it takes a whole society
opening up the learning landscape
in the high school years

AN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY TO THE
NELLIE MAE EDUCATION FOUNDATION
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Too many young people in this country lack access to the kinds of vital, productive learning experiences that should enrich their lives and provide a foundation for adulthood.
**executive summary**

In an effort to improve our collective prospects for the future, we need to dramatically increase the number of young people who possess the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in postsecondary education, work and life. Today, too many young people in this country lack access to the kinds of vital, productive learning experiences that should enrich their lives and provide a foundation for adulthood. Part of the problem rests with an over-reliance on one institution – high school – to meet the full range of developmental needs. More to the point, patterns of attrition show that high school may actually choke the learning experience for a sizeable percentage of young people. Nearly one-third of the four million youth who enter high school each year will drop out, while another third will earn a high school diploma and seek work (often lacking solid work force or post-secondary skills).

Clearly, we face an urgent need to open up the learning landscape in America. Specifically, we need to move away from a standardized vision of learning during the high school years and overcome the tendency to view academic and applied learning in “either-or” terms. To do so, we need to create a richer fabric of learning opportunities for a diverse population of youth. The “we” in this reform extends beyond traditional academic resources. A much broader segment of society needs to collaborate to find the domains and means to engage our young people in meaningful learning. Only then can we provide growth experiences that focus our young people’s passion and energy.

**REDEFINING THE HIGH SCHOOL LEARNING EXPERIENCE**

Why is personal development so important during the high school years? This is the time when young people begin to set themselves on a path toward adulthood and forge what Erikson (1963, 1968)* described as an “enduring identity.” Literally, they test new waters by evaluating the culture at large and taking the first steps toward choosing a place in that culture. Ideally, they should be exposed to learning and growth opportunities that are rooted in active learning – opportunities marked by:

**Experimentation:** Ways to discern what to accomplish in life by exploring possibilities, interests, strengths and limitations.

**Commitment:** Understanding what will be required to achieve mastery in a specific endeavor.

Unfortunately, high school causes many of today’s young people to experience “school weariness” rather than the opportunity to prepare for the future.

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*All citations can be found in the Reference Section of the Full Report, available at www.nmerfoundation.org.*
future. In this monograph, I will describe why and how the shift from today’s reality to a more vital and productive learning experience should take place (see Rethinking the High School Experience on page 3). I will draw on my own and others’ research to:

- Enumerate and illustrate the attributes of good learning experiences;
- Discuss how to make these experiences more readily available, both within and outside the constraints of current institutional structures; and
- Examine how other countries conceptualize and arrange for learning during the high school years.

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE UNDERLYING PROBLEM
Quite simply, high school learning is too narrow, fragmented, isolated and abstract to meet an increasingly diverse range of young people’s developmental needs. Specifically, high school:

- Assumes college for all. Firmly entrenched in its century-old structure, high school learning remains oriented to preparing young people for four-year college. Yet, as Rothstein notes, only about “20 percent of all youth graduate high school fully prepared for academic college. That means 80 percent need other options and pathways.”

- Delivers a common curriculum. High school curricular structures have not adapted to what we now know about how young people learn best. Moreover, learning is not oriented to the diversity in young people’s strengths, interests, and life situations.

- Isolates young people. Not only does the physical structure of high school isolate young people from the larger world, so does the academic focus. Young people are not exposed to the wide range of roles, fields and disciplines that make up our occupational and civic culture. And the handful of disciplines that are emphasized are taught in a way that affords young people only a glimpse of what work in those (or any other) disciplines is like.

As a result, there is a kind of randomness in how young people move toward their futures. As they enter the final two years of high school, many youth are unclear about where they might fit in the larger world beyond their neighborhood and peer group. Young people are too often left on their own, without the guidance, solid information, and preparatory experiences to underpin good decisions. The problem can be especially acute for youth from working class families who may have less information – and less accurate information – than more advantaged peers about kinds of post-secondary learning, the range of occupations and the preparation needed for specific occupations.

WHAT GOOD LEARNING MEANS DURING THE HIGH SCHOOL YEARS
Young people learn by immersion and through direct experience, trial and error, practice and repetition. Therefore, good learning experiences should provide a somewhat challenging – albeit safe – transitional space. Also, recognizing that young people are at different places developmentally, good learning experiences should support a range of outcomes including:

Providing a bridge to the adult world. Introduce dimensions of the larger culture including occupations and work, types of communities, parts of the world, and social and political problems.

Reflecting real tasks with real consequences. Engage young people in genuinely useful work so they can experience a complete cycle of activity in a particular field.

Contributing to a community of practice. Enable participation in individual and team activity that leads to a collective goal.

Linking personal experience to something larger. Offer the opportunity to be immersed in social, moral and ethical issues at play in the larger culture.
**Extending autonomy and ownership.** Experience some degree of personal challenge that results in a developmental “stretch.”

**Drawing upon new capabilities.** Exercise new cognitive and social skills through experiences that may require multiple elements, emerging problems or more than one solution.

**INFUSING THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOOD LEARNING INTO HIGH SCHOOL**
Fortunately, the process of reconceptualizing schooling has already begun. Scores of individual high schools and some high school reform organizations are addressing how to use the developmental tasks and qualities of good learning to “unfreeze” high school as an institution. Some, for example, are partnering with teachers who have industry experience and expertise. At the same time, in a steadily maturing self-renewal effort, career and technical education has embraced a variety of promising approaches to young people’s learning.

Here are some of the ways these changes are unfolding:

**Refining the curriculum.** Specific high school networks such as Coalition for Essential Schools, well-known models such as High Tech High and Expeditionary Learning, along with lesser known high schools such as Washington, D.C.’s School Without Walls have incorporated selected innovative elements such as project-based learning and individualized learning projects into the standard high school experience.

**Blending academic and applied learning.** Based on the notion that learning in high school will remain “inert” as long as it stays inside the school walls, efforts are also underway to relocate a significant portion of learning experiences outside of school itself. This requires recruiting a variety of institutions and adult mentors to the educational process. The best known current example is the Big Picture schools where students spend two days per week in apprentice-like learning roles in adult work and service settings.

**Engaging vulnerable learners.** These efforts are designed to reignite an interest in learning among those who have been pushed out, dropped out or aged out of traditional learning settings. Activities often take place during non-school hours and emphasize applied learning in adult and community settings. Diploma Plus, in place in a number of cities across the country, includes learning and service in the community as a core element.

**Injecting career and technical education (CTE).** Based, in part, on a three-decade effort to reconceptualize CTE, Bottoms (2008) contends that the applied teaching strategies of CTE can be harnessed for broader high school reform efforts. In CTE, learning and producing are viewed in an integrated way. And increasingly, the concentration requirements and curricula has been updated to reflect industry-defined skills for changing occupations and occupational clusters – traditional areas such as electrical, machining, agriculture and criminal justice have given way to new areas such as medical technology, natural resources and computer-aided design. Most compelling, though,

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**common denominators of good learning**

Four elements unite the most prevalent reform efforts:
- Their specificity,
- Their depth,
- The diversity of experiences, and
- The fact that they take place in the actual physical, cultural, intellectual, civic and occupational world.
is the accumulating evidence that a vocational concentration in high school increases the likelihood of completing a rigorous academic core (Bottoms and Young, 2008).

Renewing youth apprenticeships. In an apprenticeship, the adult and youth are both active. They share responsibility for the tasks at hand, although each has a different role. The adult mentor imparts his or her knowledge and skills while the apprentice needs to display proficiency. The structures vary, ranging from a set number of hours per week to a more concentrated block of time such as full-time summer programs. To date, though, only about two percent of high school students have the opportunity to participate. This is due, in part, to the level of autonomy and control that stakeholders including teachers, local unions, and employers need to relinquish in order for the apprenticeship to be meaningful.

The positive impact of these changes is clear. Through work in these settings, young people begin to master distinct knowledge, skills, practices and habits and – along the way – acquire the social identity associated with that discipline or field. Often the setting itself provides ingredients for learning. With the curriculum embedded in practice and production, teaching and learning tend to reflect problems encountered in that discipline, and often reflect real-world constraints. While often demanding, its demands are graded, tied to young people’s deepening engagement and growing skill in a field or discipline. The stakes rise gradually.

These experiences are notable for the ways in which they attend to the developmental tasks and needs of the high school years. They build background knowledge, broaden young people’s vocational imagination, and deepen the foundation of experience that young people bring to later adolescence. The requirements of learning and working under complex, real world conditions help actualize new cognitive and social capacities. Young people’s efforts lead to tangible products or performances that are often genuinely needed by someone – a business, a community, a particular population. At the same time, young people are afforded some ownership of their learning experience.

Fostering good experiences: in and beyond major institutional systems

Today most learning settings and experiences are decentralized – and thereby are spread throughout the culture, across sectors and settings – making them hard to see and imagine as a coherent enterprise. They also remain largely invisible to public policy. Elevating these learning experiences so they become an explicit option for middle adolescence will require a concerted effort. Specifically, we need to place individual clusters of experience in a broader societal framework and make them cohesive, organized, accessible and integral to our societal life.

Some of the reform needs to address the basic assumptions and structures of high school so that the avenues for infusing the attributes of good learning experiences into high school policies and practices are clear and concrete. Adult institutions need to be equally thoughtful and innovative. Across settings and over time, adult institutions need to be responsible for creating a kind of scaffolding for growth – making room for individually appropriate pathways, assuring a complementary, graduated, but intentionally connected mixture of learning, exploring, producing and assessment experiences.

- These tasks will require collaboration, mutual learning and mutual recognition across a broad spectrum of sectors that rarely work together in American society.

- Deliberate efforts will be needed to build trust, from institution to institution, sector to sector. Also, efforts will be needed to forge working partnerships around particular sets and types of leaning experiences.

- Stakeholders will have to develop mechanisms for formally recognizing and validating non-school learning experiences; they will have to expand and alter existing certification frameworks; and develop at least some overlapping metrics for considering proficiency and growth.

In addition to an enriched learning landscape, there are clear financial benefits to this collaboration as well. When non-school stakeholders contribute physical resources
that schools cannot fund – such as studios, workshops, and tools that often feature specialized equipment and updated technology – the savings can be significant. As an example, the Rhode Island RiverzEdge Arts provides graphic design, photography, professional equipment and professional teaching artists that the local CTE program in Woonsocket could never afford to offer.

HOW OTHER COUNTRIES STRUCTURE LEARNING
Today, youth policy is more visible in Europe than in the U.S. As the following table shows, schools in a number of European countries emphasize a multi-dimensional set of learning supports, in many cases, non-formal learning practices that encourage individual choice and exploration. In some countries, there’s a common schooling experience until the end of 10th grade or age 16 at which point pathways diverge. Data varies but generally about ⅓ take an academic route, ⅓ a defined vocational route and the remainder a more mixed pathway.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Pathways Offered</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria, Denmark and Germany</td>
<td>Strong work-based learning supported by industry and technical community colleges</td>
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<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>Preparatory CTE beginning at age 12 with the option to apprentice at age 16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Less defined CTE system driven by civic themes such as running municipal recreation program or starting a temporary shelter for children</td>
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<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>Learning arrangements outside of school for part of the school day or school year</td>
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Moving forward: it takes a whole society
Truly meeting young people’s learning and developmental needs will require far more than a reconceptualized high school experience. It will require the wholehearted participation of a variety of institutions and sectors of society. A variety of institutions (and individuals) will have to learn to welcome and involve young people, and to share responsibility for their growth – businesses and non-profit organizations, cultural, scientific, arts and civic institutions, individual scientists, artists and craftspeople, training and apprenticeship councils, trade-specific groups and workforce development organizations, higher education and many others. And the more settings, the better.

Moving forward, several principles should guide how we recraft schooling for our youth:

- Individualized approaches to fostering knowledge and skill are more effective than one-size-fits-all approaches.
- Learning experiences rooted outside the school walls deliver valuable knowledge, skills and civic values that enable young people to transition to a complex, shifting adult world.
- Our youth is heterogeneous and cultivating diverse talents is critical to an interesting and enriching culture.
- Most importantly, institutions need to open up and adapt to young people, rather than leaving it up to young people to make their way – or not.