Student-centered learning (SCL) has the following features:

## **Learning is personalized.**

We recognize that every learner is different; the educational experience should be customized to support each student’s specific learning needs and passions. We have the know-how and the technology to make this a reality.

## **Teaching is focused on coaching and facilitating.**

The educational model of our childhoods, with the teacher delivering content that the students were expected to absorb, is replaced by a more active back-and-forth between teacher and student. Like the athletic coach who motivates his players to reach their personal best, a 21st century teacher designs projects that set students’ discoveries and talents in motion.

## **Learning reaches beyond the school walls.**

Students learn through real-world experiences in the community, through internships, apprenticeships, college courses, collaborative projects, and exposure to different adult role models. They also have the opportunity to solve real-world problems

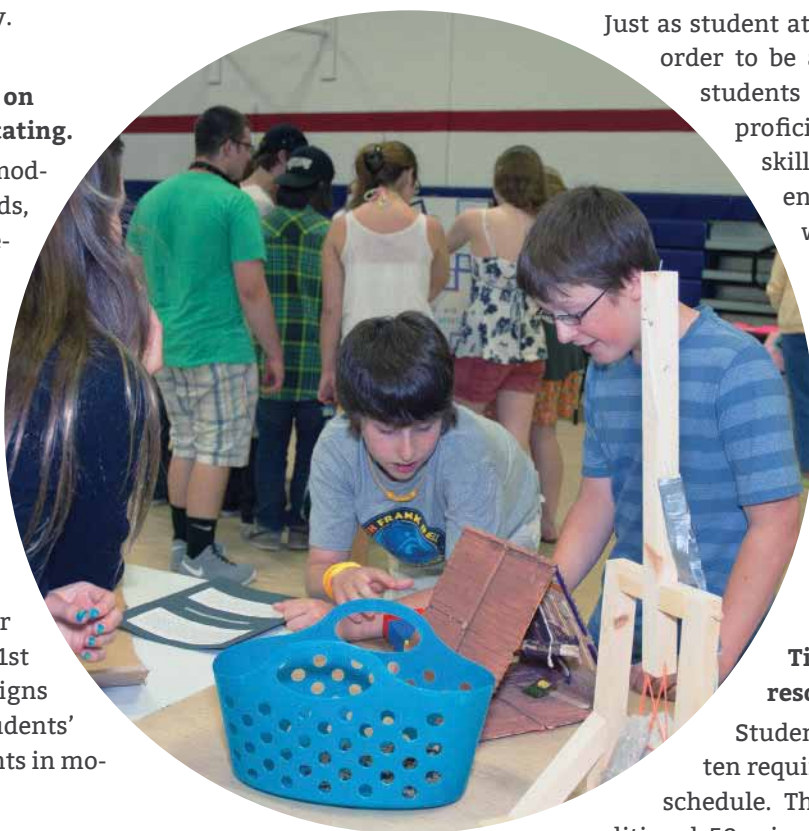
on behalf of the community. In addition, online learning gives students unusual access to the wider world.

## **Progress is measured by mastery, not by age or the number of classroom hours.**

Just as student athletes must practice in order to be able to play the game, students must reach a level of proficiency in their academic skills and knowledge that enable them to “show what they know.” Those who demonstrate mastery in a given area can move on; those who need more time can continue learning. High-stakes exams are replaced by more everyday—and authentic—assessments of progress.

## **Time is a flexible resource.**

Student-centered learning often requires changing the school schedule. The confines of the traditional 50-minute class, 6-hour school day, and 180-day school year are replaced with a philosophy of “anytime, anywhere” learning. For example, many of our students see the summer and school vacations as opportunities for intensive learning experiences outside of the classroom.





# the Center

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## A Community Vision

Through a multi-year process that included literally hundreds of conversations both within our schools and in partnership with the larger community, we have set forth a mission and vision to serve as a compass for all that we do.

### Vision

The Pittsfield School District is a school community in which all decisions are based on the best interests of our learners, supported by a learning environment that enables all of Pittsfield's young people to be fully engaged in their own learning, pursue their college and career aspirations, and be strongly supported to realize their dreams.

### Mission

The mission of the Pittsfield School District is to ensure that our learners are supported in the achievement of their college and career goals through student centered learning practices and strong partnerships with our community. We encourage and guide our students to become self-directed, lifelong learners who demonstrate a high level of knowledge, skills, and social-emotional health through self-advocacy, self-governance, and commitment to community.

### Areas of Focus

As a community, we determined that the following five areas of focus are central to realizing our mission and vision.

**Area 1:** *Student Ownership of Learning*

**Area 2:** *Core Knowledge and Skills for Success*

**Area 3:** *21st Century Skills & Habits of Mind*

**Area 4:** *The Changing Role of Adults*

**Area 5:** *Community Engagement*

“

*In a society with ever-changing technology and diversified culture, one-size-fits-all is not necessarily the most effective approach to educating our students. I believe it is important to find innovative ways to keep all members of the community, including students, actively engaged in the process.*

.....  
Linda Small  
Pittsfield Selectperson

# Student Ownership of Learning

## Focus Area One



### Implementing a Comprehensive Student Advisory Program

Experienced educators teach us that, “nothing is more important than that each student is known well and that the people who know each student have the authority and flexibility to act on that knowledge.” At PMHS, small groups of students meet every day with the same teacher in “advisories,” where they develop a strong sense of belonging and work with a dedicated teacher mentor. Students participate in team-building activities, engage in conversations about their learning, and explore college and career opportunities.

Both research and common sense tell us that students are most successful when they are engaged in what they are doing, when they have a voice in decision-making, and are given the opportunity to make some choices about how, what, when and where they learn.

Traditional schools do not typically foster student ownership of learning. Instead, adults make all of the decisions, with students as compliant recipients. In Pittsfield, we have shifted from this passive, one-size-fits-all culture, to one in which student ownership is encouraged by:

- » Implementing a Comprehensive Student Advisory Program
- » Creating Multiple Pathways for Students to Meet Learning Standards
- » Providing Student Leadership and Significant Decision-Making Opportunities



“

*Our students now have a much more equal say about what they want to learn and how they want to learn it. They learn better when they have a voice.*

.....  
Kiza Armour, PMHS Science Teacher

At PES, students participate in “morning meeting,” which is similarly geared toward personalizing the learning experience for every child.

A central aspect of the advisory program is the Personal Learning Plan (PLP), a very detailed document that follows each young person from the time she enters middle school through high school graduation. A student’s hopes and aspirations are at the center of the plan. Each fall and spring, every PMHS student presents her PLP and Portfolio—a collection of work products—to her Advisory teacher, her parent, and another member of the school community in a Student Led Conference. In contrast to the conventional teacher-led conference of the past, the Student-Led conference has led to more than 90 percent parent participation among parents in Pittsfield.

## Creating Multiple Pathways for Students to Meet Learning Standards

“Tell me and I forget, show me and I remember, involve me, and I understand.” As this old adage reminds us, involvement is what leads to understanding. But what leads to involvement? Experienced educators would say that it’s inquiry: the natural process of asking questions.

In the Pittsfield schools, we build on student’s natural curiosity by designing curricula that stimulate inquiry. We also honor the fact that every learner is different by personalizing the learning experience. Students are offered a variety of pathways to meet the learning standards and competencies for high school graduation.

For example, a student may want to work part-time in the morning, come to school in the afternoon, and take on-line classes in the evening. Through creative scheduling, we can easily accommodate such requests. Some students may want to continue their



learning during the summer, perhaps through an Extended Learning Opportunity in the community. Others may want to do the lion’s share of their course work on-line while simultaneously earning college credit. We believe that when students design their own learning pathways they are more invested in learning.

## Providing Student Leadership and Significant Decision-Making Opportunities

As part of our efforts to give students more “say” in decision-making, we created the Pittsfield Middle High School Site Council in 2010. The Council, made up of students, faculty, and members of the community, provides PMHS with a leadership body to review, modify and make decisions that influence the learning experience. Students comprise

the majority in the Site Council; they have developed initiatives such as Open Campus, and have implemented important policy changes related to grading and cell phone usage in school, among other issues.

Similarly, PMHS has created the I.M.P.A.C.T. Team, a student-led group that uses survey data to monitor school climate and strategize ways to improve it. Moreover, students may serve on the Student Council, become class officers and serve as mentors to their peers. The Writing Center at PMHS is staffed with knowledgeable student tutors. Open throughout the school day, it is a great resource for students who need support at any stage of the writing process.



# Core Knowledge, Skills, and Habits for Success

## Focus Area Two



Like a contractor building a home, our educational system must lay a strong foundation for learning by defining the core knowledge, skills, and habits of mind that our students will need for post-secondary readiness and life-long success. We are building that foundation by:

- » Defining Clear Learning Standards and Competencies
- » Implementing Quality Instructional Strategies
- » Implementing Quality Assessments
- » Providing a System of Support

### Defining Clear Learning Standards and Competencies

Clear learning standards and competencies are the driving force of our educational system. A standard defines what students need to know. A competency is a demonstration and application of that knowledge.

For example, literacy is an important state and federal English & Language Arts standard. An English Language Arts competency is the ability to listen and view critically and to speak purposefully and effectively. Students demonstrate the mastery of a competency through a set of well-defined learning activities and on-going assessments of their progress.

### Implementing Quality Instructional Strategies

A knowledgeable and skilled teacher is perhaps the most important factor in student learning. A 21st century teacher is an activator, guide, and coach who asks questions and helps students shape their own learning experience.

Today's teachers practice what is known as "differentiated instruction," in which each student is treated as an individual who is fully capable of learning; the teacher's job is to work collaboratively to find the best set of strategies to realize each student's success. In other words, every teacher has a full toolbox of ideas for reaching different kinds of thinkers and learners and every student assumes a high level of personal responsibility. Failure is not an option.



## Implementing Quality Assessments

Just as there is no ‘one size fits all’ way to help students meet the learning standards and competencies, there is no single test that will accurately measure what students know and are able to do.

In Pittsfield, we use three kinds of assessments. Formative Assessments allow a teacher to capture learning as it occurs. Interim Assessments help a teacher understand how far along a student is toward reaching mastery. Summative Assessments evaluate progress at the end of a course of study. All of these assessments guide teachers in their support of student mastery and offer a variety of ways for students to show what they know.

Pittsfield has access to valuable assessment tools through New Hampshire’s affiliation with the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, a national organization that guides states in designing cutting edge ways of measuring student progress.

## Providing A System of Support

For young people to do well in school, they must feel fully supported. Academic problems can lead to emotional difficulties, and, likewise, emotional problems can lead to academic difficulties. That’s why we have developed a “multi-tiered” support system that reaches young people wherever they are to catch them before they fall. Pittsfield utilizes a range of student support models and interventions. Some of these are school-wide and support every student; other interventions are more targeted to students who have specific academic, social, emotional, or physical challenges. You may hear such terms as Response to Intervention (RtI) and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) that refer to specific strategies to support students along a continuum of need.

“

*It gives you more of an opportunity to find what you like to do and to fix things that you’ve messed up...It gives the student a lot of initiative and it teaches them a lot of responsibility. It’s a lot better than the old methods.*

.....  
Michael Duquette  
Middle School Student



# 21st Century Skills & Habits of Mind

## Focus Area Three

In bygone days, mastery of the 3R's was a ticket to a good job and a living wage. That's no longer the case. Over the last two decades, school, community, and business leaders have identified a set of "21st century" skills and "habits of mind" that—in addition to the 3Rs—are absolutely necessary for success in work and life. In Pittsfield, we prepare our young people ready for a 21st century world by:

- » Integrating 21st Century Skills Into the Curriculum
- » Establishing and Supporting a Digital Environment for Learning
- » Increasing Opportunities for Participation in the Community
- » Improving School Culture and Climate

### Integrating 21st Century Skills Into the Curriculum

Employers across the country say that recent graduates do not possess what are often referred to as 21st century or "soft skills." In fact, scientists say that these are the critical brain-based skills that lead to thriving. They include:

- » Flexibility and adaptability
- » Ability to set and manage goals and work independently
- » Ability to communicate clearly through the spoken and written word, and to listen attentively
- » Capacity to research and analyze data, solve problems and produce results
- » Ability to work well in teams and respect diverse perspectives

In the Pittsfield schools, we aim to infuse every aspect of student learning with activities and supports that build these important life skills.

### Establishing and Supporting a Digital Environment for Learning

Because media and technology skills are also essential, we want to create a robust digital environment in our schools. Pittsfield is well on its way to developing a solid technology infrastructure that includes full wireless access. In 2013, with support from a variety of funding sources, PMHS faculty and students each received an Apple iPad for classroom use.

New tools require training. Our Technology Integrator, a new, grant-funded staff position, works closely with teachers and students on how to enrich learning through creative use of technology.

Online learning is another element of our digital learning strategy. Pittsfield's grant-funded Online/Dual Enrollment Program enables our high school students to recover high school credits or gain college credit by taking courses on-line.

To ensure that Pittsfield's digital learning environment continues to evolve, we regularly solicit ideas and address the needs and concerns of all stakeholders through informal conversations and community forums.

### Increasing Opportunities for Participation in the Community

One way of mastering 21st century skills and habits of mind is through real-life experiences in a real-world environment. In Pittsfield, we are fortunate that so many organizations and professionals in our community are opening their doors to young people. Through Extended Learning Oppor-





“

*Manufacturing businesses in town are in need of well-educated and skilled workers. Why should they have to bring people in from outside of Pittsfield when students here can—if trained properly—fill the need?*

.....  
Ted Mitchell,  
Chair, Pittsfield Economic  
Development Committee



tunities (ELOs) including internships and “job shadows” in such fields as culinary arts, genetics, criminal justice, engineering, veterinary science, theology, and journalism, students gain valuable experience while meeting rigorous academic standards.

Students are also encouraged to do in-depth research projects, follow their artistic passions through performance, and engage in more than two dozen co-curricular activities such as yearbook, newspaper, Winter Guard, gaming, and athletics. To graduate, they are also required to complete 37.5 hours of community service, beginning as early as seventh grade. All of these opportunities give students a chance to develop leadership skills and to view themselves as individuals who can make a real difference in their community and beyond. Every student is required to write a written reflection

of his/her experience, which fulfills a graduation requirement.

## **Improving School Culture and Climate**

Students learn well when they feel safe and cared for in the school environment. Educators refer to these environmental qualities as school climate and school culture. Numerous studies document that a healthy school climate leads to better grades, higher self-esteem, fewer suspensions, less anxiety and depression, and less substance abuse. In Pittsfield, teams of students and faculty members actively pursue a climate and culture that celebrates students’ strengths and aspirations; we regularly conduct school-wide surveys to measure our progress.

For example, we learned that our system of discipline was falling short. This led to the development of a new,

research-based system of discipline known as “Restorative Justice,” which focuses not on punishing students, but rather, on holding them truly accountable for their actions. Together, the team of students and faculty determine how an offending student will repair the harm done to the school community. In the process, everyone learns valuable conflict resolution skills that will last a lifetime.

Climate surveys also taught us that we needed to do more to ease student transitions—from elementary to middle school, middle school to high school, and high school to post-secondary education. In response, Pittsfield School District has created strategies and implementation teams for transition planning.

# The Changing Role of Adults

## Focus Area Four

Most educators in public schools across the country, including in Pittsfield, were trained to teach in a traditional education system that was designed for the agricultural and industrial economies of the 19th and 20th centuries. (The teacher delivering content to students sitting politely in neat rows was sufficient for those times.)

Our current economy and society, however, require teachers to have a much broader set of skills and strategies. In Pittsfield, we support teachers in deepening their own learning by:

- »Providing Professional Development for Expanded Roles
- »Developing Structures For Meaningful Collaboration
- »Creating a Performance Management System

### Providing Professional Development for Expanded Roles

In a student-centered educational system, teachers wear many hats. In addition to having solid content expertise, teachers must be activators, coaches, and advisors to their students. Because most teachers have not been formally trained for these roles, it is up to the educational system to provide opportunities for teachers to practice new skills. That's why professional development is embedded in actual classroom practice, with help from respected technical assistance providers. In addition, teachers in the school have been trained to provide professional development and coaching for their colleagues.

Pittsfield teachers are also learning to integrate technology into their daily classroom practices—through creative use of the Internet, smart phones, tablets, digital cameras, software applications, and social media platforms.

### Developing Structures For Meaningful Collaboration

Today, to help students meet higher standards, effective teachers must work closely with their peers. The research shows that when teachers work in teams, students are less likely to fall through the cracks and student outcomes improve dramatically.

In Pittsfield, we have greatly expanded the amount of time that our teachers collaborate. Teachers meet regularly in grade level teams to examine student work, develop curricula, and assess student progress. Our “Late Start Wednesdays” at PMHS give teachers time to deepen their knowledge and practice.

### Creating a Performance Management System

In a 21st century learning environment, a very deliberative performance management system is necessary. In Pittsfield, we work hard to clearly define the role of each and every position in the school system so that the right people are in the right places. Whether it's recruiting, screening, hiring, or orienting new employees or evaluating individual performance of existing employees and creating professional growth plans, we recognize that all of the roles in our educational system are important and interconnected. For this reason, our Performance Management System now includes a Professional Growth and Evaluation plan for all educators and a 360-degree feedback process that enables multiple stakeholders, including students, to assess administrator performance.

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*I don't think you get much out of it if you just sit there and do worksheets. This is more hands-on, doing what you want to do, building what you want to build, and using your own imagination. So it's a lot of fun.*

Ryan Marquis  
High School Student





# Community Engagement

## Focus Area Five

In most cities and towns in the United States, the school and the community are seen as separate from each other. In reality, they are inextricably linked. The future well being of our town depends on our ability to provide a world-class education to its future leaders and contributors. Likewise, the strength of our schools depends on our ability to harness all of the human assets of the community on behalf of our young people. In Pittsfield, our motto—"Strong Community, Strong Schools"—is an expression of our commitment to:

- »Promoting Structures to Support Ongoing Community Engagement
- »Creating Vehicles for Ongoing Two-Way Communication
- »Developing Relationships With Post-Secondary Institutions
- »Networking with Other School Districts

### Promoting Structures to Support Ongoing Community Engagement

One of our first efforts to bridge school and community was the creation of the Community Advisory Council (CAC), a group of faculty, community members, students, parents and local leaders whose goal was to develop a seven to ten year plan for redesigning the educational system. Through the CAC's efforts, Pittsfield secured the Nellie Mae Education Foundation grant. The CAC's succes-

sor is the Good to Great Team (GTGT), whose role is to ensure the schools' continuous improvement through meaningful progress and bring new energy to the redesign efforts.

In partnership with the schools, the Pittsfield Youth Workshop and Pittsfield Listens provide opportunities and support for community members to develop and assume leadership roles in a process to make positive change. Pittsfield Listens does this through a variety of ways, which include community-wide dialogues, leadership and facilitator trainings, a Community Connection Series, action committees and a youth organizing committee. The ideas and concerns that emerge help inform the ongoing redesign of the educational system, making Pittsfield a better place for everyone to live, learn and play. Pittsfield Listens is part of New Hampshire Listens, a project of the Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire.

The Pittsfield Parent Connection and the PES PTO bring together educators and parents to strengthen the vital connections between home and school. They organize community forums and keep their finger on the pulse of the different parent constituencies in the community.

### Creating Vehicles for Ongoing Two-Way Communications

The Pittsfield Schools have a strong presence at community events, such as Old Home Day and National Night Out. Our superintendent, faculty, and students are frequently invited to speak at civic meetings about the redesign of the educational system.

Our part-time, grant-funded Community Liaison builds relationships across the community through attendance at events and meetings, and through ongoing communication with stakeholders. The Liaison, along with the Com-





munications Team, creates a variety of materials to keep the community informed. The Team also notifies local, state, regional and national media of Pittsfield's accomplishments.

## Developing Relationships With Post-Secondary Institutions

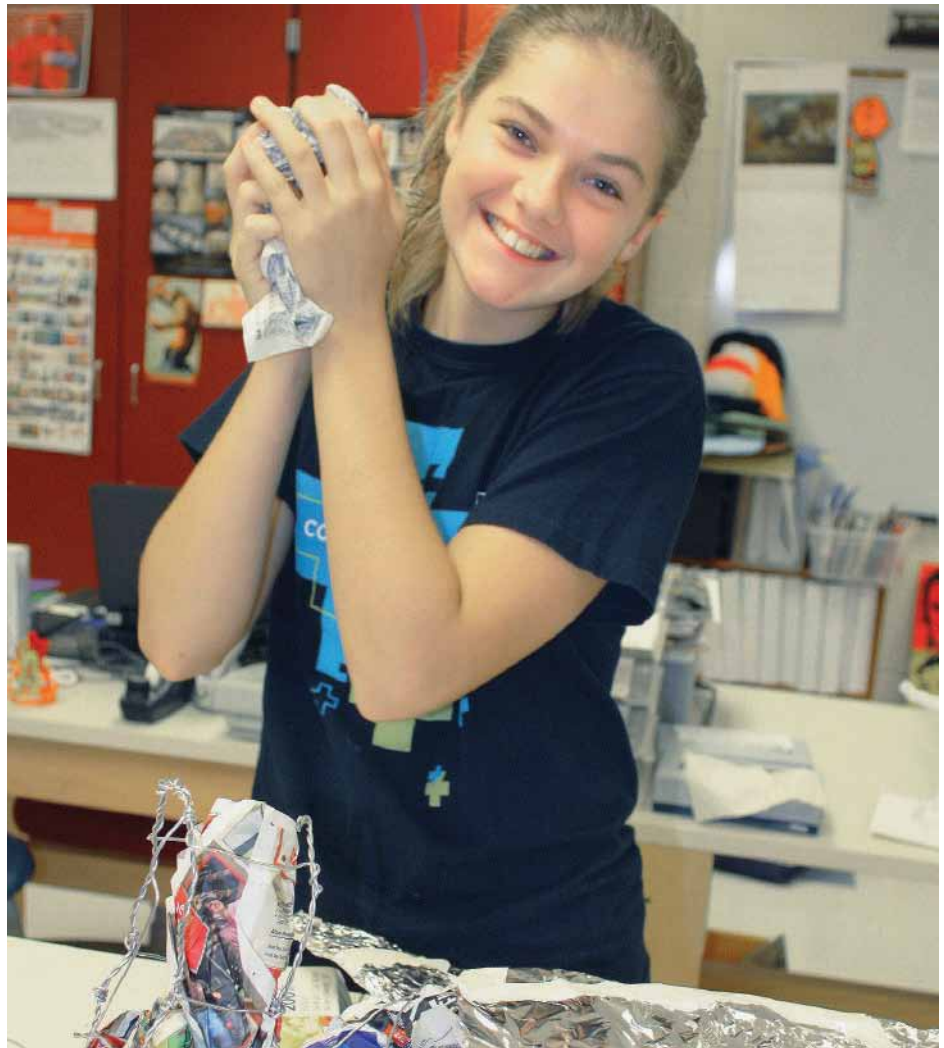
From the time they enter kindergarten, we want every student in Pittsfield to assume that learning extends beyond high school. That's why we work hard to establish and deepen our relationship with colleges, universities and career centers in the region. For example, the New Hampshire Higher Education Assistance Foundation (NHHEAF) sponsors New Hampshire Goes to College Month and hosts college and career events in our schools. We also have strong relationships with the University of New Hampshire, the New Hampshire Technical Institute, and the Lakes Region Community College.

## Networking with Other School Districts

Pittsfield is fortunate to be part of several school networks that both advance our thinking and give us an opportunity to share what we are learning.

As one of four District Level School Change districts funded by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation in New England, we attend and present at cross-site meetings and are given access to a wealth of resources. Our teachers and staff also participate in professional learning teams with colleagues in these districts whose roles are similar.

Through our ability to secure large government grants, including the prestigious Investing in Innovation Fund (i3) of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and the School



Improvement Grants (SIG) of the U.S. Department of Education, we have gained access to individuals and organizations possessing many different kinds of educational expertise. Pittsfield also participates in a variety of professional learning networks sponsored by the New Hampshire Department of Education.

In recent years, invitations to share our successes at a variety of statewide, regional, and national meetings have dramatically increased. Recently, representatives from PMHS presented at conferences of the New England Secondary Schools Consortium, National Association of Secondary School Principals, Learning Forward and Breaking Ranks.

The Pittsfield School District will soon be host to the Pittsfield Educational Resource Center Summer Institute, a series of four three-day workshops for communities and schools in New England that are interested in focused explorations of student-centered learning.

We hope this review of our community-wide effort to reshape our schools for the needs and demands of the 21st century has been helpful to you. There is always room at the table for your ideas and we fully welcome your participation in this once-in-a-generation enterprise.





### **SAMPLE 3: Student-Centered Learning Overview: The Nellie Mae Education Foundation**

The Nellie Mae Education Foundation, located in Quincy, Massachusetts, has been a leader in supporting school redesign throughout New England. This brochure provides a language for explaining what “student-centered learning” is all about.

## STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING IN ACTION

*learning happens anytime, anywhere*

At the Virtual Learning Academy Charter School (VLACS) in New Hampshire, students can access courses anytime, anywhere. VLACS offers flexible schedules for students who are looking to make up credits or competencies, need to work outside of the traditional classroom setting, or want to take advanced placement courses or earn college credits.

*learning is competency-based*

Boston Day and Evening Academy has replaced the traditional year-long high school calendar with trimesters. The courses in each trimester are aligned with standards-based learning targets and benchmarks that all students must reach in order to pass.

*learning is personalized*

At Sanford High School in Maine, students maintain a personalized learning plan or educational portfolio that records their progress in meeting learning standards in each subject—demonstrating their mastery of content.

*students take ownership*

At Pittsfield Middle-High School in New Hampshire, student-led conferences replace traditional parent-teacher conferences, allowing students to take the lead role in presentations that articulate academic, personal, and social growth.



## *student-centered* LEARNING IN ACTION

*Why should education be  
one-size fits all?*

# STUDENT-

*learning doesn't stop when  
the final bell rings*

# CENTERED

*does your brain only work when  
you're sitting in a chair?*

# LEARNING

*how do we prepare today's  
learners for tomorrow's economy?*



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## ABOUT US

The Nellie Mae Education Foundation is the largest charitable organization in New England dedicated exclusively to education. We're committed to reshaping the high school learning experience by working with schools and organizations to implement the principles of student-centered learning—learning that is personalized, engaging, competency-based, and happens anytime, anywhere. Since 1998, the Foundation has distributed over \$170 million in grants.

## A CHANGING WORLD DEMANDS A CHANGED SYSTEM

Today, we know more than ever about how students learn. But traditional school systems, designed in a different time for a different purpose, aren't providing the best environments to prepare students for success in today's economy.

Students engage with material in different ways, so the learning process doesn't look the same for every student. Public schools need student-centered strategies, rather than a top-down, one-size-fits-all approach, that meets students where they are and engages them in the process.

Today's innovation economy and diverse society require skills that aren't addressed in a traditional curriculum—such as critical thinking, problem solving, communication, collaboration, self-directed learning, and social-emotional skills.

## WHAT IS STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING?

Student-centered learning engages students in their own successes—and incorporates their interests and skills into the learning process. Rather than having teachers hand down information, students can engage with teachers and their peers in real time—preparing them to participate in a skilled workforce later in life.

Student-centered means:

*learning is personalized*

Personalized learning recognizes that students engage in different ways and in different places. Students benefit from individually paced, targeted learning tasks that start from where the student is, formatively assessing existing skills and knowledge, and addressing the student's needs.

*learning is competency-based*

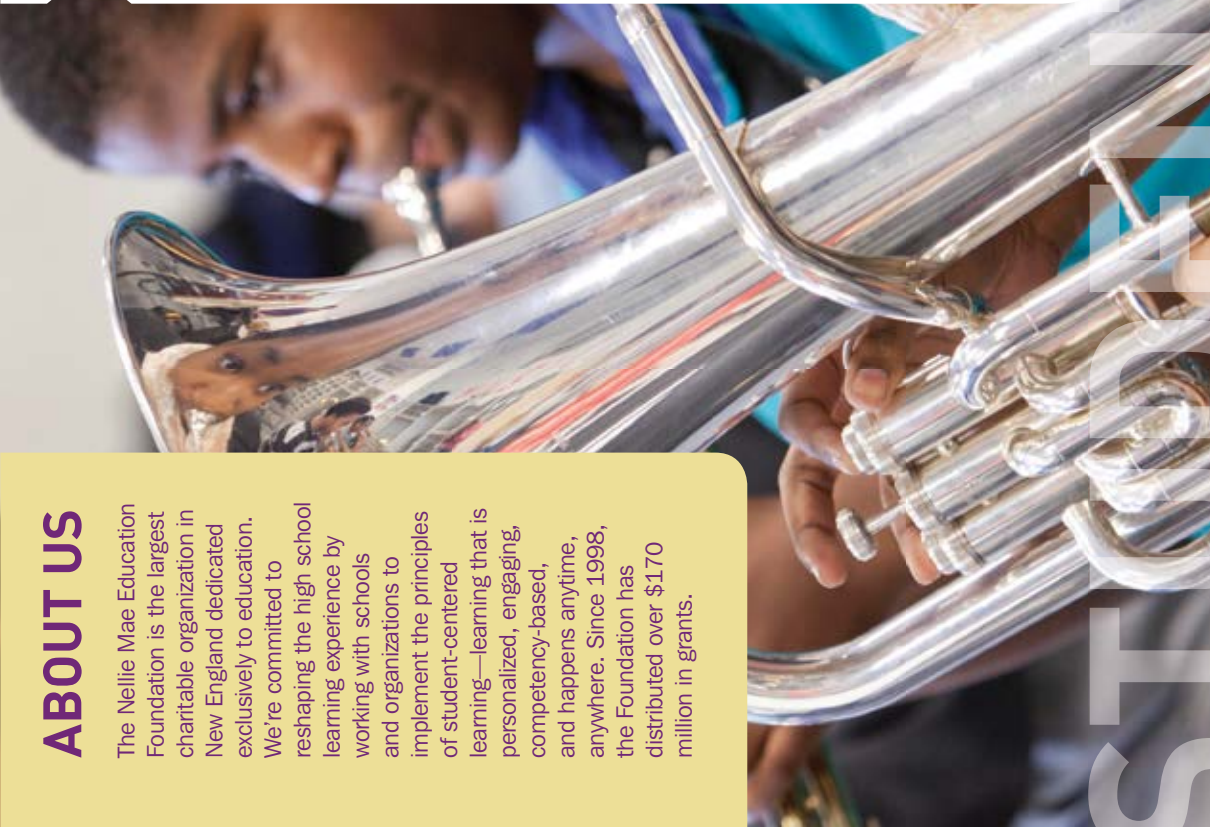
Students move ahead when they've demonstrated mastery of content, not when they've reached a certain birthday or endured the required hours in a classroom.

*learning happens anytime, anywhere*

Learning takes place beyond the traditional school day, and even the school year. The school's walls are permeable—learning is not restricted to the classroom.

*students take ownership*

Student-centered learning engages students in their own successes—and incorporates their interests and skills into the learning process.





# A Guide to Protocols That Support Dialogue

The following chart references protocols from the School Reform Initiative that are powerful and proven strategies to guide deep dialogue about school redesign. This overview will help you quickly identify which protocol might best serve your intended purpose, taking into consideration the time available and group size. School Reform Protocols can be found at [schoolreforminitiative.org/protocol-alphabetical-list-2](http://schoolreforminitiative.org/protocol-alphabetical-list-2).

| PROTOCOL                                                                                                                      | PURPOSE                                                                                | DISTINGUISHING CHARACTERISTICS                                                         | POTENTIAL PROMPTS                                                                                                                                  | TIME NEEDED  | GROUP SIZE      |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|-----------------|
| <b>Affinity Mapping</b>                                                                                                       | To generate the best thinking of the group on topics that are important to its members | Each person's idea becomes community "property" and connected to other people's ideas  | <i>What do our graduates need to know, understand, and be able to do to contribute to their community?</i>                                         | 45 min       | Up to 30        |
| <b>Appreciative Inquiry</b><br><a href="http://www.centerforappreciativeinquiry.net">www.centerforappreciativeinquiry.net</a> | To generate rich questions                                                             | Storytelling about what works                                                          | <i>What is your most powerful learning experience ever? What were the defining qualities of that experience that made it so powerful?</i>          | 45–60 min    | 3–5 per group   |
| <b>Attributes of a Learning Community</b>                                                                                     | To establish the attributes of personalized learning environments                      | Storytelling about learning environments in which all participants thrive              | <i>I learn and work best and contribute the most in an environment that...</i>                                                                     | 45–60 min    | 8–20            |
| <b>The Best Ever</b>                                                                                                          | To define qualities of excellent work for groups                                       | Participants reflect on and uncover their best work                                    | <i>What was it about the work itself that made it so excellent?</i>                                                                                | 45–60 min    | 4–5 per group   |
| <b>The Block Party</b>                                                                                                        | To learn from each other as we reflect on different quotations                         | Participants have short conversations with multiple partners in a short period of time | Cull from the many online collections of quotations on education, learning and change                                                              | 15–20 min    | Any size over 8 |
| <b>Chalk Talk</b>                                                                                                             | To have a rich and engaging dialogue with full participation                           | No one speaks, everyone participates                                                   | <i>What is the purpose of education? What does a student-centered classroom look like? What are 21st-century habits, skills, and dispositions?</i> | Up to 30 min | Any size        |

| PROTOCOL                              | PURPOSE                                                                                                                                       | DISTINGUISHING CHARACTERISTICS                                                                                                                                             | POTENTIAL PROMPTS                                                                                                                                                                             | TIME NEEDED | GROUP SIZE  |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| <b>The Charette</b>                   | To enlist the best thinking of others on a problem that the presenter is genuinely stuck in solving                                           | The presenter stays out of the conversation as the group takes ownership of the issue                                                                                      | <i>I want to become a more student-centered teacher. I give students choice in what they write about. What more can I do for the students to really care about the quality of their work?</i> | 15–20 min   | 8–12        |
| <b>Classroom Meeting</b>              | To take a quick pulse of a group on an important issue before digging deeper                                                                  | Moving through the stages of defining, personalizing, and extending                                                                                                        | <i>Define a 21st century school and its relationship with the community.</i>                                                                                                                  | 30 min      | 15–30       |
| <b>Critical Friend Conversation</b>   | To ensure clarity of purpose, to question your own assumptions, and to develop a proposed course of action for addressing important questions | Moving from meaning making about external factors to eliciting resolution and next steps                                                                                   | <i>What is it about the current structure of school that falls short of preparing students to become contributing members of their community?</i>                                             | 60 min      | Groups of 4 |
| <b>Compass Points</b>                 | To gain an understanding of your natural role in a group, the mix of styles within your group, and why we need all types of contributors      | The group discovers that each working style has a valid place on the team, as individuals become more conscious of their quick judgments of other people's working styles. | <i>Note the distribution of styles within our group: What would be the best possible combination to have? Why? How will we create balance of all points in our group?</i>                     | 45 min      | Up to 50    |
| <b>Constructivist Learning Groups</b> | To move towards consensus on difficult issues                                                                                                 | No one in the small group knows who will report out until the last moment                                                                                                  | <i>Why are personalized learning plans important to the greater community?</i>                                                                                                                | 45 min      | Up to 30    |
| <b>Continuum Dialogue</b>             | A provocative yet non-threatening way to uncover perspectives, beliefs, and opinions on hard issues                                           | People move along the continuum based on what they are hearing from others. Surfaces individuals' assumptions                                                              | <i>"Education's primary purpose is to prepare individuals for their future" to "the primary purpose is prepare students to contribute to the greater good"</i>                                | 30–40 min   | Up to 50    |

| PROTOCOL                           | PURPOSE                                                                                                                         | DISTINGUISHING CHARACTERISTICS                                                                                                                               | POTENTIAL PROMPTS                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | TIME NEEDED | GROUP SIZE  |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| <b>Dyads</b>                       | To promote better listening and talking in depth                                                                                | Highly personal sharing about emotional issues using double confidentiality                                                                                  | <i>Why should I care about our public school system? What can I, as a community member, add to the conversation? What action can I take?</i>                                                                                                  | 4–6 min     | 2 people    |
| <b>The Gap Analysis</b>            | To identify and to work on closing the gap between your desired results and your current practice                               | Intentionally designed to bring a higher level of integrity to the work of classrooms, schools, and districts                                                | <i>What is a student –centered approach to learning? What is currently in place and what gaps exist in our current practice?</i>                                                                                                              | 45 min      | Groups of 4 |
| <b>The Kiva</b>                    | To encourage participants to actively listen rather than automatically critique or analyze what is being presented to the group | Hearing from youth and adults working as partners sharing important stories about their work. The youth are considered “elders” by the rest of the community | <i>Describe a time where you and an adult worked together on a project that really mattered to both of you. Describe a time that you really felt ownership over your learning.</i>                                                            | 45–60 min   | 20–60       |
| <b>The Making Meaning Protocol</b> | To use storytelling as a rich source of data to make schooling more meaningful for teachers and students                        | Sharing of powerful growth experiences in small groups                                                                                                       | <i>Tell a story about a time when the quality of your work was evaluated by a project rather than a test.</i>                                                                                                                                 | 45–60 min   | Groups of 4 |
| <b>Microlabs</b>                   | To address a specific sequence of questions in a structured format in groups of 3                                               | Three rounds of increasingly deeper questions, with a focus on active listening                                                                              | <i>1. Tell of a time that your interest was not recognized at school; 2. Tell of a time that you worked closely on a shared interest with someone at school; 3. What interests do you wish that you were able to explore while at school?</i> | 30 min      | Groups of 3 |

| PROTOCOL                                  | PURPOSE                                                                                                         | DISTINGUISHING CHARACTERISTICS                                                                                                                   | POTENTIAL PROMPTS                                                                                                                                                                    | TIME NEEDED           | GROUP SIZE    |
|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------|
| <b>The Multiple Perspectives Protocol</b> | To encourage multiple perspectives to enrich our conversations and to make our learning more powerful           | Each person in a small group takes on a different role, but then reflects on any changes in perspective after listening to others' perspectives. | <i>What does proficiency-based learning look like from the perspective of a student, a parent, a teacher and a community member?</i>                                                 | 45 min                | Groups of 5   |
| <b>What's in a Name</b>                   | To create a welcoming sense of belonging for each member of a new group and to appreciate our different origins | People share their intimate stories (with just one person) about their own names including nicknames they have had.                              | <i>What is the origin of your name? Think back as far as you can remember about the nicknames that you have had. How did your name come to you?</i>                                  | 30 min                | 8–20          |
| <b>The Talking Stick Ceremony</b>         | To provide a reflective closing experience for a group                                                          | Each person in the group has the opportunity to share their most meaningful learning that grew out of the group experience.                      | Participants might share a new insight or a question, describe some significant learning they had, or talk about what they propose to do in the future as a result of that learning. | 30 seconds per person | 5–50          |
| <b>The Success Analysis Protocol</b>      | To identify best practices in the classroom, school or district                                                 | An instance of success is analyzed by a small group and the lessons learned are applied to future practice.                                      | <i>Describe a personalized learning plan that really built on student interests and passions. What made it work?</i>                                                                 | 30–45 min             | Groups of 3–4 |
| <b>The 5 Whys</b>                         | To help the group get at the foundational root of a question and uncover multiple perspectives on that question | Each round of “why” questioning gets closer and closer to the root cause of the issue                                                            | <i>Why must we remodel education for the future of our youth and our community?</i>                                                                                                  | 45 min                | Groups of 5–6 |



| PROTOCOL            | PURPOSE                                                    | DISTINGUISHING CHARACTERISTICS                                                                                   | POTENTIAL PROMPTS                                                                                                                                                        | TIME NEEDED | GROUP SIZE           |
|---------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|----------------------|
| <b>Wagon Wheels</b> | To stimulate generative thinking in a short period of time | The dynamic physical movement of the group in which each person speaks with three other people at separate times | <i>What do you know and what do you want to know about: Personalized Learning Plans? Proficiency-Based Assessment? Multiple Pathways to Graduation? Dual Enrollment?</i> | 45 min      | As many as you dare! |

**Text-Based Protocols** that can be adapted to use with videos, presentations, and text.

| PROTOCOL                         | PURPOSE                                                                    | DISTINGUISHING CHARACTERISTICS                                                                  | POTENTIAL PROMPTS                                                                                                                                                           | TIME NEEDED | GROUP SIZE  |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| <b>The Four As</b>               | To co-construct with a group the meaning of a video, presentation, or text | Each participant chooses what was most important or perplexing and hears the thinking of others | <i>What do you <b>agree</b> with or want to <b>argue</b> with? What <b>assumptions</b> are at play and what <b>action</b> do you plan to take based on this experience?</i> | 40 min      |             |
| <b>The Final Word</b>            | To co-construct with a group the meaning of a video, presentation, or text | Each participant chooses what was most important or perplexing and hears the thinking of others | <i>What was the most significant part of the experience to you?</i>                                                                                                         | 40 min      | Groups of 4 |
| <b>Save the Last Word for Me</b> | To co-construct with a group the meaning of a video, presentation, or text | Each participant chooses what was most important or perplexing and hears the thinking of others | <i>What was the most significant part of the experience to you?</i>                                                                                                         | 40 min      | Groups of 4 |
| <b>Three Levels of Text</b>      | To co-construct with a group the meaning of a video, presentation, or text | Each participant chooses what was most important or perplexing and hears the thinking of others | <i>What was the most significant to you? Why was it so significant for you? What action are you going to take based on this experience?</i>                                 | 40 min      | Groups of 4 |