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## BACKGROUND

As our society and economy have evolved, calls for high school redesign have been made by a variety of factions. Wake County Public School System (WCPSS) administrators recognized a need for reform here as well, starting an investigation of the research and conducting discussions of possible improvements several years ago. They identified several approaches to increase the rigor and the relevance of coursework, and opportunities to build closer student-staff relationships. In 2003-04, eleven high schools moved to a 4x4 block schedule designed to support high school students in meeting new graduation requirements, provide more elective program and advanced class opportunities, provide more opportunities for students to re-take failed courses, and create smaller learning communities within the schools. In 2004-05, WCPSS expanded its efforts toward strengthening rigor, relevance, and relationships in high schools by providing:

- ✦ an increased number of advanced, rigorous courses;
- ✦ more in-depth training on differentiation of instructional practices, modified lesson pacing guides, and professional learning community development to more fully engaged students and make the learning process more relevant; and
- ✦ a stronger emphasis on personalization, such as ninth-grade transition efforts, to develop stronger student/staff relationships.

This study provides a progress report on WCPSS high schools as they work toward high school redesign. In this summary, comparisons have been made between 2002-03 and 2004-05, unless noted.

## MAJOR FINDINGS

### Rigor

A set of new, challenging advanced courses provided students with more opportunities to meet the more rigorous graduation requirements. Academic opportunities have continued to increase since the 2002-03 school year.

- ✦ Increased challenging coursework was made available in 2004-05 for students through 142 new advanced courses (in addition to the 23 new advanced courses in 2003-04).
- ✦ Enrollment in higher-level courses increased by 57%, compared to a student membership increase of 13%.

- ✦ Most student respondents (75%) in the spring 2005 High School Special Topics Student Survey expressed satisfaction with their course opportunities.

Increased rigor was evident in the 2004-05 school year.

- ✦ Compared to 2002-03, the percent of students with a 3.0 or higher grade point average increased by 2.8% (to 49.9%) while the average number of credits earned grew from 5.65 to 6.66.
- ✦ North Carolina End-of-Course (EOC) test results remained stable with 83% of the students scoring at grade level.
- ✦ Performance in the North Carolina ABCs of Accountability Program (ABCs), the state's primary school improvement program, was stable in spring 2005, following a 2.5% increase between spring 2003 and spring 2004; high growth was reached in 11 of 18 schools in spring 2005.
- ✦ The average SAT score for WCPSS was up 8 points, to 1075. Grade 12 student participation was down from 80% to 75%, however. Both participation and scores were still above the nation and the state.
- ✦ Advanced Placement (AP) course enrollees increased 24% to 10,804; the number of test takers increased by 16% to 3,212, and the number of tests taken by the students increased as well by 16% to 6,365. The most common scores were at 4 or 5, which allowed many test-takers to earn college credit.
- ✦ Of graduating seniors, 63% planned to attend a 4-year college (a gain of 2%), and 25% anticipated going to a 2-year college (a gain of 1.3%).

From surveyed students' comments, the most common request regarding rigor focused on the desire for more thorough instruction in courses taken (e.g., less rushing through the curriculum, more discussion, study sessions). Teachers most often requested greater freshman transition support and instructional make-up/coaching sessions. A common request from both groups was for year-long versus one-semester AP courses. (over)



## Relevance

In 2004-05, more meaningful coursework and use of time in school engaged students more fully and supported their need to see relevance between school, their lives, and future plans.

- ✘ The mix and frequency of use of instructional practices changed; a wider variety of activities was used on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis.
- ✘ The learning structures showed students were more fully engaged.
- ✘ Student satisfaction with schools was generally positive:
  - ☞ Course opportunities – positive responses from most students (75%);
  - ☞ Coursework – positive views from most students regarding challenge, comprehension, and homework reinforcement and amount; and
  - ☞ Daily schedule – most students (78% or more) liked their school’s schedule.
- ✘ An increase occurred in dropout rates from 2.8 in 2002-03 to 3.7 in 2004-05 (note that 2002-03 was the first year for the NCWISE database implementation, and data entry issues may have resulted in artificially low rates):
  - ☞ The increase overall primarily reflected an increase within the Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino student subgroups (from 3.9 to 6.0 and from 6.5 to 8.8 respectively).
  - ☞ The increase in the 11 schools new to the block schedule was slightly less (from 2.7 in 2002-03 to 3.5 in 2004-05).

Students most commonly requested more varied instructional methods and more course options, as well as a more flexible schedule (e.g., bell schedule allowing more time between classes and longer lunch periods, some courses for one semester, some courses for one year). Most teacher requests were for the use of more instructional strategies and more time for planning and professional development.

## Relationships

An emphasis on personalizing the educational experience supported students through the building of staff and student relationships and helping students feel more connected with their schools.

Indications are that efforts to improve relationships have had some positive impact. In the spring 2005 High School Topics Teacher Survey, more than 80% of the teachers reported using personalization strategies to further student connections with their schools. The transition process for ninth-grade students was also addressed in the spring 2005 High School Special Topics Student Survey, relating to some new strategies attempted.

Some indicators suggested improved climate at schools, while some indicators remained stable.

- ✘ Almost all students (93%) said they were often or sometimes satisfied with their relationships with their teachers.
- ✘ In terms of student behavior, short- and long-term suspension rates stayed fairly stable between 2003-04 and 2004-05, with the percentage of students suspended declining across grades 9 through 12.
- ✘ More than half of the students and two-thirds of teachers reported fewer discipline concerns in 2004-05.
- ✘ Most students (81%) and teachers (92%) said their school is safe, down slightly (4% for students; 2% for teachers) from 2002-03.
- ✘ Close to two-thirds of students report that they liked their school (stable).
- ✘ Attendance remained high at 96%.
- ✘ Most students (87%) said they often or sometimes felt like a part of their school.
- ✘ Most ninth-grade survey respondents (80%) indicated the change from middle to high school went smoothly for them. Some chose not to participate in ninth-grade transition activities. Of those that did participate, parent support (81%), teacher advice (74%), and advice from upperclassmen (66%) were viewed as most helpful.

In terms of areas for improvement, students most often requested more personal attention. Teachers most often requested a more positive campus climate, with students held more accountable for discipline issues, as well as more student-teacher-parent-community interactions.

Focus	Target Indicators	Results
Rigor	Course opportunities Advanced course enrollees	↑ ↑
Relevance	Variety in instructional practices Student engagement	↑ ↑
Relationships	Students like their school Positive student/teacher relationships	↔ ↑