High School Redesign Gets Presidential Lift

From left, Annie Kostrubanic, Elise Terner, and Ben Rich enjoy their time together while editing a podcast for a Spanish honors class at Beverly High in Massachusetts. School officials asked students to play a big role in conceiving and carrying out new initiatives.

—Charlie Mahoney/Prime for Education Week

Spending proposal includes $300 Million for innovation contest

By Caralee J. Adams

A flurry of good news appeared on the high school front this winter. Graduation rates were at their highest mark in nearly 40 years, record numbers of students were taking and passing Advanced Placement exams, and more high schools than ever were offering college credit through dual-enrollment programs.
On top of all that, President Barack Obama *applauded* high school redesign efforts in his State of the Union address and encouraged districts to look to successful models for inspiration. Last week, he followed up with a request in his fiscal 2014 budget proposal for a new, $300 million competitive-grant program.

Recognition is widespread that high schools need to change to engage students and prepare them for the workforce of the future. That push goes back decades, but now momentum is accelerating, and talk is not of reform, but redesign.

"What the president's remarks show me is that progress is being made and there are new models for high school that are emerging and producing results. The federal government is saying let's take advantage of that and step in and help," said Bob Wise, the president of the Washington-based Alliance for Excellent Education, which advocates high school improvement.

While all that attention is welcome, including at the federal level, some in the education community worry whether the expectations for change come with enough resources and flexibility to allow schools to tailor the redesigns to their communities. Others think the emphasis on the STEM subjects is too narrow and bigger policy shifts toward competency-based learning need to occur before real change can happen.

Junior Marisa Jaynes, right, helps Meghan Cafferty, also a junior, during an Algebra 2 class. Data indicate that innovations the Massachusetts school undertook have led to improvements in achievement.

—Charlie Mahoney/Prime for Education Week

Still, experts encourage schools to look at evidence-based approaches and emerging research on what works at the secondary level.
"There is a realization that our high schools were designed for another time and era," said Joe DiMartino, the founder of the Center for Secondary School Redesign, based in West Warwick, R.I., and the author of Personalizing the High School Experience for Each Student. But, he added, "making changes to high schools has been proven very difficult. Tradition is dying hard."

Sean Gallagher, the principal of Beverly High School, just north of Boston, says what American schools have in their favor over other countries with more centralized systems is the ability to be creative, and that should be embraced when schools reinvent themselves. Administrators may operate under similar premises, but when dealing with unique students, parents, and communities, change is going to look different from school to school.

"You need to craft it to make it your own," Mr. Gallagher said of the initiatives and models for high school redesign. "It would be great if there were just one easy thing to do—then everyone would be doing it."

Too Much STEM?

The president's fiscal 2014 budget request aims through the competitive grant to help high schools better prepare students for postsecondary education and the workplace and to focus on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

The grants are envisioned as partnerships between districts and nonprofit groups, higher education, or business. Districts that serve high-poverty students and rural school systems would be given priority.

The National Association of Secondary School Principals commended the president for highlighting high schools in the budget, but the Reston, Va.-based organization is dismayed by the use of a proposed competitive-grant approach over formula funding because it "widens the gap between those districts with and without resources."

The organization also expressed concern about a focus on the STEM subjects, without a similar emphasis on literacy in secondary schools. "While we fully endorse STEM education, we fear that a failure to support the development of foundational literacy skills will condemn any other initiative to failure," said Executive Director JoAnn Bartoletti in a statement.
Mr. Wise said he is encouraged that President Obama is sending a message about the need for alternative models.

"I think it's worthwhile to have some competitive dollars out there because that's how you encourage people to look at innovation," he said. "Formulas tend to support what you've been doing. You need both."

Other parts of the budget plan, including funds for school turnaround grants and STEM education, have the potential to benefit high school redesign as well, added Mr. DiMartino.

Testing Barriers

Several models for innovative high schools are popping up across the country, alongside traditional ones. But the assessment policies and practices of the education system haven't adapted to accommodate major structural change, Mr. DiMartino of the Center for Secondary School Redesign said.

"One thing that bothers me about a federal approach is that when you think of personalizing a school, and then you assess [students] all on the same test, that doesn't actually allow for them to use their enthusiasm," he said.

For schools to truly be able to change, there needs to be a move away from seat time and testing to new approaches to engage students, he said, and to competency-based learning that uses a variety of assessment instruments, such as student exhibitions of their learning.

Efforts to reinvent high schools date back decades. One of those was the NASSP's 1996 release of the "Breaking Ranks" framework for school improvement and an updated version of the initiative in 2003. It outlined three core areas that must be addressed for student performance to improve: collaborative leadership; personalization of the school environment; and curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Some schools have adopted those strategies. At the NASSP's annual conference, those that have been successful showcase how a personalized approach to learning can have positive effects on students.

Much has changed in the world, and new research is showing what's effective, but education has been slow to respond to that research and technology, Mr. DiMartino said. "We need to
rethink high school altogether," he said. "I don't think there is a model that will work in every community, but there are some basic tenets."

Common Themes

Many agree on some common principles that are providing direction for high schools as they map out what change will look like for students.

• Personal connections and engagement: There has been a move away from large traditional high schools to smaller personalized ones (or at least teams within a big school) where students can feel a sense of belonging.

Administrators are finding when they make an effort to seek input from students, the students often are more connected to the school and less likely to drop out. Through advisory classes or cohort groupings, redesign often includes an emphasis on building close relationships so students know a caring adult in the building.

• Leveraging technology and data for individualized learning: Personalization in learning, through the use of technology, means students can move at their own pace and feel a sense of empowerment in their education. "Technology is a game changer for high schools," said Mr. Wise. With real-time data and online resources, teachers can customize the curriculum to make it more relevant for students.

• Rigor: To help students prepare for the challenges of college and the workplace, high school redesign often emphasizes rigor and academic supports to help all students succeed. That may mean ramping up Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs. The common standards will require deeper learning and holding high school students to higher standards for college and career readiness.

• Extended learning opportunities: High school students can get excited about school when they see the relevance of what they are learning work in the real world. All students at the School Without Walls in the District of Columbia, for example, are required to do an unpaid internship and 100 hours of community service. Most earn college credits through a dual-enrollment program with George Washington University.

"It's the power of place," Sheila Mills Harris, the director of the GW Early College Program, said of bringing students on campus for classes. "High student students are ready for it. ...
They are looking for more of a challenge, to expand their knowledge, to delve into areas they are truly interested in."

William Corrin, the deputy director for K-12 education policy with MDRC, a New York City-based research organization, said some schools can manage to transform on their own, but it usually takes support from partner organizations or grants. "There are multiple pathways to get there," he said. "The priority for schools is to think about how to put in evidence-based approaches."

While the federal focus on redesign places a sense of urgency to see results quickly, Mr. Corrin cautions that successful redesign takes time. "We live in a world where there is pressure to see outcomes for kids change in a year," he said. "The needs are pressing, but reform doesn't happen overnight, ... it requires three or four years. It's a combination of time and patience."

Expectations have to be raised to get results, and businesses are pushing for high school improvement to pick up the pace, Mr. Wise said.

"I'm one of the most bullish in a town of political bears. I think some improvement is taking place already," he said, citing the increase in graduation rates. "It's not going to leap forward if we don't continue to support new models, innovation, and breaking the mold on how we've done things over the last 200 years.

"I see lot of different attitudes shifting markedly across the education spectrum, and folks are doing things they wouldn't have done a decade ago," he said. "A lot of that is because of new research; finally practice is bearing out, and policy is beginning to follow successful practice."