



The  
Super School  
Project

Rethinking High School:

**THAT'S A  
SCHOOL  
BOARD  
THING.**



**Here are the numbers:**  
**There are more than**  
**14,000 school districts**  
**in the United States,**  
**governed by more**  
**than 95,000 school**  
**board members. These**  
**leaders help direct the**  
**expenditure of more than**  
**\$600 billion annually to**  
**teach more than**  
**50 million students.<sup>1</sup>**

**If you're ready to get**  
**active in your community,**  
**why not get involved with**  
**your local school board?**

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# Friends,

We at XQ believe that high schools are the fulcrum for educational transformation. Change high schools and you change the entire system, from kindergarten through college.

Schools should be at the center of community revitalization, and decisions about schools are made by local school board members. But do you even know what school boards do? Do you know who your local school board members are? Do you know what they are responsible for?

Far too often, the answer to these questions is, “No.” If that’s your answer, you are not alone. We are here with you—to help you see the power and possibility of school boards.

This four-part guide will empower you to:

- Educate yourself about local schools and how they are doing
- Attend school board meetings, ask questions, and speak up for change
- Vote in school board elections for candidates who share your concerns
- Maybe even serve as a school board member yourself

And if you already are a school board member, this guide will help you lead high school transformation in your community.

School boards are charged with creating the conditions for neighborhoods to thrive and with enabling schools and educators to fuel the hopes and dreams of every student and family. School board members are the rightful guardians of every community’s future. They need to hear your voice.

Very truly yours,



Russlynn Ali  
Chief Executive Officer, XQ Institute

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# SCHOOL BOARDS DEMYSTIFIED

## SHAKE UP THE STATUS QUO

With activism in the air across America, you may be wondering where the next great wave of change-makers is coming from. If so, we have but one question to ask: Why not look in the mirror?

The outsiders, the newcomers, the rookies, and the novices taking part in public life today are no different from anyone else. That is, with one small distinction. They've decided that they no longer want to wait for change, they want to be the change.

The best time to start? Right now. The best place to begin? In your own community. And, especially at the local level, no public arena stands to benefit more from your participation than education. And there's no organization better poised to drive meaningful, results-driven impact than your local school board.

If you believe growing businesses and a healthy economy start with a talented and skilled workforce, you care about education.

If you believe that cities, towns, and neighborhoods are stronger, safer, and more prosperous when we stand together with young people and listen to what they have to say, you care about education.

If you believe America's best days still can be ahead of us, rather than behind us, you care about education.

And if you care about education, you definitely care about school boards.

And so, when more and more people are looking for new ways to make their voices heard, amplify their priorities, and multiply their good works, we at XQ would like to suggest that your local school board—right in your own backyard—is wonderfully equipped to lead the charge.

If you believe that every student—not just some—deserves an effective education that prepares them for college, careers, and life, then school boards are for you.

If you believe that everyone has something to contribute to the vitality and health of our public high schools, then school boards are for you.

If you believe that the time to take action is now, then school boards are for you.

And the best part about our local school boards? They're for the community, by the community, of the community. It's never too late—or too early—to get involved.

So step up and find out what's happening with your local school board. Attend a meeting—it's a form of public service! Then use this guide to figure out what more you can do to shake up the status quo, strengthen your community, and help transform your local high schools.

# Activism Is in the Air

# Why School Boards Matter: Power in Action

## WHAT EXACTLY IS A SCHOOL BOARD?



Who controls public schools? As the name implies, the public! All of us have a stake in our public education systems, regardless of whether or not we have children currently in them. That's why localities do their part by selecting a school board made up of local residents. Some boards are elected, others appointed. Boards also vary in size, but they typically have anywhere from three to seven members.

School boards exercise local control over education—and more than that, they articulate and pursue a community's hopes for its young people. All school boards share a common purpose: to establish a vision for the community's schools that reflects the needs of the students, the wishes of the voters, and the consensus of the community—and to work with the superintendent to make that vision a reality.

Engaged and supportive school boards are essential for making the changes that need to happen in our high schools so students can be prepared for the modern world—changes like expanding

access to rigorous courses, implementing schedules that allow for project-based learning, and making sure teachers have the right professional development and support. A dedicated school board helps steer a steady path, even when change is difficult or controversial.

School boards partner with the superintendent and teachers, families, and students to make sure every student gets a great education in the district's schools. They sometimes work with employers, colleges, and nonprofit organizations to break down the barriers that separate classrooms from communities and open up new, real-world learning opportunities for local students—and pipelines for employing future graduates in local businesses.

A school board is a group of committed citizens who embrace an active leadership role within their district's schools. And with automation affecting a growing number of jobs, a great high school education is more important than ever.

## ELECTED VS APPOINTED BOARDS

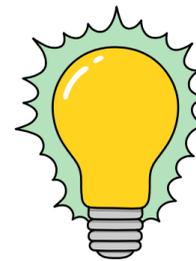
Depending on the jurisdiction you live in, board members may be either elected or appointed. Appointed boards are named by the mayor, county commissioner, city council, or a combination of these officials. Regardless of how its members are selected, a school board is a local version of quintessential American representative government. Its members are vested with the authority to act on behalf of those they serve and to make big decisions for their district.

## WHAT DO SCHOOL BOARDS DO?

School boards make crucial decisions on issues that matter—issues like school safety, modernizing facilities, and employee relations. They hire the superintendent, develop and oversee budgets, set the school calendar, and analyze progress on a wide array of measures, all of which play a big role in how effectively and efficiently local schools serve students. They work closely with district leadership to make sure schools are running smoothly and that teachers and students get the resources they need. They deal with controversy, seek solutions to problems, and help the community come together around what matters most: making sure local kids get a world-class education.

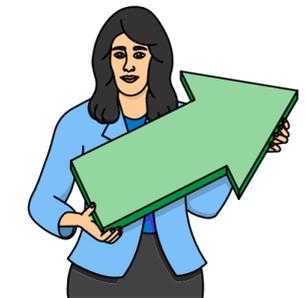
School board members are also the ones entrusted with asking hard questions on behalf of the whole community. Are our schools living up to our expectations? Are students in every neighborhood getting the same access to rigorous courses, engaging learning, and inspiring opportunities? Are all kinds of students—including low-income students, English learners, and students with disabilities—getting what they need to succeed? If not, what can we do about it?

In addition to making key decisions, here are a few key things effective school boards do on an ongoing basis.



### Set the Vision

The school board establishes a clear vision and high expectations for quality teaching, engaged learning, effective school leadership, and a safe, positive school culture—all essential for students to thrive.



### Lead the Community

An effective board understands that it's essential to build strong relationships with parents, teachers, students, and community members. Through dialogue, school board members hear and respond to community concerns and explain the district's priorities to the public.



### Advance Policy

The school board also sets practical guidelines for transforming its vision into reality. Through policy, the school board influences nearly every aspect of school operations.

### Demonstrate Accountability

High academic standards, transparency, and accountability undergird world-class education. School board members share responsibility with educators for the performance of the district's schools and students.



### Forge Consensus

It's only natural that a school board faces issues that inspire a diversity of strong perspectives and passionate beliefs. But the goal always remains the same: to pursue consensus, to reconcile differences, to reach compromises—all in service of students.

## WHO SERVES ON SCHOOL BOARDS?

School boards are made up of everyday people with an interest in how education affects the community and how the community affects local schools. Just by making a commitment and following through steadily and with determination, one school board member's voice can transform students' lives, reset and reshape high school priorities, and even change the trajectory of an entire community.

Serving as a school board member isn't just for educators or just for parents with students currently enrolled. It isn't just for those with incredible amounts of spare time or those with vast personal resources. The strongest school boards include people who represent many points of view, a wide array of experience, and a diversity of backgrounds and can still work together collectively.



## WHAT ABOUT CHARTER SCHOOLS?

In the 2016-17 school year, there were almost 7,000 public charter schools in the United States, serving an estimated 3.2 million of the nation's 50 million public school students.<sup>2</sup> That means over the past 10 years, enrollment in public charter schools has nearly tripled. Demand for these schools has grown, too, and many now have long waitlists.

Charter schools are indeed public schools, governed independently but publicly funded and accountable. And yes, they have school boards, too—although charter boards operate differently from district school boards. In most states, each charter school or network operates as a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization and is overseen by its own volunteer, non-elected board. (Some states also permit charter schools that are operated by private, for-profit companies, and their board requirements differ from those of nonprofit boards.)

A charter board has significant responsibility for ensuring that the school provides a great education,

complies with relevant laws and regulations, and uses public resources responsibly. It sets the vision for the school and makes critical decisions about resources, school leadership, and strategic planning.

Charter schools need board members who bring relevant skills and experience to the table, represent a range of backgrounds and perspectives, and are deeply committed to providing an excellent education for every student. Serving on a public charter school board can be a powerful way to improve public education.

If this kind of public service appeals to you, reach out to a local charter school, your school district, or a charter school support organization in your city or state and ask how you can get involved. Charter Board Partners is another great resource; check out their website for advice on whether or not charter board service is right for you and help with finding a board that needs your skills.

<https://charterboards.org>



# WHY SCHOOL BOARDS SHOULD FOCUS ON HIGH SCHOOLS

Most school boards are responsible for schools from kindergarten through grade 12. But when it comes to local school systems, high schools deserve special attention. High school students are eager to become tomorrow's leaders, thinkers, and difference makers. But in survey after survey, high school students across the country report being unchallenged, unengaged, and unprepared for the real world.

So let's ask ourselves, is "boredom in the classroom" a Republican issue? Is "disengagement from learning" a Democratic issue? Of course not. Whatever our politics, let's acknowledge that rethinking high school isn't a blue or a red issue; it's an American issue. And it's an issue for every community in America.

## What High School Students Say About Their Schools...

- **Only a third** of eleventh graders report being engaged in school.<sup>3</sup>
- **Only half** of all high school students believe their school has helped them develop the skills and knowledge they will need in college.<sup>4</sup>
- **Less than half** say their school has helped them figure out which careers match their skills and interests.<sup>5</sup>



# STRONG HIGH SCHOOLS = ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

A rigorous, engaging high school education is essential to success, both for individuals and for the larger economy. School performance is linked to higher earnings and lower unemployment. For communities, a prepared workforce helps attract and retain desirable employers. So how are we doing in the United States? Not so well.

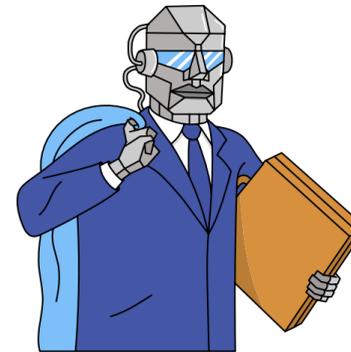
**\$551B**

Closing the racial achievement gap alone would boost American GDP by more than half a trillion dollars a year.<sup>7</sup>



Only one in 20 American adults thinks high school grads are "very prepared" for college and the modern workplace.<sup>9</sup>

**47%**



Economists expect that nearly half of American jobs will be impacted by automation.<sup>6</sup>

**87%**

Eighty-seven percent of high school students want to go to college. But fewer than half graduate fully prepared for college coursework.<sup>8</sup>

**\$1B**

As a result, students and their families spend more than \$1 billion every year for remedial courses in college.<sup>10</sup>

These numbers aren't just emotionally sobering, they're economically depressing. When high schools don't prepare students to fulfill their ambitions, dropout rates climb higher and college readiness drops lower.

Economists estimate that this waste of time, energy, and human potential imposes the equivalent of a "permanent recession" on the American economy. And with automation affecting a growing number of jobs, a great high school education is more important than ever.

Addressing these problems in our education system isn't just the right thing to do, it's the smart thing to do. Rethinking, redesigning, and modernizing high schools is THE economic opportunity of the century.<sup>10</sup>

# WE CAN'T BE A GREAT COUNTRY WITHOUT GREAT HIGH SCHOOLS



Great high schools make promising, productive futures possible for every student. They serve the needs of local families and local businesses. They contribute to the long-term civic and economic health of a community. They keep our nation strong, vibrant, and competitive in an ever-changing global economy.

At XQ, we believe that high schools are the fulcrum for improving our entire education system, from preschool through higher ed. Yet, for all the continuing debate around public education, high schools are the one institution that hasn't received due attention in recent years.

Stronger high schools inspire improvement in the earlier grades by setting higher expectations and modeling the kind of real-world, engaging learning students and families value.

Rethinking high schools from the bottom up isn't a political issue—it's an American imperative.

Stronger high schools also drive change in postsecondary education by working in partnership with local colleges to create efficient and effective pathways for students from all walks of life—and, of course, by graduating students who are ready to succeed in college, career training, the military, the workforce, and life overall.

That's why rethinking high schools from the bottom up isn't a political issue—it's an American imperative.

By refocusing our efforts—from teaching high school students what to think to how to think, from asking them to solve problems at the end of the chapter to engaging them in real-world problem solving—we can better prepare students, as well as our communities, our institutions, and ourselves, for future success.

# Today's high schools are operating on yesterday's ideas.

The simple truth is that today's high schools are modeled on outdated ideas and needs. No longer are most graduates going on to stable careers in manufacturing. So why the factory-like periods and bells? No longer do students need only to internalize static information. So why the over-emphasis on rote memorization and under-emphasis on analysis, critical thinking, and problem solving?



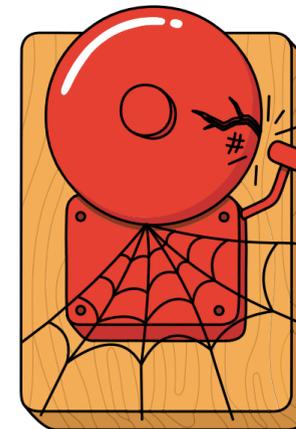
# High standards don't mean standardization.

In many places, we have clear standards for what students need to know and be able to do in order to emerge from high school ready for college and careers. As long as we're all committed to teaching students to meet and exceed those standards—and how to think critically, communicate effectively, and problem-solve efficiently—flexibility in how students are taught can only make us stronger. Our students need engaging projects, hands-on experiences, smart technologies, and personalized approaches that help them master core subjects and build the skills they need for success.



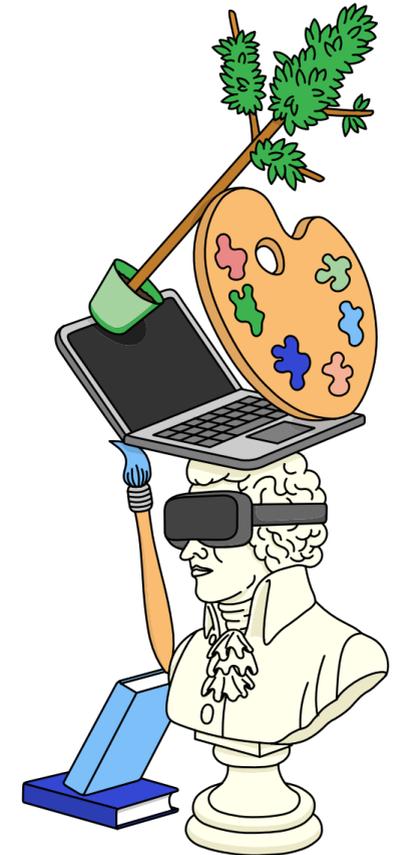
# So what can we do? The possibilities are endless.

Let's reimagine what high schools can be for students and their communities. Let's make high schools the driving force of equity and opportunity. Does your community have local businesses that can offer practical experience to students? Does your local high school have access to community organizations—for the environment, for business development, for the arts? Does your region have historical, cultural, or environmental resources that can make classroom lessons come alive? Do teachers have the resources, training, and technology they need to make learning more engaging, individualized, and effective?



# There is no one-size-fits-all solution.

No two students are the same, so why must our high schools be mirror images of one another? Different communities have unique resources that can become engines for powerful, engaged learning. So why is learning restricted to school only? Why can't schools credit learning conducted in internships, in community-based projects, and beyond? In short, why can't "school" happen outside of school? Why can't all the resources of each and every American locality be opened up to its young people, so they can make productive futures for themselves, their communities, and the country as a whole?





## AMERICAN EDUCATION: HOW DID WE GET HERE?

American high schools used to be the admiration of the world. But over the past several decades, other countries have outpaced us. In test scores. In college readiness. In workforce preparation. In student satisfaction and engagement. The list goes on.

Which leaves many of us asking, “How did we get here?”

The short answer is this: the public school system we know today was developed with all the best intentions and, for decades, a fair amount of success. At the turn of the 20th century, educational reformers such as industrialist Andrew Carnegie saw that our country needed a revolution in education to match the revolutions taking place in industry and society. In other words, they rethought school.

A uniform, standardized system based on time spent in school, in lessons—what came to be known as the “Carnegie Unit”—brought order and consistency to what had been a patchwork educational system. And it worked. But just because something worked well in the past doesn't mean it will work well indefinitely.

Things changed. Industry changed. America and the world are in the middle of a new information revolution, and simply counting the hours of instruction we give our students and tracking them into college prep, general, or vocational strands will not work anymore. Instead of a guidepost, the rigidly standardized Carnegie Unit has become a straight-jacket for educators, schools, and most important, students.

We need students who know how to keep up with a massive growth of

information, who are creative and critical thinkers, who can compete and thrive in a global economy. We need students who are ready to claim their future in a very unstandardized world.

If we free ourselves from the rigid framework of modeling education on time spent in the classroom—the Carnegie Unit approach—to adopting a design that prioritizes discovery, subject mastery, personalization, equity, and positive student relationships, what else do we free ourselves from? Would a classroom still necessarily consist of a blackboard, a teacher's desk, and thirty or so seats? Or could the classroom be a laboratory, a museum, a trek into nature, an internship? Would all schools look like carbon copies of one another—in a community but somehow separated from it? Would the day be divided into periods by factory-like bells? Would teachers “teach to the middle”—a one-size-fits-most approach—or would they be empowered to teach to each and every individual?

When we start to challenge old education assumptions, the Carnegie Unit chief among them, the most pertinent question stops being, “How did we get here?” and becomes, “Where are we going next?”



# Workbook 1.

## START RETHINKING HIGH SCHOOLS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Real change comes when high schools and community members like you work together in a strong partnership to improve our children's educational future. A partnership that's built on a strong foundation of trust, honesty, and a genuine commitment to improving student achievement. A partnership where everyone involved can freely

acknowledge the community's challenges, identify its strengths, and work hand-in-hand to improve both. What role can you play? How can you contribute? The workbook below will help you think through what you can do to help and how your high schools can strengthen the community and vice versa.

- 1. When I look at my community, what are our three most unique strengths and our three challenges? In other words, what makes our community great—and what does our community need to work on, together?**

### STRENGTHS

For example: Strong community organizations, growing tech industry, engaged parents

**A** \_\_\_\_\_

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**B** \_\_\_\_\_

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**C** \_\_\_\_\_

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### CHALLENGES

For example: Job loss from factory closings, lack of career training, poverty and inequality

**A** \_\_\_\_\_

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**B** \_\_\_\_\_

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**C** \_\_\_\_\_

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# GET INVOLVED

## PARTICIPATE. ACTIVATE. INNOVATE.

If we agree that school boards represent a high-impact, but all-too-often overlooked vehicle for improving high schools in our home communities, the question becomes:

“Well, what are we going to do about it?”

There is no shortage of options and opportunities to engage your local school board. From educating yourself on the state of local high schools to attending meetings, asking questions, and raising urgent priorities...

From learning where candidates stand on improving high schools to voting for worthy candidates...

From campaigning for a candidate you believe in to even becoming a school board candidate yourself!

Your involvement can be as tailored, or as wide, as you're ready to make it.

Whether you're simply looking to learn more about your local school board or you're ready to throw your hat into the ring, the biggest step you'll take is simply getting started.

Let's take that step, together.





# Our School Boards, Our Neighbors

**Most school board members have never held prior public office. They are small business owners, concerned citizens, local leaders, parents, grandparents, retirees, and district alumni who share a common purpose: doing what's best for students and the communities they call home.**

School boards comprise everyday, ordinary people taking on an extraordinary challenge. Great school boards are bettered by the diversity in background, ideology, and outlook of their members. They recognize that preparing students for success in college, careers, and life is a shared responsibility that compels community members to listen to—and learn from—one another.

The more we realize school board members are our own neighbors, the more approachable and accessible school boards become.

The bottom line? You don't need to have a background in education or government to get involved with your local school board or even get elected. Very few school board members do.

What matters most is a genuine commitment to students, a willingness to work hard, and a desire to bring others along. School boards are not elite clubs. They're not intended for career politicians or aspiring ones. They're designed to encourage and empower everyday citizens like you to make a difference in your community. And they're bolstered by *your* presence and participation.



## GO AHEAD, RAISE YOUR HAND!

School boards typically meet once or twice a month on a set weekday. Meetings are open to the public and provide an opportunity for community members like you to learn about what's happening in your local schools. Most boards post their agendas on their websites, so you can find out in advance what they're planning to discuss. The website will probably also include short bios of current members.

Every board meeting is different, but there are certain common elements you can expect. The superintendent or school board president will probably give a general update and make announcements about upcoming events. Board members might debate a new discipline policy, consider a new program, or review student performance data. They might discuss budget issues or hear a report on a problem that came up at an earlier meeting. The tone might be businesslike, conversational, or confrontational—or a combination of all three.

Protocols vary, but there's usually an opportunity to ask questions and share your opinions, concerns, and solutions about how to improve the schools in your community. You might need to put your name on a list and wait to be called on to speak. You might be given only a minute or two to ask a question or make a comment. Or you might find that just listening during the public part of the meeting is the best approach.

Remember, the best introduction to your local school board is simply to attend a local school board meeting. You'll learn a lot—and, equally important, you'll show your concern. School boards function better when there are more committed people in the room.



# Inside a School Board Meeting

## NEVER BEEN TO A SCHOOL BOARD MEETING? NO PROBLEM.

1

Find out when and where your local school board meets by checking the website of your local district. Then put the next meeting on your calendar and show up.

2

When you arrive at the meeting, note who's in the room. Does the crowd seem to represent all segments of your community?

3

What's on the agenda? Are board members actively engaged? If controversy arises, is it dealt with openly and constructively?

4

When the meeting ends, introduce yourself to board members. Tell them why you're attending and what you'd like to hear discussed at future meetings. Ask for information that can help you learn the issues.

5

Ask questions during or after the meeting, depending on the Q&A protocol for the public. If the board or superintendent mentions a policy you're not familiar with, don't be afraid to ask for clarification.

## YOUR FIRST SCHOOL BOARD MEETING: A CHEATSHEET



## Workbook 2. FIND OUT HOW YOUR DISTRICT STACKS UP

Public schools are accountable to the public. Period. But how can we hold school systems accountable if we don't do our homework? Fortunately, there's lots of information available to help us understand how well our schools are doing. We have a right to it, and a responsibility to use it.

When you understand the data, you'll have a much clearer picture of your local high schools—where they're strong, where there's room for improvement. You'll ask better questions. And you'll know where your help is needed most.

Answer the following questions as you start attending your first school board meetings. Answer them on your own or with a group of friends. Just be sure to answer them with care, thoroughness, and rigor. You owe it to yourself, your community, and local students to get these answers right.

To get the answers, consult publicly available data sources such as the ones listed below. If you don't find everything in one place, keep digging!

### 1. Of the 9th graders who entered our high schools five years ago, how many graduated with their class? How many didn't, both in numbers and percent?

Nationally, approximately 85% of American students graduate from high school.<sup>11</sup> Those who don't graduate have high unemployment rates and low wages.

**In our district:** \_\_\_\_\_

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### 2. Of the students who graduated from our high schools last year, what proportion were proficient readers? What proportion were proficient in math?

Nationally, 37% of high school seniors are proficient in reading and 25% are proficient in math. On international examinations, our high school students rank 20th in reading and 31st in math.<sup>12</sup> Reading comprehension is critically important to most jobs; math performance is the single largest determinant of lifetime earnings.

**In our district:** \_\_\_\_\_

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**3. Of last year's graduates, what proportion completed the courses necessary to be ready for college? How many completed the sequence of courses (at least three related courses) to prepare for a career? How many did neither?**

Nationally, only about 8% of high school graduates complete the courses necessary to be ready for both college and a career. An additional 31% complete a college-ready course of study, and 13% complete a three-course sequence of courses in the same career cluster. Almost half (47%) of high school graduates complete no coherent course of study at all, and are thus ready for neither college nor the workplace.<sup>13</sup>

**In our district:** \_\_\_\_\_  
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\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**4. How many of our recent graduates entered a 2- or 4-year college within a year of graduating from high school? Of those who entered, what proportion had to take remedial English or math?**

Nationally, 67% of high school graduates enter college within a year of graduation. Of those who entered 2-year colleges 52% had to take remedial courses. For students in 4-year colleges, the share in remediation was 20%.<sup>14</sup>

**In our district:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**5. What is the racial/ethnic and economic composition of our high school student population? Are there significant differences on any of the above four measures by race/ethnicity or by family income?**

Nationally, 49.8% of high school students are students of color and 17% are growing up in poverty. Because opportunities at school and at home are still far from equal,<sup>15</sup> Black, Latino, and low-income students tend to complete fewer advanced courses and are more likely to graduate without the full preparation needed for college or careers.

**In our district:** \_\_\_\_\_  
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\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**6. How many English learners are there in our high schools? If some are recent arrivals who haven't attended school previously in the US, are they getting the supports and services they need?**

Nationally, approximately 1 in 20 high school students is an English learner.<sup>16</sup> Some are new arrivals to the country; others were born here and educated in American schools since kindergarten.

**In our district:** \_\_\_\_\_  
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\_\_\_\_\_

**7. How many students in our high schools are receiving special education services? Are they getting the supports and services they need? How many are graduating with diplomas or alternative certificates?**

Nationally, approximately 13% of public school students receive special education services. Of students ages 14–21 who received special education services and who exited school in 2014–15, 69% graduated with a regular high school diploma and 11% received an alternative certificate.<sup>17</sup>

**In our district:** \_\_\_\_\_  
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\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**8. How many of our graduates took college-level courses (AP, IB, concurrent enrollment in local colleges) during high school? How many of those performed at a level high enough to earn college credit? Are all groups of students participating equally in these programs?**

Nationally, nearly 4 in 10 (37.7%) students in the class of 2017 completed at least one AP course. And more than 1 in 5 graduates (22.8%) scored a 3 or better in at least one class -- the level typically necessary to earn college credit. While there is no good national data on the number of high school students taking one or more "dual enrollment" college-level courses, most experts place the number between 10% and 15% of high school students.<sup>18</sup>

**In our district:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



**9. How many of our high school students have been suspended at least once during high school? How many have been suspended multiple times? Collectively, how many instructional days did they miss? Do these rates vary by race, gender or special education status?**

Nationally, some 2.7 million students were suspended at least once during the 2015-16 school year. Together, they represent 5-6% of all K-12 students, though the rates are typically much higher in high school than in elementary and middle schools.<sup>19</sup> In a typical school district, suspensions are higher for boys, students of color, and students with disabilities than they are for other groups of students. Collectively, these students lose thousands of instructional days.

**In our district:** \_\_\_\_\_

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**10. How are we incorporating student voice into our community's education decision-making?**

Nationally, school boards around the country are looking for new ways to listen to and learn from students directly. Some include a student representative. Others purposefully orchestrate opportunities for students to weigh in on decisions with their concerns and suggestions.

**In our district:** \_\_\_\_\_

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# BEST SOURCES FOR BASIC DISTRICT AND SCHOOL DATA

## YOUR SCHOOL DISTRICT

Take a look to see what information your district makes available to the public. Some districts offer very detailed information about enrollment, spending and the performance of individual schools, some very little. Dig in and see what you can discover (search "your city name" + "school district").

## YOUR STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Generally, state department of education websites have basic information on every school and school district in the state, including size, graduation rate, test performance, and spending. The best state websites help you compare your schools and district to others in the state, and post whether your schools are meeting state goals.

<https://www2.ed.gov/about/contacts/state/index.html>

## NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATIONAL STATISTICS

Be sure to check out the School and District Navigator, an accessible tool from the National Center for Educational Statistics. It contains the basics on every school district in America, including numbers of schools, students, and administrators and teachers, expenditures per student, and more. Just enter the name of your district, and you'll find the information you need.

<https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/schoolmap>

## GREATSCHOOLS

GreatSchools.org is a national, nonpartisan non-profit organization that gathers a wide range of public data on schools across the country and makes it available, all in one place. Here, you'll find information about individual school performance, based on objective data like state test results, as well as data about college readiness, equity, advanced placement classes, discipline and attendance, student race/ethnicity and income levels, and other measures. GreatSchools has also begun to share data about the performance of school districts through a new partnership with XQ.

<https://www.greatschools.org>

## US DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

The Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights offers a search tool that provides a wealth of data on school enrollment, discipline, finance, course-taking, and participation in gifted programs. All can be filtered by race and special education status.

<https://ocrdata.ed.gov/DistrictSchoolSearch#districtSearch>

## PROPUBLICA DATABASE

ProPublica's interactive Miseducation database lets you search more than 17,000 school districts and 96,000 public and charter schools to explore key data about students' access to high-quality education. Use it to find and understand patterns of racial inequity and to see how your district stacks up. It's sourced from data released by the U.S. Department of Education.

<https://projects.propublica.org/miseducation>





## DATA INTO DISCUSSION

You've done your homework. You're up to date on the facts, percentages, and stats. But how do you turn that information into activity?

When you insert real data into a school board discussion, you're bound to get attention—and maybe even spur some action. Take the data you've found and turn it into questions that open up community conversations about the changes that need to happen in your local high schools.

Look through the questions below and see if one can serve as a jumping off point for engaging your local school board. Treat these questions as a guide, not a script. And be sure to follow up with a question about next steps and how to measure meaningful change.



## SPEAK UP! QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR SCHOOL BOARD

- "A lot of our students aren't getting the kind of learning they need for college and the modern world. What is the district doing about that?"
- "When I talk to local students, they say they're bored in class or just drifting through high school. How can we make learning more engaging?"
- "Some of our high schools have much lower grad rates than others. How can we make learning more equitable across the district?"
- "Students in a nearby district have cool internships with local businesses. Can we start something like that in our schools?"
- "Could our high school students be playing a bigger role decision-making about the district, their schools, and their own learning?"

**And as a follow-up to any of those questions:**

- "How are we measuring that, and what steps are we taking to improve things for students?"



## THE POTENTIAL IS LIMITLESS



When you've gotten to know your school board and how it operates, met a few school board members, and delved into some of the issues facing your district, the question becomes this: How can you contribute to this important work, rather than just observe it?

This is where your own creativity and commitment become real assets. Because if you've got those, the potential to make a difference is huge.

Among the possibilities:

- Does the school board or the school district have committees you can get involved with?
- Can you start, or become part of, a local effort to look into the performance of your high schools and how to improve them? And if your superintendent and school board don't seem to welcome that kind of input, can you form a committee of people willing to work together to push for change?

Offer to share your expertise in an area like computer science, criminal law, architecture, or entrepreneurship as a guest speaker in a high school class. Or invite the class to visit your business or organization.

Could you organize a mentoring program or student internships, or get involved with an initiative that already exists?

Does your high school use volunteer tutors? If your schedule can accommodate it, consider signing up.

The bottom line: There's no reason you can't get involved with your local school board, even if you aren't actually on your local school board. Like any collective, school boards accomplish more when we work together than they ever could on their own.

The only thing holding us back is ourselves.

# Get Active, Get Involved

## TEAMWORK MAKES THE DREAM WORK

Redesigning high schools to give all students the foundation to succeed in college, career, and life...

Educating young people to become more productive members of society...

Building stronger ties between high schools and the community...

These are common goals every family wants for their kids and every concerned citizen wants for their local high schools. So why not join forces to make change?

Imagine people in your own community willing to come together to ask deep questions about the purpose of high school and the education students really need for the future, study local high school performance, and figure out ways to improve high schools for every student.

Imagine a group of parents willing to work alongside other community members and business leaders for change.

Imagine a coalition of activists who speak with one voice and are ready to support—or, if necessary, push—the superintendent and school board in researching and implementing innovations that will work in your schools.

Imagine the power of working together for real change.

There are many people in your community who share the same desire to see your local high schools become everything they ought to be, the same commitment to ensuring that every child has an equal opportunity to succeed, the same determination to better equip all students for the real world.

What if you were the person who brought them all together?



## USE YOUR VOICE, IN BIG WAYS AND SMALL

There are numerous ways to connect with fellow parents, business leaders, and active members of your community. Attend a PTA meeting and announce that you're starting a study group—one that's looking to understand the emerging trends in education today.

Start a book club—one that centers on education and how we can make our high schools better. Start a dinner and discussion club—one that brings people together for a worthwhile conversation about the need to redesign our high schools to better prepare students for future success.

Reach out to people on social media, attend neighborhood forums and district town halls to connect with your neighbors. More important, meet with students to listen to their experiences, understand their concerns, and hear their ideas and vision for the future.

Yes, one person can make a difference. By using your time, energy, and voice to form a community coalition for change in your local high schools, you can help make a miracle in your own backyard.

## START AN EDUCATION CONVERSATION

**Let's start by being honest... How well do we think our high schools are really preparing students for college... for careers... for life?**

**Every community has its challenges. What if part of a high school education was addressing them? What could students work on here?**

**How can we teach skills like problem solving, creativity, critical thinking, and self-discipline?**

**"Boring." "Irrelevant." "Not for me." Why do so many students seem to feel that way?**

**If the sky was the limit, how could we redesign high school to better serve today's students?**

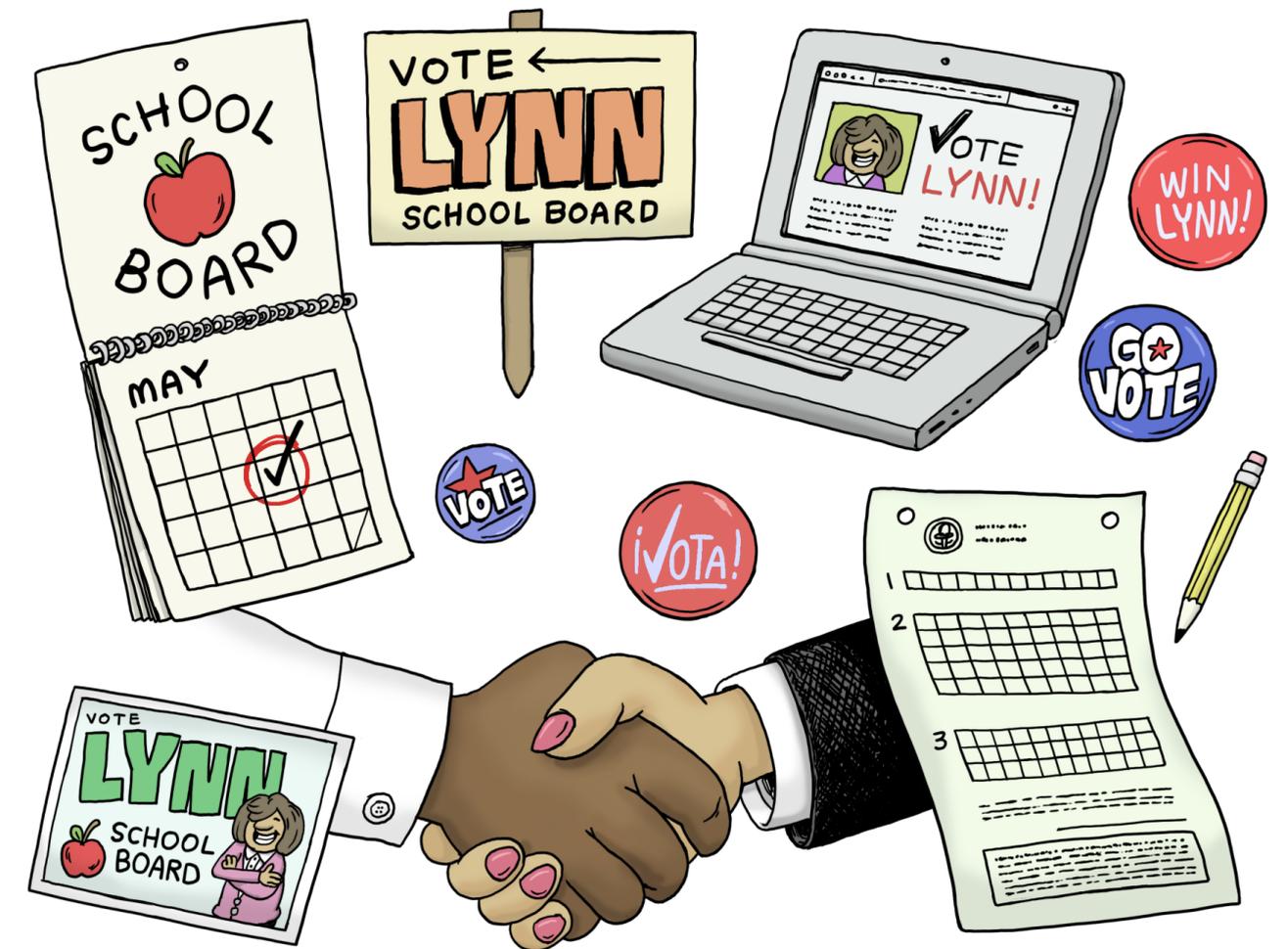


## BECOME AN EDUCATED SCHOOL BOARD VOTER

There's no wrong time to get involved with your local schools or your local school board. But there's a time when you can't afford NOT to be involved: school board election season. It's the perfect time to become versed in the issues that impact your district, the time when members of the community turn their attention to the future of their schools. And it's a great time to push high schools higher up on the agenda.

Unfortunately, school board elections often come and go without a lot of people noticing—never mind casting an informed vote for a candidate they believe in. Don't let that happen to you! Take these steps to become an educated school board voter.

- Find out when the next school board election is happening in your district. XQ can help with that: go to <https://xqsuperschool.org/school-board> and enter your address.
- If the election is coming up soon, find out who's running. You can get that information from your local Board of Elections or school district.
- Learn about the candidates. Ask around to see what others are saying. Check their campaign websites for their qualifications and priorities. Are high schools important to them? Who's endorsing them, and why?
- Check for upcoming campaign or candidates' forums and attend them. Ask questions about high schools. If you find a candidate you like, introduce yourself and offer your help.
- Register and vote!



## PUTTING HIGH SCHOOLS IN THE SPOTLIGHT

You'll learn a lot from seeing candidates in action as they debate the issues and answer questions from families, students, and other residents. Check with your local Board of Elections, League of Women Voters, or Chamber of Commerce for the times and locations of candidates' forums or other public events. Your school district might also have information about planned events—or check with the mayor's office or the city council.

If there's no candidates' forum scheduled, consider organizing one yourself on behalf of a neighborhood, civic, or parents' association. Or contact the candidates who interest you most and find out when and where you can meet them in person and ask a few questions. Remember, most candidates are eager to engage with voters and will welcome the chance to talk with you.



### SPEAK UP! QUESTIONS TO ASK SCHOOL BOARD CANDIDATES

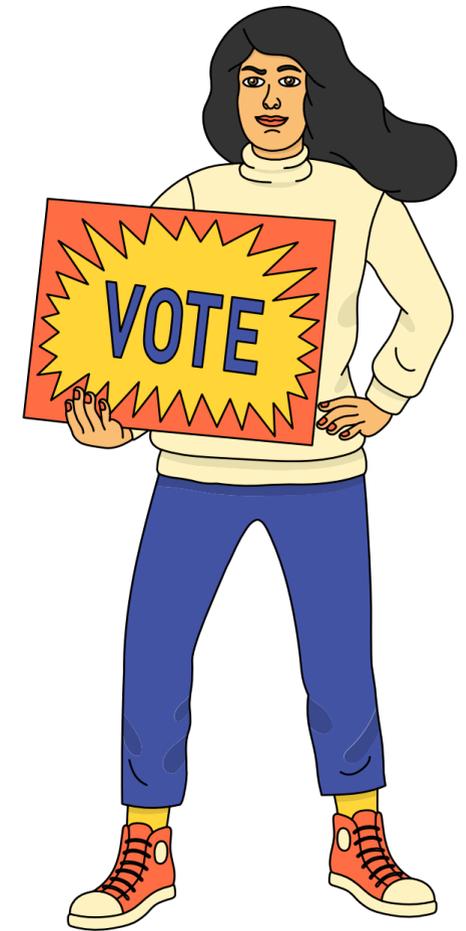
- “When it comes to high schools, what is our district getting right? What do we need to work on?”
- “What are your three biggest priorities for improving high schools?”
- “How will you build partnerships with businesses, colleges, and other organizations?”
- “What skills and experiences do you have that will help the district improve our high schools?”
- “How can the school board become more accountable for our high schools?”

## ENGAGE, ORGANIZE, AND VOTE

Community activism is what America and the democratic process are all about. Getting involved, calling for change, and being part of solution-finding efforts is a privilege—but it's also a lot of fun. Why not enjoy it? You can push for or organize candidate forums so that you can listen to their ideas and solutions, share your own perspectives, and ask questions. Found a candidate that you believe in? Consider getting involved with the campaign by volunteering in a phone bank or going door-to-door. But the single most important thing you can do is VOTE. A handful of districts even allow high school students to vote in local school board elections.

### The Problem of Low Participation in School Board Elections

Voter turnout for school board elections is notoriously low—an estimated 10% nationally, and as low as 2% in some districts.<sup>20</sup> This needs to change. And you can do something about it in your hometown. Organize a voter registration drive. Encourage your friends and neighbors to vote. If you have time, mobilize or join a get-out-the-vote effort to remind people to vote and transport them to the polls.



## MAKING OUR VOICES HEARD

Your vote matters in every election—national, state, and local—but when it comes to school board elections, it's even more deeply personal. The future of our schools affects the future of our local economies, neighborhoods, environments, and more. Voting is a right, but it only counts if you exercise it.

The truth is that because school board elections don't always align with national or midterm elections, they tend to be under-promoted and underrepresented at the polls. It's more than a shame, it's a disservice. These are our communities. It's only right that we make our voices heard.

## OR EVEN DECIDE TO RUN

Feeling inspired? Think about putting your name on the ballot and running for school board yourself. Although the rules vary a little from state to state, there are some basic qualifications you'll almost certainly need to meet. In most cases, you must be:

- A registered voter
- An official resident of the district
- A high school graduate

As a school board member, you'll chart the course of education and set generations of students up for success. Whether your district needs a program to meet the needs of English learners or more advanced courses to make sure all students are prepared for college, you'll be on the frontlines of decision-making.

If you don't have children or grandchildren in the school system, it doesn't mean you should be discouraged from getting involved. That's because school boards transcend the classroom—they make the community a better place for everyone. Imagine working alongside local employers and business owners to create partnerships that strengthen the local economy and future generations.

As a board member, you'll be responsible for interacting with parents, the press, and other stakeholders on the issues that matter most to your hometown. That puts you in a unique position to improve public safety, resources for seniors, historical preservation efforts, the local economy, and more.

And remember, you're not alone. Great school board members across the country are playing a big role in making American high schools great, one community at a time.

# From Citizen to Candidate



# RUN TO SERVE

## THE POWER OF ONE

Redesigning high schools to improve student achievement and prepare students for life is a collective responsibility. It requires local effort, led by parents, teachers, students, and community members like you, working together with one another and with the superintendent, to deliver meaningful, lasting change.

But it can start with just ONE person sparking the discussion.

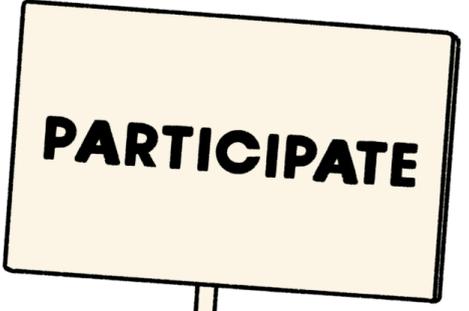
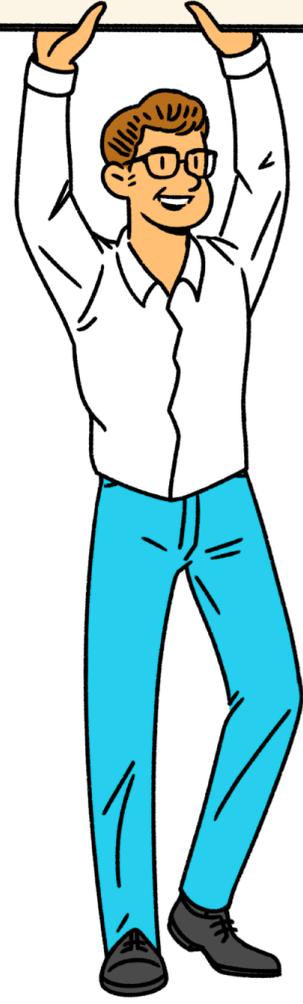
ONE person raising the priorities and asking the right questions.

ONE person reaching out to friends and neighbors to build a coalition that energizes a community movement.

You can be that person.

The health of a community depends on the health of its local high schools—and vice versa. If you choose to “run to serve” your hometown and neighborhood as a potential member of your local school board, you can put the spotlight squarely on the issues and solutions that really matter: high schools that truly prepare young people for the challenges of the future.

Win or lose, a candidate who advocates for rethinking high school in election season is a gain for us all.





## RUN FOR SCHOOL BOARD.

## YES, YOU.



# Become An Engineer for Change

Now more than ever before, people are calling for change. That's why voters all across the country are calling upon the president, their members of Congress, their governors and state officials, their local town council, and other elected leaders to improve their communities and states, not to mention the nation and the world, in tangible ways.

You might be asking yourself: What can I do? And the answer just might be: Run for school board. Yes, you.

School boards comprise everyday people—no prerequisites, no out-of-reach qualifications needed.

You don't need a background in education policy. You don't need to have experience in local government. And you don't need to have kids in the school district.

What matters most is your own deep commitment to seeing the young people in your community get the best possible high school education—the kind of high school education that can carry every one of them forward into a rewarding future.

Start with commitment, and you'll set the tone for success.

The most important qualification is a willingness to advocate for the students in your district. The second is the ability to listen. After all, school board members are responsible not only for making decisions that improve schools, but also for incorporating the needs, priorities, and consensus of the community.

By resetting and reshaping high school priorities, every school board candidate can change students' lives—and the trajectory of an entire community.





# School Board Stories: CIPRIANO VARGAS

Vista Unified School District, California

**“School leaders have the responsibility to measure beyond graduation rates and college-bound numbers. We need to ensure that the content within a high school prepares students beyond graduation and allows them to thrive in any setting, whether it’s a four-year university, a technical school, the military, or the workplace.”**

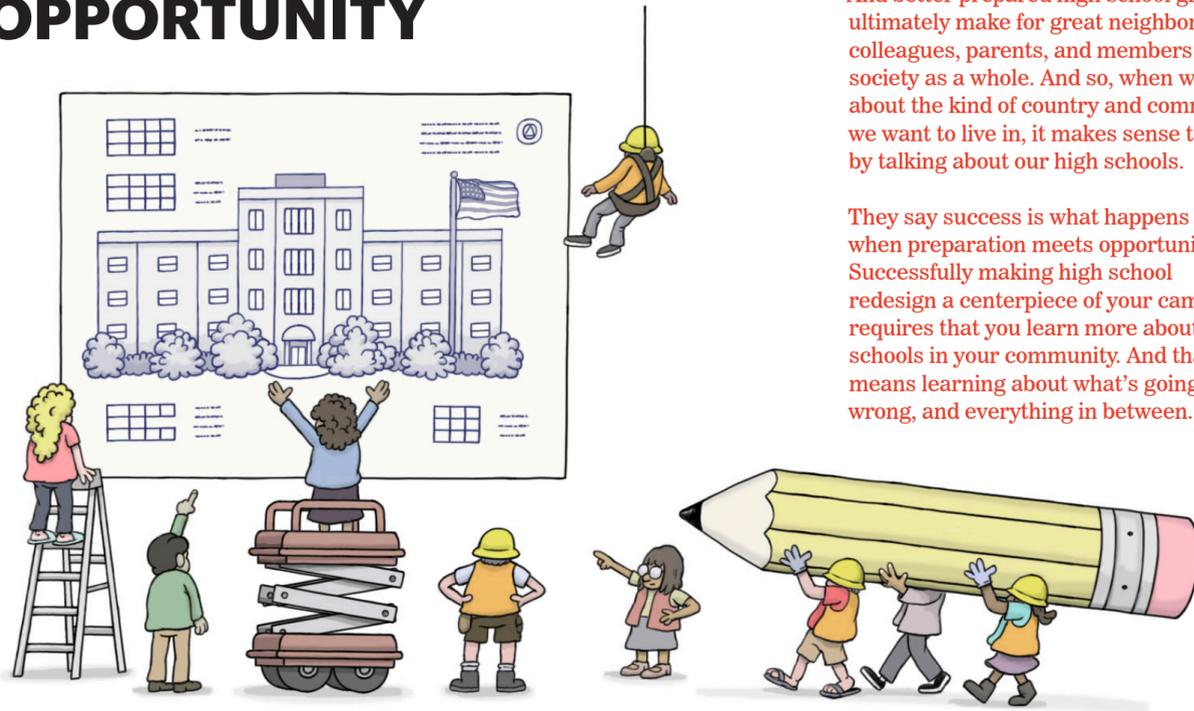
Cipriano is the first member of his family to earn a college degree and at age 24 was the youngest person to be elected to Vista’s school board. Throughout his 2016 campaign, he emphasized the need to focus on preparing students for future success.

“We need to make sure that our students are reading and writing at grade level in high school and throughout the K-12 system, and that they’re not falling behind, so that when we send our students off to college, we aren’t setting them up for failure,” Cipriano said in a campaign video.

Cipriano also believes that, in a changing world, students’ future depends on a grounding more expansive than traditional academics alone: “I want to ensure students have the skills necessary to succeed in the 21st century. This includes cultural competency, and the skills sought after in the workforce.”



## PREPARATION MEETS OPPORTUNITY



Better high schools make for better equipped high school students. Better equipped high school students make for better prepared high school graduates. And better prepared high school graduates ultimately make for great neighbors, colleagues, parents, and members of society as a whole. And so, when we talk about the kind of country and communities we want to live in, it makes sense to start by talking about our high schools.

They say success is what happens when preparation meets opportunity. Successfully making high school redesign a centerpiece of your campaign requires that you learn more about the schools in your community. And that means learning about what's going right, wrong, and everything in between.

# How to Make High School Redesign Part of Your Platform

## START BY GATHERING THE FACTS

A reverence for the facts, for data, for substantial evidence—no matter where it leads—not only strengthens your own command of the issues, but also sends a strong signal to voters that you're well-versed on the community's needs and passionate about the opportunity to improve our schools.

Facts may be stubborn things... but they're also the building blocks of school board campaigns and the catalysts for positive change.

### REVIEW YOUR WORK

This is a good time to look back at the answers you uncovered in Workbooks 1 and 2.

If you haven't done so already, it's time to answer those questions about your district and your community.

Remember, they're designed to make you a more knowledgeable and thoughtful school board candidate and to help you prepare for questions you'll surely get on the campaign trail.



# SEARCH FOR SOLUTIONS

Once you understand the facts, you can start thinking about why problems exist, why those problems matter, and why they may be hard to change. From there, you can start searching for potential solutions that will actually work and stick.

Educating yourself about what can actually be done will make you a better candidate. It will help you discover what you personally believe is right. And it will help raise the level of discussion of the whole election.

## THINK You Might Be Thinking

I can't help but notice a lot of school-aged teenagers outside of the classroom during the school day. It seems to me that my neighborhood high schools don't have the steady attendance records I would expect. Am I onto something?

## QUESTION Why It Matters

Simply put, students who aren't in school can't learn. Poor attendance can be a warning sign that a student is disengaged and in danger of dropping out, or it can signal problems outside of school that need attention. It can also be a sign that a student needs better instruction.

## LOOK Where to Find Ideas

A useful resource for solving attendance problems is Attendance Works ([attendanceworks.org](http://attendanceworks.org)), a national nonprofit that helps states and localities tackle this difficult problem. Here you'll find advice on strategies that work, stories from schools that have improved attendance, and tools for analyzing your data.

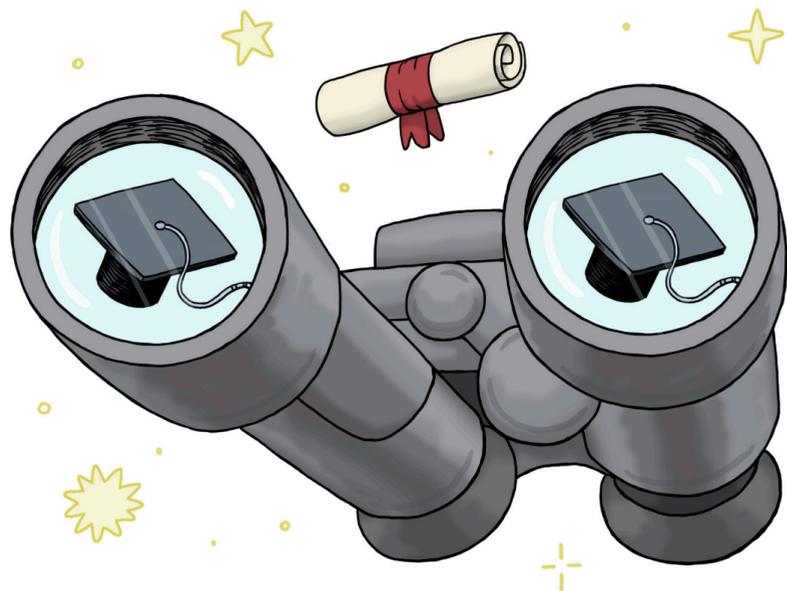
The high schoolers I know often complain about 'being bored' in the classroom—that they find the work too easy and unstimulating. These are smart kids, so I asked them about looking into Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, or dual enrollment opportunities. Their response? That they don't qualify. What gives?

Students deserve to be intellectually challenged. And one of the best ways to add rigor to high school curricula is through college-level coursework, including AP, IB, or dual enrollment with a local college. These classes offer students a head start on college—often saving their families many thousands of dollars in tuition later on—and demonstrably improve their chances of on-time graduation.

More than three-quarters of American high schools offer one or more AP courses, and many others offer either IB or dual enrollment opportunities. For schools that don't have programs like this, the obvious next step is to start them. Learn more about how they work from the College Board (for AP), the IB Diploma Programme, or a local college.

For schools that do have these programs, the next step is to expand offerings and participation by reducing unnecessary barriers like GPA or teacher recommendation requirements. If students want to challenge themselves academically, why should their schools stop them?

For schools, especially in rural areas, where access to advanced coursework is impractical, technology can open new doors of opportunity. Consider using online courses or virtually connecting to other schools that are offering these programs. Courses like this are offered through various platforms, including edX.



## THINK You Might Be Thinking

My local public high school has a reputation—and it's not good. It's been labeled a "dropout factory" because of its chronic low graduation rates and high dropout rates. I know this is a big problem, but it seems hopeless. Does anyone really know how to fix it?

## QUESTION Why It Matters

Young people without a high school diploma have few options—either for good jobs or for furthering their education. The average dropout earns \$27,000 per year. That's a lot less than the \$36,800 average for high school graduates and the \$61,400 average for those with a bachelor's degree.<sup>21</sup> Over a career, these differences in pay accumulate to tens, even hundreds of thousands of dollars.

## LOOK Where to Find Ideas

If low graduation rates are an issue in your district, try talking to students to understand the problem from their perspective. Once you grasp what students are experiencing, look for potential solutions from these three excellent resources: Johns Hopkins University's Everyone Graduates Center ([www.every1graduates.org](http://www.every1graduates.org)), the National Dropout Prevention Center ([www.dropoutprevention.org](http://www.dropoutprevention.org)), and the College and Career Readiness Center ([www.betterhighschools.org](http://www.betterhighschools.org)).

Look, I know there's a lot of push-back about the number of—and focus on—standardized tests... But I was looking at the data, and it seems to me that the results are clear. Not enough of our students are reaching basic proficiency levels in math and reading. What does this mean?

While tests don't measure everything, low proficiency rates are an urgent signal that students are not being effectively taught the basics they'll need to succeed in college, careers, and life.

Studies around the country show that when teachers get professional development and high quality curriculum resources, and students get immediate support when they struggle, proficiency rates—and test scores—can improve rapidly. Some schools use "early warning systems" to identify and help students in danger of falling off the path to graduation. The National High School Center at AIR ([www.earlywarningsystems.org](http://www.earlywarningsystems.org)) offers information on how they work.

Our high school has done a good job at increasing graduation rates and helping students achieve their diplomas, but I'm worried that may not be enough. Too many local students don't have plans to attend college—either two-year or four-year programs—after high school. Many say it's because they don't know where to start. How can we help?

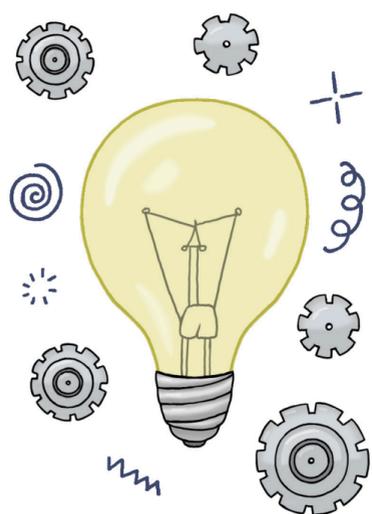
Securing a solid foothold in the new economy requires virtually everybody to get at least some postsecondary education. It can be two- or four-year college, or a quality technical training program, but the point is most jobs today require education after graduating from high school.

Too often students don't know what courses they need to be ready for college, or even much about available college opportunities. Schools have a responsibility to ensure that students receive support in the college application process. There are many useful resources, including those freely distributed by the College Board and the National Association of College Admissions Counselors. Another group, AVID ([www.avid.org](http://www.avid.org)), is helping thousands of high schools implement a college-going culture and student supports.

**THINK**  
You Might Be Thinking

On average, our local high school seems pretty good on all the usual metrics—proficiency rates, standardized test scores, graduation numbers, and college acceptance. But when I look closer, there seem to be some startling discrepancies based on demographics. Why are some groups at my high school succeeding, and some having a harder time?

Frankly, I'm concerned with how our high school handles student discipline. It seems that one of the first choices is to remove students from the classroom, suspend them, and in some cases even refer them to law enforcement. I'm struggling with how we can facilitate a conducive learning environment while ensuring more students are kept in school, where they belong.



**QUESTION**  
Why It Matters

Gaps in student outcomes are signs of differences in student opportunity, not student capability. Intentionally or not, some schools or school personnel may be signaling to various groups of students that certain opportunities—college prep or AP courses, for example—are just not for them. When we see unevenness in high school outcomes along demographic lines, we have to ask ourselves what structural impediments or biases are we allowing to stand?

Removing disruptive students from the classroom can be necessary, but it should always be the last resort. Remember, students who are suspended from school lose valuable learning time, making it harder for them to catch up in the classroom and more likely that they'll act out as a result. More drastically, when schools rely too heavily on referring students to law enforcement, young people are involved unnecessarily in the criminal justice system, often with lifelong consequences for themselves and their families.



**LOOK**  
Where to Find Ideas

Progress hinges on acknowledging the problem honestly. Voicing the issue isn't about assigning blame—it's all about taking the first step toward correcting unfair and uneven systems and structures.

From there, the question naturally becomes: How do we solve the problem? What are the barriers? How can we eliminate them? How will we know when we are making progress? For ideas, check out resources available from the National Equity Project ([www.nationalequityproject.org](http://www.nationalequityproject.org)).

In recent years—and often with the help of local parent and community organizations—many school districts have substantially reduced the number of students with out-of-school suspensions through a combination of better professional development for teachers and implementation of restorative justice practices. Students at the Center Hub ([www.studentsatthecenterhub.org](http://www.studentsatthecenterhub.org)) offers useful resources for learning about this approach.



# CRAFT A POWERFUL CAMPAIGN NARRATIVE

Every community is unique, with its own distinctive strengths and weaknesses, points of pride and pain points. And so you'll need to find a unique way to talk about the importance of high school redesign in a way that resonates with local voters.

Only by listening to—and learning from—students, parents, educators, experts, and other constituents can you use your candidacy to advocate for the types of change that make sense for your high schools, your neighborhoods, your community.

Once you've grounded yourself in data

points and best practices, heard from students and neighbors, and explored your own personal beliefs about high school, you'll have the ingredients you need to craft the beginning of a campaign narrative. A narrative that weaves together why you care, what you know, and how you propose to make a difference.

A narrative that forms the foundation of a school board candidate speech... a personal website... an entire platform. In short, you'll have all the ingredients to start making your own compelling case for change.





# School Board Stories: **TOMEKA HART**

Memphis City Schools, Tennessee

**“Initially, I did what everyone does. I thought, ‘Somebody needs to run!’ After a while, the thought turned to ‘Why don’t I run?’ I spent time trying to talk myself out of running. In time, I realized I couldn’t. I wanted to be part of the solution... I wanted to contribute my time and talent in service of my school system.”**

As a former teacher who spent five years teaching middle and high school students, Tomeka never planned or even thought about running for office. That is, until she started paying attention to local politics, especially her local school board, and discovered that there was little focus on the problem of low student achievement. Once elected, Tomeka led an effort

to create the Memphis school system's first Office of the General Counsel—saving the district millions of dollars. Her commitment to improving academic outcomes for students sometimes meant pushing for policies and practices that some deemed controversial, but she used her influence as a board member to help bring about needed change, no

matter how hard. Under her leadership as school board president, the board transformed its own activities—ranging from how it evaluated the superintendent's performance to how strongly it prioritized student achievement.





## Workbook 3. MAKE YOUR CASE, RAISE YOUR VOICE

This section will help you go piece by piece to take a big task—articulating your reasons for running—and break it down into its component parts. Your writing here can inform a stump speech—a tool you can use to reach out to and resonate with voters and volunteers while on the campaign trail.

### Make a Personal Appeal

- 1.** At their best, what do I believe great high schools offer a community? What do they look like? What do they prepare their students for, and what do they give back to the community?

I believe that the community gains when high schools are at their best because...

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- 2.** Why do I want to take a leadership role on our district school board?

I personally care about education, and specifically our district's high schools, because...

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- 3.** If I am entrusted with a seat on our local school board, what principles of process — transparency, a willingness to listen, accountability, etc.—would I emphasize?

If I am entrusted with a seat on our local school board, voters could expect that I would ...

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## Establish the Facts

- 4.** When I look closely at the data about my district and all the other things I've learned, what do I see as our top three strengths?

Our strengths are... and we should be proud, because...

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- 5.** But if I'm truly being honest, what are the top three areas where we need to improve? What evidence and examples would I cite?

The key areas we need to address are... because...

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- 6.** And again, being truly transparent, what do these weaknesses or challenges cost our students and our community as a whole? What do I think the root causes are?

I believe that the challenges our high school faces affect our students and our community by...

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## Set a Vision for the Future

- 7.** What do we stand to gain as a community by purposefully turning our attention to our high schools and addressing their weaknesses?

If we turn our high schools' weaknesses today into strengths tomorrow, we would gain...

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- 8.** With no idea being too big or too small, what are three ways we could "rethink, reshape, redesign" our high schools to address their weaknesses and build a better future?

Three possibilities for using our unique community resources are...

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**B**

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**C**

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# School Board Stories: **KELSEY WAITS**

Hastings Public Schools, Minnesota

**“The hardest part for me was taking that first step and filing to run for office. I had convinced myself that I was ‘unelectable.’ I was a home-schooler, I was too young, and I was too new to our small community to pull off a victory. Once I was able to set those fears aside, I jumped in, campaigned hard, and won one of the three open seats.”**

For Kelsey Waits, the inspiration to run for her local school board began with the Women’s March in her hometown of St. Paul, Minnesota. “We had close to 100,000 marchers, and experiencing the power of all those voices coming together was amazing. I wanted to be a part of carrying that power forward and working toward making a difference in my community.”

Kelsey’s passion for advocacy started at home with her family. “I’m a statistician turned stay-at-home-mom. When I decided to run, my youngest child had just started in special-education speech therapy courses at our public preschool, and my oldest daughter was being home-schooled due to special needs.”

With an eye on the future, she wanted to be sure the local public schools would be prepared to serve all kids all the way through high school. Her work leading the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiative spearheaded jointly by her city council and school board led to a local proclamation affirming that “All are Welcome” in their community.



## BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE CAMPAIGN

Yes, as a candidate, launching a campaign calls for you to talk about yourself, your background, your beliefs, and your vision for the future. And hopefully, with the practice of starting a campaign narrative, you'll grow increasingly confident about doing just that. But as bridges between the community and the classroom, school board members—and candidates—have an obligation to encourage a dialogue that goes both ways. And that means knocking on doors to uncover the pulse of neighborhoods. It requires drawing out the frustrations of struggling students in an open forum. It calls for not only landing strategic endorsements, but creating effective partnerships.

What do parents of high school students really think about your local high schools? What do parents think schools are getting right, and wrong? What do teachers and administrators want parents and community members to know?

Find out—and then create a campaign that's powered by their enthusiasm.

What skills are local employers and college officials looking for from the young people who graduate from your schools?

Discover what matters most and partner with local businesses to get the word out!

Above all, what do the students themselves think about their day-to-day experiences? Do they feel they're getting what they need to be successful in college and the careers that interest them?

Invite students to an informational session, where they give their input and you teach them about how school board members can create change. Pass the torch.

The best part? As you listen, you learn. You gather real stories that can strengthen your narrative through example. Stories you can use to make a point, challenge the status quo, or illustrate the difference a policy change can make. Stories are the perfect vehicle for communicating change precisely because they bring numbers, facts, and hard truths to life through the human experience. That's why every statistic you cite should always have a human component drawn directly from the students, parents, and teachers you talk to.

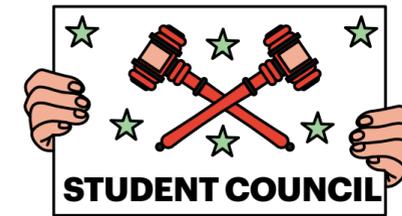
# Turning Supporters Into Partners

## DARE TO BE DIFFERENT



### A Candidate's Night During the Day

Candidate debates and discussions are often held during the evening when it's inconvenient for students and even some parents to attend. Think about asking local high schools to host a candidates' event during the lunch hour in the school auditorium, so hundreds of students can see, listen to, and provide ideas to all the school board candidates.



### Your Campaign Student Council

Think about recruiting a group of impassioned high school students to counsel you and serve as a sounding board for your ideas—not only about education, but about your campaign. Promote your student council and their ideas in your campaign materials.



### A Different Kind of Campaign Brochure

What if, instead of a traditional campaign brochure, you included a link to a community survey in your initial flyer? The survey would give community members a chance to reflect on their goals for local young people, and how well they think your high school is serving its students. You can report back in future campaign literature.



### A Cabinet of Local Experts

In addition to your core campaign committee, consider recruiting a "cabinet" of people who share your commitment to high school transformation and are willing to work to make it happen. Your cabinet might include a Secretary of Employer Partnerships, a Secretary of Student Engagement, a Secretary of Equity, a Secretary of Postsecondary Learning, and other key roles.

# WAYS TO WIN

## 1. Create materials that grab—and hold—public attention

Whether they're displayed on lawns, taped in store windows, or flashed across social media, campaign signs are typically uniform: the candidate's name, the position they're running for, maybe a decorative flourish or two. Not memorable in any way. But you can design your campaign materials to spark a meaningful conversation about the importance of improving the district and your community. For example:

Every student needs an exceptional education

Equipping students for the REAL WORLD

ALL young people deserve an EQUAL opportunity to SUCCEED

Creating meaningful, lasting change in our high schools

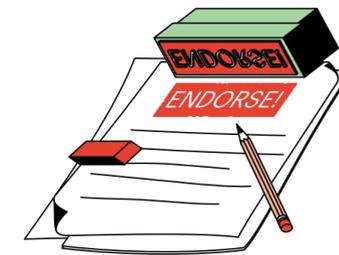
LET'S RETHINK HIGH SCHOOLS SO ALL STUDENTS ACHIEVE

Preparing students for success in college, careers, and LIFE!

PREPARING THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS

A genuine commitment to our children, our schools, and our future

## 2. Gather endorsements



From businesses. From your local newspaper. From administrators, teachers, and community figures you respect. Endorsements signal both validity and tenability to other voters. They are something you can promote on your website, on the campaign trail, and in day-to-day conversations. All of a sudden it's not "take my word for it," ... it's "take our word for it."

## 3. Lean on personal and professional networks



Winning campaigns is about activating the social influence you already have as much as it is about creating new networks. Family, friends, colleagues—if you believe in your cause, these are all available resources who you should feel comfortable asking for support.

Does your colleague participate in a sports league? Ask him or her if you can introduce yourself at a game. Does your favorite local coffee shop have a bulletin board? Ask if they'd allow you to advertise your next campaign forum. Does your cousin run a business council? Ask him or her if you can take five minutes of the committee's time to explain why school boards matter—and how as a school board member, you'd work to strengthen the relationship between the high school and the local economy.

## 4. Balance personal appearances and social media presence



There's no doubt that social media has changed races for public office—even on a local level. But it doesn't have to be all or nothing. When a phone has the power to record video, why not ask a campaign team member to capture an "in-person" appearance—whether during a speech, in a listening forum with students, or while out canvassing. Social media at its best amplifies your real, interpersonal connections with community members—it doesn't replace them.

## 5.



Too often, school board elections suffer from a lack of voter turnout simply because they don't coincide with bigger political races. So why not draw attention to them? Get-out-the-vote efforts are all about increasing voter turnout. They draw attention to a race, instead of a particular candidate. And because we all win when more people get involved with their local school board, they're a great way for any team to spotlight the issues that matter most to them. Go on, GOTV!

# SERVE FOR CHANGE

## BE A STANDARD-BEARER FOR PROGRESS

In the movement to rethink American high schools, no one is more important than a committed local school board member.

Whether you're new to the board, a seasoned veteran, or somewhere in between, serving for change requires a deep conviction that local high schools need to change and a belief that changing them is possible. It requires humility—a willingness to admit that you don't know all the answers—coupled with a willingness to inspire and assist others to get involved, fashioning the answers together. It requires tenacity, especially when protectors of the status quo push back. You'll need to listen intently, study carefully, think creatively, and then act accordingly on behalf of high school students in your community.

You know the issues. You know your district. You know the stakes.

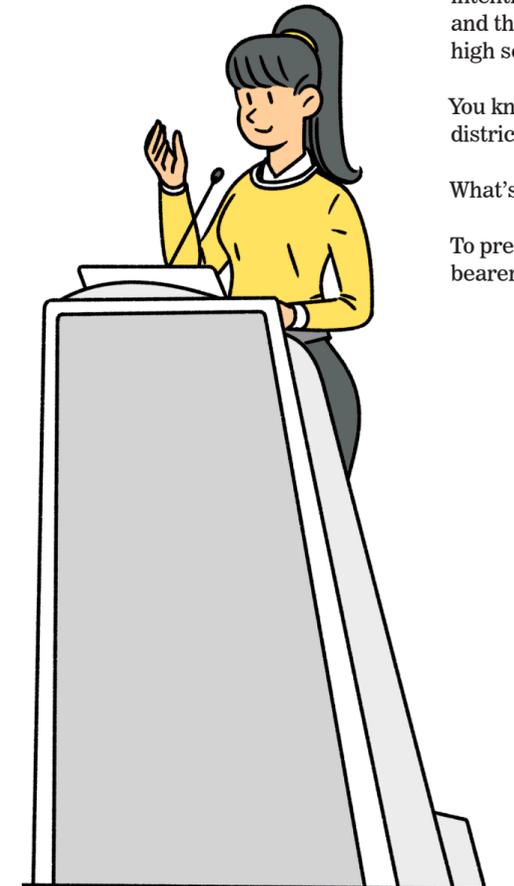
What's left?

To press forward. To be the standard-bearer for change.

School transformation starts in your own backyard and ripples forward to touch every corner of your community. And this is just the beginning. All around the country, people like you are taking up the mission and mantle of being the change they want to see, in the arena that affects us all the most: Education.

Rural communities. Urban communities. Suburban communities. Alone, these local transformations are a source of pride, a show of progress. But taken together? It's a real-time, true-to-life movement in the making.

Being part of a genuine, growing movement means many things, but most of all, it means that you're never alone. That you're part of something bigger than yourself. That what you do today will shape tomorrow—and affect those who come after you. As you're leading the education redesign in your community, others are doing the same in theirs.



## XQ AND YOU: CALLING ALL SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

If you're a school board member who's already working to transform your high schools or interested in getting started, please get in touch! We'd love to hear from you.

Write to us at  
[school-board@xqinstitute.org](mailto:school-board@xqinstitute.org)

Check out our XQ school design resources, including in-depth Knowledge Modules, inspiring videos, and infographics. All are free and open source.

Visit us at  
<https://xqsuperschool.org/resources/school-design>

## KNOW WHERE YOU STAND, TOGETHER

One of the most powerful things a school board can do is shine a spotlight on the need for change. You and your fellow board members can start by making a public commitment to take a close, thorough, and fair-minded look at your local high schools. It's time to join hands with your colleagues on the board, your superintendent, and others in the community to consider—together—what changes might be necessary.

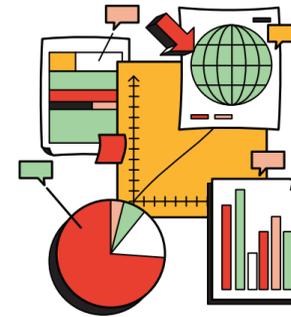
If we can share one piece of advice as you set out, whether as a school board member or an active community member, it's this: Commit to rethinking your public high schools in a very public way.

Whether you get the whole board involved or get the board to form a committee, whether the board starts alone or by inviting the community in from the beginning, make sure the process is crystal clear, including the steps you'll take to be sure everyone who's interested can get involved. Get the superintendent on board, as his or her cooperation will be important to making the process go smoothly. And always, always share the information you're relying on and where it came from. The more proactively transparent you and your colleagues are, the more trust you gain.

And remember, even if you start with a thorough review of the current situation, the listening and learning process is never finished. As a board, it's important to find ways to keep looking throughout the year and from one year to the next. Public engagement strategies like community conversations, focus groups, and even polling can help surface issues and find common ground, especially around contentious issues. A commitment to ongoing listening and learning helps ensure that your priorities are the community's priorities and that community ideas become school board solutions.

# Earn Consensus for Change, Every Day

## REACH OUT AND TAKE STOCK



### Explore the Data

Collect, examine, and share data on big issues like high school completion, college readiness, student proficiency, access to advanced courses, attendance, and discipline. Compare the numbers for all kids in the district, for particular groups of students, and for specific schools. Consider commissioning a systematic audit to get at underlying equity issues.

### Reach Out to Teachers and Principals

Ask high school teachers and principals to share their ideas with you on how high schools could be improved. What do they think is working? What needs attention? Which rules and regulations are getting in the way of improvement?

## SUMMARIZE AND STRATEGIZE TOGETHER

To get underway, consider setting a timeline for stock-taking that includes active outreach—listening and reporting back—to the broader community. Here are some things to put on your agenda.

### Engage Students

Talk with a broad range of students—not just the ones taking advanced courses or the student government leaders who are typically invited to present to the board. Ask them about their aspirations and their experiences in high school. Ask them about relationships: Do they feel that adults in their schools know them well and care about them?

### Consult Higher Ed and Employers

Meet with representatives of local two- and four-year colleges, employers, and others who have experience with recent grads. Ask them about the changing demands of work and higher education and how well local students are prepared. Urge them to get involved.



If your stock-taking process doesn't take place at regular board meetings, make sure to schedule regular reports of what you are learning during school board meetings. Leave plenty of time for comments, questions, ideas, and discussion. While you're at it, why not invite some of those you spoke with to address the board? That way, you're getting more people involved with school board proceedings. Remember, when people are engaged in identifying problems on the front end, they're much more likely to help solve them later on.



### Listen to Families

Hear from families about their experiences with local high schools—district schools, and also private, charter, and parochial schools if your community has them. Listen to parents who have chosen to homeschool their children. Ask all of them to share the challenges they have faced and their expectations for their children.

### Build Alliances

Invite people from youth organizations, after-school and sports programs, arts and cultural groups, and local faith and civil rights coalitions to the table. Ask them about the young people they work with every day, and what high schools can do to better to prepare them for the future.

Once the process is complete, stop to summarize and strategize together. Where do your local schools stand today? What did the process tell you about what needs to be done, not to mention the interest and capacity of various community institutions and organizations to play a role? The results might surprise you—and they will almost certainly surprise others. The simple fact is that there's room for improvement in every high school in the country, even those that are considered best-in-class. Similarly, even struggling high schools hold inspiring lessons and ideas.



# School Board Stories: ALYSSA HERNANDEZ

Rich Township High School District 227, Illinois

**“I was raised to be a servant leader and to serve wherever I thought I could make a difference. It’s exactly what motivated me to fill the need on my local school board.”**

Alyssa Hernandez was just 18 years old and a full-time high school senior when she was elected to her local school board. In fact, her tenure began just a few short weeks before graduation. She was inspired to run because her community of Park Forest, Illinois, wasn’t fully represented on the local school board. “The Rich East community had long felt

neglected and questioned the direction of the district, because of the lack of local representation. This was my call to action.” Alyssa thrives on giving back to students and truly understands the importance of a strong high school education. That’s why she feels so proud to hand out diplomas to students she has mentored. “Graduation each year

made the rest of the struggles worth it.” Another point of pride was the role she played in her school board’s nationwide search for a superintendent. “We hired an excellent superintendent from within our community. We found that the best candidate for the job was our assistant superintendent. She is a rockstar, and I was proud to help fulfill her vision.”



## WHERE DO YOU BEGIN?

So, based on what you've found, where do you begin? Every community is unique, but a close look at high schools will almost certainly place you at one of two starting points:

### Tackling Inequities From the Start

Your stock-taking process might have revealed glaring problems for certain groups of students—for example, for those attending schools in particular neighborhoods or for low-income students and students of color more generally. Or you might have seen evidence of neglect—schools without sufficient books or computers, rundown facilities, or overcrowded classrooms. If that's the case, you and your board colleagues may choose to start by addressing those inequities head-on with decisive action. Addressing these inequities is important in its own right. But, especially where there is more suspicion than trust, it may also be an important step in building the trust and relationships necessary to mount and sustain a broader, community-wide school redesign process.

### Mounting a School Redesign Effort

Your stock-taking process might have uncovered evidence that your high schools weren't working very well in general. Perhaps school attendance is steady, but students complain about being bored in the classroom. Perhaps students are graduating, but too many aren't confident about putting together a plan for college or future careers. Perhaps there's just a certain staleness to the educational approach, and a feeling that your schools need to be doing much more to engage, challenge, and uplift students and the community. If that's the case, you and your board colleagues can begin immediately to rally your community around high school redesign.

# Forge a Path That's Right for Your Community

## EQUITY AND INNOVATION GO TOGETHER

The vast majority of today's high schools—even the good ones—simply aren't designed to provide a college- and career-ready education to every single student. Addressing equity problems means looking closely at how high schools are organized, what and how students learn, and what schools expect all their graduates to know and be able to do. It means asking hard questions about why some students aren't getting the education they need, and what it's going to take to change those patterns. Most communities that choose equity as a starting point will therefore also want to launch a high school redesign effort.

Similarly, in a high quality redesign process, innovation alone will not be enough: you'll need to put equity at the center of everything you do.

Equity and innovation go hand in hand. What differs is the order in which you do things, the priority you give to certain schools or groups of students where inequities are stark, and the level of effort needed to build trust among students and families who have been poorly served by existing high schools.

### EQUITY vs. EQUALITY

Equity is a deceptively simple word, behind which stands a deep and complex concept. In public education, equity is about each and every student getting what they need in order to progress and ultimately succeed in postsecondary education and adult life.

Too often, "equity" is confused with "equality," which typically means every student getting equal resources, regardless of their circumstances. Equality is important, too, and glaring educational inequalities are often easy to spot. You may have seen inequalities in small vs. overcrowded classes, advanced vs. low-level coursework, modern vs. outdated facilities, or counselors and other helping professionals. You may have seen inequalities, too, in discipline data suggesting different punishments for certain groups of students for similar infractions.



## ACHIEVING EQUITABLE RESULTS

For communities, achieving equitable results means high schools that meet every student where they are, as individuals, and make sure they get what they need to succeed in postsecondary education and adult life. Yes, all students need excellent instruction, engaging learning, encouragement, access to vital services and a full range of opportunities, and more. But some students need more of those things than others from their school community.

To catch up with their peers, for example, students who enter high school behind may need extra instruction in the form of longer school days or perhaps extra instruction on weekends or during the summer. Similarly, those who live in particularly challenging circumstances may need extra counseling or mental health supports. Sadly, though, instead of providing these extras, today's high schools often provide the least to exactly the students who need the most.



# LEADING FOR EQUITY

- 1. Make sure your goal for students is clear: all students on a path to college and careers. All young people need and deserve to graduate from high school ready for postsecondary education, even if they're not immediately college bound. That's the promise of public education. And it's more important today than ever.**
- 2. Ground your efforts in evidence and data. Share the numbers and other information publicly, discuss them in school board meetings, and make sure all data are easily understood.**
- 3. Make sure schools get the help they need to build commitment and capacity. Reversing inequity requires profound changes in how high schools operate. To carry out this difficult work, educators will need help: leadership, training, and resources.**
- 4. Build trust among students and families. A history of inequity might mean some people don't believe that change is possible, or that the school district really cares. Both the board and the schools need to work hard to overcome that by engaging openly and inviting community participation.**

Don't think for a minute that tackling inequities will be easy because, after all, it's about fairness. It turns out that fairness is often in the eye of the beholder.

Almost every change you make will threaten somebody's established interests: a teacher who might prefer to continue teaching just the "easy" kids; a powerful parent who thinks that keeping his daughter's AP physics class small is

a right; a low-wage employer who thinks higher standards for all will threaten her supply of willing workers.

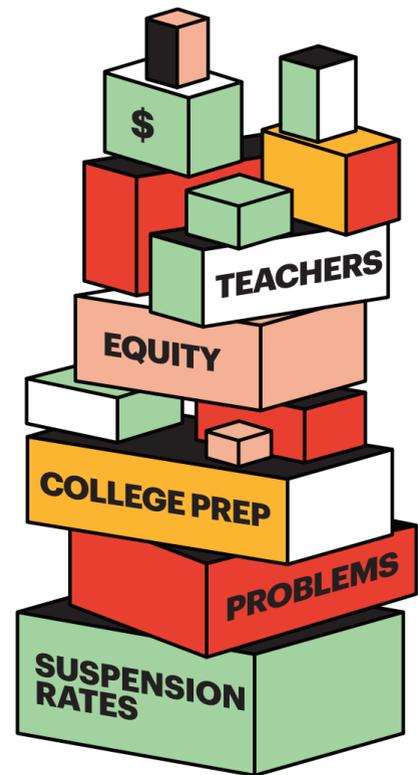
But remember, for every one of these, there are usually many others who will cheer you on—though not always loudly. Teachers who got into teaching to help even the poorest children succeed. Parents who value diversity and don't want their children to grow up in a world

riddled with inequities. And employers whose biggest problems aren't maintaining a supply of low-skilled labor but finding enough people who are highly skilled.

A committed school board can provide the leadership a community needs to navigate these and the many other challenges inherent in moving toward educational equity.



# ASSEMBLE AN ADVISORY COMMITTEE



If you decide to start by tackling equity issues, the school board will probably need to craft and pass a resolution making its intent clear, then work with the superintendent on goals, timelines, and a process for getting there. Encourage high schools to get involved by assembling advisory committees composed of parents, students, youth-serving organizations, and other community institutions to help them identify root causes and fashion effective solutions. You may want to assemble such a group district-wide to help you monitor and assess progress.

**You might choose to work on one piece of the problem at a time across all of your high schools. If, for example, your review found egregious differences in access to college prep and advanced courses, or in suspension and expulsion rates, you might set some goals there and ask all of your high schools to focus there first.**

**Similarly, if you found unusually high teacher (and possibly also leadership) turnover or high teacher absenteeism in some**

**of your schools but not others, with the result that some students were taught mostly by novices, you might choose to tackle that problem immediately.**

**Or the board could lay out the range of inequities you uncovered and ask your high schools to make their own choices about what order in which to tackle them.**

## EQUITY RESOURCES

To learn more about how high schools can serve all groups of students equitably, check out these organizations.

- Low-Income Students and Students of Color National Equity Project**  
<https://nationalequityproject.org>
- The Education Trust**  
<https://edtrust.org>

**Diplomas Now**  
<https://diplomasnow.org>

**Internationals Network for Public Schools**  
<http://internationalsnps.org>

**English Learners Center for Applied Linguistics**  
<http://www.cal.org>

**Center for English Language Learners at the American Institutes of Research**  
<https://www.air.org>

**Migration Policy Institute**  
<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/topics/education>

**Internationals Network for Public Schools**  
<https://internationalsnps.org>

**Students with Disabilities National Center for Educational Outcomes**  
<https://nceo.info>

**National Center for Learning Disabilities**  
<https://www.nclld.org>



# REPLACE OUTMODED EXPECTATIONS

We know that the future isn't waiting for anything or anyone. We also know that in the rapid-paced, 21st century economy, good is no longer good enough. If you and your school board colleagues don't want to settle for high schools that were designed a century ago, you'll

want to launch some sort of a school redesign process to replace outmoded expectations of what high school should look like with a new set of ideas for what high school can be. You won't be the first community to head in this direction.

## Vista, CA

In Vista, California, **Vista High School** is transforming itself from a large, traditional high school into one where each student is engaged and empowered. Everything about this 2,700-student high school is being rethought to make learning more personal and more relevant. The school is organized into "houses," each with a team of five teachers, so students can develop trusting relationships with faculty and one another. New courses help students better understand themselves and the world in which they live, and a special "challenge" course encourages students to explore, analyze, debate, and research ethical responses to global problems inspired by the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Vista is preparing its graduates to be 21st century activists, conscious of their power to transform their own lives and the lives of others.

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## Cleveland, OH

In Cleveland, Ohio, a group of innovators from education, local industry, museums, and higher education came together to design a STEM focused school in the heart of a community that was losing its population and had one of the highest dropout rates in the country. Ten years later, **MC2 STEM High School** and its two primary partners, Cleveland State University and General Electric, are using the city as the campus with a curriculum based entirely on project-based learning. The school pulls in experts, internships, and resources from more than 85 local industry and advocacy groups to help prepare students to work in and for the community. Students pursue semester-long, interdisciplinary, theme-based projects that integrate Ohio's state standards and reflect current industry needs. The atmosphere of innovation empowers students to direct their own learning.

## Grand Rapids, MI

In Grand Rapids, Michigan, students at the new **Grand Rapids Public Museum School** treat the entire community as their classroom, with the museum and city archive as a home base. The high school's philosophy stems from a simple idea: immerse students in learning experiences that are deeply rooted in their own hometown. The curriculum focuses on big issues related to sustainability, technology, and design explored through a local lens—the history, culture, economy, and ecology of the Grand Rapids region.

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# IT'S NOT JUST THE NATION'S BIG CITIES

## Elizabethton, TN

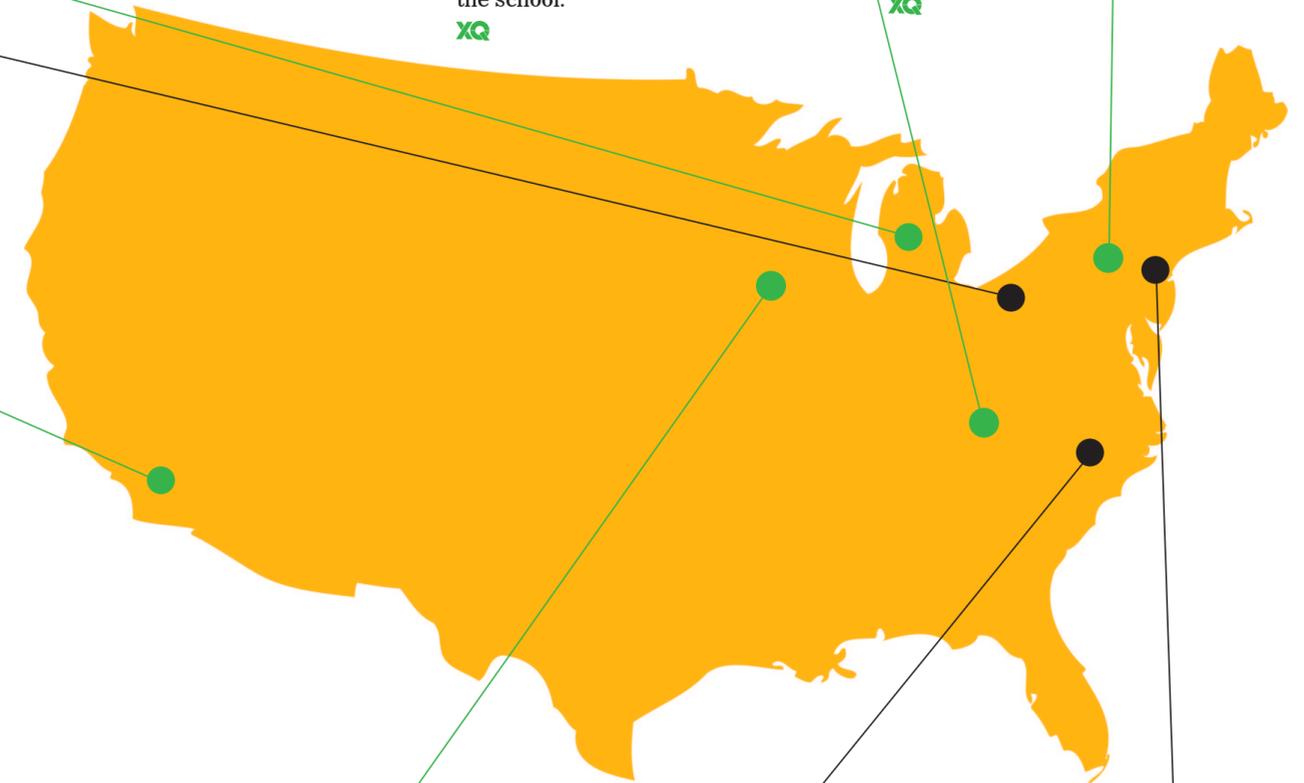
In Elizabethton, Tennessee, students are actively contributing to the redesign of their high school and the revitalization of their hometown. With support from their teachers and the local school board, students designed a new initiative, the Bartleby Program, through which students take on community improvement projects and develop their entrepreneurial skills. Recognizing the importance of student voice, the local school board added a student member who provides direct input on key decisions. The success of the Bartleby Program has spurred **Elizabethton High** to begin infusing an ethos of purposeful learning through every dimension of the school.

XQ

## Endicott, NY

In Endicott, New York, a former industrial town that was once home to IBM and Endicott-Johnson, school district and local leaders came together to look to the future of their community. The result was **Tiger Ventures**, a high school and incubator space in one, where students pursue their goals for college and careers while working alongside local start-ups. This alternative school collaborates with businesses, arts groups, and a nearby state university to provide immersive, project-based learning experiences. It's becoming an epicenter for local revitalization and a pipeline for the entrepreneurs of tomorrow.

XQ



## Cedar Rapids, IA

In Cedar Rapids, Iowa, leaders in three school districts came together with leaders in local government, non-profit organizations and local businesses to create **Iowa BIG**, which attracts students from across the region to learn by taking on projects that benefit their community.

XQ

## North Carolina

In North Carolina, an independent, statewide organization—North Carolina New Schools—provided support and assistance for statewide expansion of Early College High Schools and other innovative high school models.

## New York, NY

Between 2002 and 2008, leaders in New York City created more than 200 new high schools, replacing old, low-functioning schools with smaller, more personalized high schools designed by teams of educators and community partners. Independent research has shown that these new, smaller schools are considerably more effective in helping students to graduate ready for the future.

# Launching a Redesign Process



## HERE ARE SOME TIPS FOR GETTING STARTED

### Visit a few redesigned high schools.

When your only frame of reference is how high schools have looked in the past, it's sometimes hard even to imagine what they could be. So consider front loading your process with visits to some high schools that look very different. Take as many people as you can afford to take—teachers, principals, students, parents, community organizations—and share what you learn broadly. Here are a few candidate schools for your consideration, but don't feel obliged to stick to our list. Ask around to learn if there are others in your region. And be sure to check our website at [xqsuperschool.org](https://xqsuperschool.org) for a complete list of XQ Schools and other schools on the move.



At **High Tech High's** six schools in **San Diego, California**, high-quality student work is on display everywhere. Field studies, community service, academic internships, and consultation with outside experts connect students' learning to the world beyond school. Students are encouraged to take risks with their learning and to use their mistakes as opportunities to develop resilience and persistence. High Tech's elementary, middle, and high schools share a common intellectual mission and commitment to deeper learning. The rigorous curriculum meets admission requirements of the University of California, and 98% of graduates go to college, most of them enrolling in four-year institutions. <https://www.hightechhigh.org>



In **Washington, D.C.**, the **Washington Leadership Academy** offers four years of computer science to every student, along with opportunities to learn through virtual reality. WLA places a strong emphasis on leadership to prepare graduates to take an active role in digital-age civic life. Students can take electives from part-time instructors with specific, hard-to-find skills in fields such as programming and robotics. And teachers leverage digital tools to personalize learning, tailoring instruction to each student's interests and needs while tracking each student's mastery of rigorous standards. <http://www.washingtonleadershipacademy.org> **XQ**

### **Bard** Early Colleges

**Bard Early Colleges** is a frontrunner in providing high school students access to college level courses, particularly low-income students and students of color. Bard encourages students to value learning, question assumptions, engage in reasoned debate, and strengthen their own voices. Graduates earn both their high school diplomas and associate degrees, with up to two years of transferable college credit. A strong focus on analytical reading and writing and an approach to instruction based on the Socratic seminar inspires students to become leaders across disciplines. With schools located in New York City, Baltimore, Cleveland, and Newark, Bard Early Colleges are increasing college access, affordability, and completion. <http://www.bard.edu/earlycollege>



In **Indianapolis, Indiana**, students at **Purdue Polytechnic High School**—part of the city's Innovation Schools Network—are getting prepared for the high-skill, high-wage STEM jobs of the future. At PPHS, students learn by doing, including through industry-focused projects and design challenges that combine rigorous academics and applied skills. Personal learning coaches help students create a customized daily schedule that meets their unique educational needs. And every graduate has a pathway to postsecondary education and training, including an option for direct admission to Purdue Polytechnic Institute. <https://pphs.purdue.edu> **XQ**



## Decide on an approach and initial scale.

Regardless of the size of your district, you will want to think hard about the scale of your redesign effort. Do you want to get activity underway in all of your high schools simultaneously? Would you prefer to start small, with only one or two? And what about approach? Do you want to open up a design competition, allowing teams from every school to compete, or something narrower? This is something you will want to talk through carefully with the superintendent, especially given that design teams will need considerable support.

## Think hard about how to structure the needed support.

The XQ website includes lots of resources on high school design and redesign. We invite you to use it as a toolbox of videos, infographics, podcasts, and Knowledge Modules. We made them for you!

### XQ RESOURCES Explore These and More



#### Knowledge Modules

Imagining high school takes a lot of hard work. And deep knowledge. These refreshed modules offer a mix of cutting-edge academic research and inspiration to help anyone think boldly about both the possibilities and the realities of rethinking high school.

<https://xqsuperschool.org/knowledge-modules>

#### Facts and Interactives

XQ has created three fact-filled infographics that may be useful in your campaign: Who Succeeds and Why?, College & Career Readiness for All?, and Preparing Students for the Workplaces of the Future.

<https://xqsuperschool.org/resources/get-the-facts>



#### Expert Podcasts

Listen to conversations with transformational leaders in education. You'll hear inspiring examples, stories, and lessons learned from across the country.

<https://xqsuperschool.org/resources/expert-series>

#### Design Kit

Our XQ Design Kit is packed with everything you need to launch your community on the journey of high school design. To order yours, write to us at [info@xqinstitute.org](mailto:info@xqinstitute.org).

#### High School & the Future of Work: A Guide for State Policymakers

Learn how effective state policy leadership can set the stage for local high school redesign and improvement.

<https://xqsuperschool.org/future>

## Get a community redesign process underway.

You can structure your process in a variety of ways. You might, for example, get a variety of ideas percolating—and a variety of new players engaged—with a community-wide visioning process. The ideas hatched—and relationships made—there can excite interest in the community and serve as fodder for a more sophisticated design process later on. Or you can get right to work with a design process or design competition. Think about how to organize and support the process. Through the high school office of your district? A respected nonprofit or community foundation? A local college? A new organization? The right support will make all the difference in your ultimate success.

## Establish design principles or a design framework to help give the process structure.

Every effective high school is built on a set of design principles that define how it will operate day to day, how members of the school community will work together, and how everyone in the school will pursue common goals and priorities.

Design principles are aspirational, but they're also practical. For example, a school that sees personalized learning as fundamental will also see that the principle is meaningless without high-quality teaching and learning, informative assessments, and the right technology tools in place. Similarly, a carefully structured academic program will succeed only if students are able to cultivate strong, trusting relationships with adults and their fellow students. Those practical pieces may need to be developed carefully and implemented over time, but articulating the principle helps make personalized learning an ongoing priority.

The following “design principles” were developed by XQ with help from leading educators, experts, and activists. They're here for your school community to borrow, in whole or in part, as you see fit.

### XQ DESIGN PRINCIPLES Consider, Discuss, and Make Them Your Own



#### Teaching For Deeper Learning

Innovative approaches to curriculum and teaching that use real-world, interdisciplinary learning experiences to enable students to develop and apply deep content knowledge and complex skills.

#### Personalized Learning Powered by Tech

Leveraging technology to tailor learning to the unique needs of each student, as well as to actively assess student progress and provide tools that help students build the skills and knowledge they need to thrive in college, career and life.

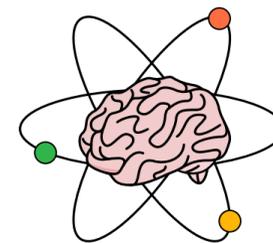


#### Youth Empowerment, Voice and Choice

An approach to teaching, learning, and overall school culture that focuses on truly getting to know students, both inside and outside the classroom, and giving all students opportunities to build their identities as learners and develop the capacity for agency and autonomy.

#### Community Partnerships

Powerful partnerships—with community and cultural institutions, business and industry, higher education, nonprofit organizations, and health and service providers—that provide support, real-world experiences, and networking opportunities for students, enabling them to envision and set goals for the future.



#### A Broad Vision of Student Success

Goals and outcomes that integrate academic and social-emotional learning and enable students to become masters of all fundamental literacies, holders of foundational knowledge, original thinkers for an uncertain world, generous collaborators for tough problems, and learners for life.

#### Rethinking Traditional Systems

Non-traditional, flexible uses of time, technology, space, place, financial resources, and roles to increase the effectiveness of teaching and learning.



## Workbook 4. COME TOGETHER TO IMAGINE THE FUTURE

High school redesign is meant to be a time of exploration, innovation, and creativity. How do you take your community's natural resources, talents, and interests and leverage them into educational excellence for all students? This workbook is meant to help your schools and their communities come together to imagine what could be.

### 1. Community Values

**When it comes to our community specifically, what are three values that have significant importance and unique value?**

For example, if your community is located in an ecologically unique area, a value may be sustainability or environmentalism; if your community brings together a wide variety of people from different backgrounds and ethnicities, a value may be inclusion; if your community is in a revitalizing area, a value may be innovation or, perhaps, historical and cultural preservation. The options are limitless and there are no right answers.

The three values that differentiate our community and matter to us are:

**A** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**B** \_\_\_\_\_  
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\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**C** \_\_\_\_\_  
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## 2. Community Assets

**Again, when it comes to our community specifically, what are three specific assets or resources we already have?**

Some potential examples might be: a growing business district or industry; rich cultural traditions; tight-knit sense of community; access to unique points of interest; a diverse population; an active music scene.

The three “resources” or “assets” that differentiate our community are:

**A** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**B** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**C** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Now let’s brainstorm how education, specifically at the high school level, could enhance these natural assets or resources.**

For example, why might local employers or civic organizations care about what’s happening at the local high school?

The three natural assets could be enhanced by local high school education because:

**A** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**B** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**C** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**And reciprocally, what could our local high school stand to gain from our community’s assets and resources?**

For example, how might high school teachers and students stand to gain from collaborating with local employers or civic organizations?

Our local high school might gain from working more closely with our community’s pre-existing assets and resources because:

**A** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**B** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**C** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## 3. Putting It All Together

**Reflect on our community values and assets. In the section below, describe a school that lives up to those unique principles and makes the most of those unique resources. How do the two work together to make a more engaging, effective, and inspiring place of learning?**

There’s no right or wrong answer here. But it works best to almost “paint a picture.” When you envision your ideal school in your home neighborhood, what do you see? What are students doing? What do you hear? Redesigning high school is about embracing creativity.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**There—you’ve done it. You’ve taken your first pass at high school redesign. It’s not just for experts; it’s approachable to all. That’s because, at its best, high school redesign doesn’t have to be abstruse; it’s meant to be accessible.**

**The beauty of high school redesign is that anyone can participate in the process—and the process improves with everyone’s involvement.**



# THE ROAD TO REIMAGINE HIGH SCHOOL

## How to take XQ local and start a movement in your community.

1.

### ANNOUNCE A CHALLENGE

Make it ambitious, inspiring, and different. XQ called on education inventors, students, teachers, parents, business people, youth workers, artists, entrepreneurs, and everyone in between to ask themselves what high school could be.



2.

### MOVE PEOPLE TO ACTION

Incentives can help move people to act. XQ offered \$10 million to the five best high school designs. Almost 700 teams of 10,000 people from 50 states and 4,000 communities went through a 7-month "Designer of Learning" process to complete applications.

For XQ, it was funding, but it could also be time, resources, or capital to help them make their high school dreams a reality.

3.

### HELP TEAMS DREAM SMART

Put equity, innovation, and excellence at the center of it. XQ created a plethora of free resources to help the teams. Our 13 XQ Knowledge Modules offer a mix of cutting-edge academic research and inspiration.

Our XQ School Design Kit takes teams through the design process, and our Expert Series podcasts delve into the challenges teams often grapple with.

4.

### VISUALIZE THE PROCESS

Map out the steps and a timeline so people can see how to get involved and where the work will lead them. XQ created a three-phase process that turned conventional school planning on its head:

#### Discover

**Explore the landscape:** Begin by listening to young people, studying the latest science on brain development and how people learn, and understanding the community a school will serve.

#### Design

**Invent a school:** Create a school where mission and culture, teaching and learning, student engagement, and community partnerships come together in an audacious, original design.

#### Develop

**Produce a practical plan:** Produce a plan that considers all the realities involved in launching a school, from staffing and budget to innovative uses of time, space, and technology.

6.

### CHOOSE WISELY

Assemble a diverse group of well-respected people to narrow down the applicants. XQ used a comprehensive rubric to help 44 judges select the most promising designs. Judges were a diverse group, spanning the political, technology, and education spectrum.

7.

### REWARD THE BOLD ONES

Choose designs that change people's thinking about high school. XQ selected teams that listened to students, involved the community, emphasized equity, and challenged the status quo.

In the end, XQ was so impressed by the caliber of the applications that we awarded an additional 5 grants for a total of 10 teams across 8 states to help them turn their Super School designs into reality.

8.

### NO WINNERS OR LOSERS

Honor everyone who gives their time, energy, and effort to redesigning high schools. XQ continues to be out on the road, listening to people and inspiring communities. To date, the XQ Super School Bus has visited 66 cities in 32 states and held 76 student roundtables.

Deep community engagement will continue to be a core part of the work XQ does to ensure a continuous cycle of listening and growth.

5.

### MEET PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE

Spread the word about rethinking high school far and wide. XQ advertised the competition on billboards, TV, radio, and social media. We drove the XQ Super School Bus to communities around the country, listening to students and bringing people together.

XQ's online matching directory helped people find teams in their area and helped teams find local participants and supporters.

9.

### MORE SCHOOLS, MORE ENGAGEMENT

Months after announcing the first 10 Super Schools, XQ found that many unchosen teams had continued working, even without the award. Some had progressed and improved on their ideas, inspiring us so much we made more grants to honor their persistence.

10.

### XQ SUPER SCHOOLS

Today, the XQ Super School Cohort is a network of 19 schools on their journey toward becoming Super Schools. Together these schools are a beacon for the nation, shining a light on a brighter future for all students.

# GETTING AND KEEPING THE COMMUNITY INVOLVED

Whether you're building a base of supporters for high school redesign or keeping them involved over the coming years, ongoing dialogue is important. Here are some things your school board and superintendent can do to engage key constituencies in your community.

## 1. Conduct regular surveys of high school students and families.

Your local high schools might already be conducting student and parent surveys; if not, initiate them. The findings can be a jumping off point for high school redesign.

## 2. Establish a community partnership among local businesses.

When local business leaders get involved in improving high schools, great things can happen for both students and teachers. A business coalition can coordinate internships and mentoring for students, create paid work experiences, and connect teachers with opportunities to co-design community service and workplace-learning projects.

## 3. Join forces with local colleges and universities.

Form a local council to ask questions about how well local institutions are preparing your students. What does it take to succeed to and through college? What are the skills employers are looking for from those with associate or bachelor degrees? What do university students tell you are the most useful lessons they learned in high school, that they lean on the most while continuing their educations? These aren't just interesting questions. They reveal informative insights about what's most valuable for preparing students for success in college, careers, and life—the kind of insights that can spur real rethinking.



**30 STUDENTS  
X 1 TEACHER  
X 1 SUBJECT,  
REPEAT FOR  
6 PERIODS.**

**NO MORE.**

Unchanged for nearly 100 years, the rigid rules that govern high school education in America are stifling the innovations of our best educators, keeping community institutions and local businesses that could provide powerful learning opportunities at bay, and leaving our young people underprepared for the world that awaits them after high school.

Over the past two decades, our elementary and middle schools have gotten a lot better. But outmoded systems have kept high schools stuck in too many communities. We've gone from the Model T to the Tesla, from the typewriter to the touchscreen, from the rotary phone to the smartphone, but very little has changed in our high schools.

That changes with you.

You already have everything it takes—the commitment, the intentionality, the sense of possibility—to jumpstart the high school redesign process in your own community. Imagining high school takes hard work, deep knowledge, and an unwavering sense of optimism in the future. All of which you've got, in spades. As you collaborate with others to rethink what's possible in your community, we invite you to use XQ materials to help you on your design journey. To think through issues. To answer questions. To pre-empt pitfalls and concerns.

All XQ materials are designed to make participation accessible to anyone who's motivated to get involved. Educators, of course—from your fellow school board members to teachers, principals, youth workers, college professors, community leaders, and partners who work with young people every day. They're also designed to help you engage high school students and their families, not to mention recent grads, parents of young children, business leaders, professionals, and others in your community. All those people have valuable perspectives, ideas, and resources to bring to the table. It's up to you to gather them and inspire them.



**ON  
YOUR  
MARK,  
GET SET,  
CHANGE!**





# About XQ

## Our commitment to rethinking high schools.

XQ is a growing and passionate network of educators, students, families, and civic-minded citizens reimagining high school education in the United States. Our mission is to fuel America's collective creativity to transform high school so every student succeeds—no matter their race, gender, or zip code. We want to see that change underway in every high school and in every community, in all 14,000+ school districts.

XQ launched in September 2015 as an open call to the nation to rethink and redesign the American high school. More than 10,000 people from all 50 states answered our call with unique ideas for innovative, student-centered

high schools that prepare young people for tomorrow's world. XQ has pledged more than \$130 million to create Super Schools that make those visions a reality.

Super Schools are just one element to XQ's work. We offer free, open source tools and materials so that every community can rethink their high schools. And because we believe that great high schools for all are a hallmark of a great nation, we are carrying that message into homes, schools, and neighborhoods across the country to tell stories that show how innovative and creative high schools can and should be.



For more information, visit [www.xqsuperschool.org](http://www.xqsuperschool.org), follow us at @XQAmerica, or text FUTURE to 225568

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