

# **Connecticut River Valley Collaborative Planning Committee**

## **Reimagining our Future Schools**

### **Introduction**

At the request of the Connecticut River Collaborative Planning Committee, during the summer of 2020, the school counselors from the northernmost high schools in New Hampshire and Essex County of Vermont collaborated to develop three exemplars of a new Regional North Country 9-12 school and were tasked with focusing on staffing for these exemplars. A summary of the exemplars was provided to the SAU#7 and ENSU superintendents. The counselors were then asked to continue their collaborative efforts and “reimagine” a learning model best suited for a Regional North Country School.

The counselors feel that several aspects of the three exemplars previously shared should be included in a “reimagined” learning institution. These aspects include: (1) proficiency/competency based learning that guides instruction, assessment and reporting (2) expanded Career Technical Education (CTE) programming located in a facility that is connected to the secondary school and available to middle school (3) a revitalized program of studies that offers greater electives and more dual enrollment courses (4) personalized learning plans for all students that are directed by the student and produce a culminating project or experience and (5) focused academies structured as a school-within-a-school.

In addition, the counselors propose the addition of (1) an alternative program focused on students in grades 6-9 but also available to high school students (2) the elimination of grade levels to better align with proficiency based learning and (3) a flexible daily schedule.

### **Proficiency/Competency Based Learning**

The reimagined school will do away with credit requirements and be a completely proficiency-based system. Both the Agency of Education in Vermont and the Department of Education in NH have required this; yet, currently, none of the three schools are doing so.

### **Expanded CTE Programming**

Schools are responsible for supporting students in obtaining gainful employment so they can earn a livable wage. By expanding CTE programs, and linking them to needs in the Great North Woods communities, this will happen. CTE students will graduate as marketable employees; all programs will offer certifications, endorsements, and/or licensures for marketability.

In this reimagined system, CTE programs could potentially increase from five (offered in the current 2020-2021 year) to 11. The 11 programs, or focus areas, would align with labor data for the Great North Woods region as well as the states of New Hampshire and Vermont. These programs will be hands-on and offer direct career experience, including in the trades. The

current five CTE programs offered include Advanced Integrated Manufacturing, Business & Technology, Construction & Restoration, Diversified Agriculture & Natural Resources and Fire & Emergency Services.

The following programs could be considered based on student interest evidenced in recent post-secondary pursuits and a need in our community. Sub pathways to the current and future programs, if applicable, are indicated.

- Automotive Technology
  - Heavy Equipment Operations
  - Engine Repair
- Hospitality & Tourism
  - Recreation, Amusements & Attractions
  - Restaurant & Food/Beverage Services
  - Lodging
- Architecture & Construction
  - Carpentry
  - Electrician
  - Heating, Ventilation & AC
  - Drafting & Design
  - Welding
  - Maintenance/Operations
- Diversified Agriculture & Natural Resources
  - Horticulture / Food Products & Processing
  - Forestry/Natural Resources
  - Animal Systems
  - Environmental Service Systems
  - Power, Structural & Technical Systems
  - Agricultural Mechanics
- Advanced Integrated Manufacturing
  - Logistic & Inventory Control
  - CNC Operations
  - Maintenance, Installation & Repair
  - Manufacture Production Process
  - Precision Machining
  - Woodworking
- Business, Management & Administration
  - Accounting
  - Entrepreneurship/Marketing
  - Business Finance
  - Management
- Human Services
  - Education Teaching/Training

- Early Childhood Development & Services
- Personal Care Services (Including Elder & Disabled Persons)
- Counseling & Mental Health Services
- Information & Computer Systems Technology
  - Cybersecurity
  - Networking & Informational Support Services
  - Programming & Software Development
  - Web & Digital Communications
- Protective Services
  - Fire Management Services
  - Emergency Medical Services
  - Law Enforcement Services(including Corrections and Border & Customs)
  - Military
  - Legal Studies (including Paralegal, Stenographer, and Lawyer)
- Health Sciences
  - Nursing
  - Therapies (Physical and Occupational)
  - Medical Transcription
  - Dental

The CTE Center will share a common campus with the high school. Having the CTE Center on the same campus allows for the fluidity of student participation in other programs on campus. Each CTE program will offer short-term introductory courses to students beginning in middle school. Each CTE program will also offer academic classes in the subject area. By allowing non-CTE students to take these courses they will be able to explore potential careers. CTE programs will deliver curricula through a half-day program throughout the school year to allow for delivery of these academic classes.

Because these academic courses will be offered through CTE programs and taught by CTE instructors, they can be approved as “CTE courses”. This will bring in more federal and state CTE funding.

### **Revitalized Program of Studies**

The inclusion of more elective offerings is critical for student success and engagement. In addition to empowering practical skills, electives can help students find hidden talents or passions. In fact, several studies show that students are more likely to get a degree or major in a course they took as an elective. In addition, electives reveal the skill sets of some students that might not be obvious in their other classes, helping them see their strengths and affording them opportunities to be successful and feel valued.

Through the experience of remote learning, it was evident that many students can excel online. Students have historically utilized online learning opportunities through platforms like NH Virtual Learning Academy Charter School (VLACS), Vermont Virtual Learning Collaborative (VTVLC),

Middlebury Interactive Languages, and Odysseyware to enhance their traditional schedules and augment their transcripts.

Courses that students have valued include: Criminology, Veterinary Science, Nutrition, Medical Terminology, Flexibility, Cybersecurity, Wall Street, Microeconomics, Sports Officiating, Animation, Zoology, Pre-Vet Studies, Careers in Dentistry, American Sign Language, Astronomy, Allied Health Assistant, and so much more.

By reimagining learning, these electives could be taught by our own instructors - either live and in-person or online. For example, we could develop our own virtual learning experience much like VLACS and VTVLC does. This, like our expanded CTE Center, could become a source of revenue as other schools south of us also take advantage of our online learning program. This would also benefit students who can use their time during the school day to pursue other areas of interest and complete online learning when and where it best suits them.

Additional electives to offer students include: Public Speaking, Astronomy, Genetics, Botany, Marine Science, and Ecology, Philosophy, Political Science, and Religions of the World, Exploring Makers-space, Computer Science, Mixed Media Arts, Engineering Design and Web Communication & Design, Chamber Music, Music Theory, Musical Composition & Production, Performance Band - Rock & Jazz, and Stagecraft, Leadership, Ethics & Contemporary Issues and Study Strategies.

Our reimagined school system will offer a variety of dual enrollment opportunities including Running Start, early college or eStart. This coursework prepares students for post-secondary success. Dual-enrollment courses offer students college credit for courses taken while in high school, saving students and families money on college tuition. Grades earned become part of their permanent college transcript and credits can be transferred to most four-year institutions. In addition, students (and the school itself) will be able to take advantage of a college library and resources.

By expanding and promoting dual enrollment, whether it be through Running Start, early college or eStart, students can actually earn a liberal arts associate degree (60 credits) by the time they graduate from high school. To accomplish this our reimagined school system should enter into an agreement with a local college/universities for students to be on a college campus or remotely taking coursework as much as possible. For this to be economically feasible, we anticipate negotiating different tuition rates for our students, less than the early college rate. During senior year, for example, our students could be bussed to White Mountain Community College in Berlin, Community College of Vermont in Newport or Northern Vermont University in Lyndonville so they could take more hands-on courses (if desired) to address their liberal arts and open electives.

## **Personalized Learning**

The reimagined school will develop a system to monitor engagement in standards/learning/competencies. Every student will work with a team of educators, professionals, community members and others who will provide support and mentorship. This team will meet regularly to assess progress, revise the learning plan, and guide learning objectives.

## **Learning Academies**

The reimagined school system looks at redesigning the high school experience to better engage students and prepare them for success in college and the workforce. This can be accomplished by offering small learning academies and a proficiency/competency based system of teaching and learning. Sometimes referred to as a “school within a school”, the emphasis on these smaller communities will support students in developing stronger connections with their instructors and peers. A “school within a school” means that students will take the majority of their classes within the academy setting.

Our reimagined system will allow students to focus their educational interests, much like college. They can choose one of two pathways: STEM or Arts. A profile of a STEM and Arts Academy student can be developed and used to shape the application process and academy structure. Each pathway would involve exposure to technological integration, project-based learning, community engagement, work-based experiences, dual enrollment opportunities, personal reflection, flexible work and learning spaces, smaller and collaborative class sizes, and comprehensive, cross curricular instruction.

The two pathways could be further developed to become schools that stand on their own - much like charter or magnet schools. This is a highly probable long-term outcome/goal and would be another source of revenue for our regionalized school system as local districts opt to enroll students. This could also be a strong attractor for new families to move to our special part of Vermont and New Hampshire.

## **Alternative School**

There are two educational options in our community that students have pursued in order to earn their diplomas. Right now Canaan Schools is sending three students to Northeast Kingdom Learning Services (NEKLS). CAES has no open seats at North Country Charter Academy (NCCA) - all 5 are full. One of these seats has been occupied by a student since middle school and most didn't have credits beyond 9th grade when they enrolled. One student has been enrolled in a hybrid option of CAES and NEKLS. In addition, three Stewartstown residents have used their school choice option to enroll at NCCA. Pittsburg doesn't currently have any students at NCCA; however, they have enrolled two in recent years.

Though NEKLS and NCCA have been successful options for many students, these programs are primarily online and not full day. The reimagined alternative program would be more of a blend - not more than 50 percent online, feature small group, teacher-led instruction, real world

connections, and strong youth and family supports. Involving the family group in this alternative option will be essential to long-term student success and ultimately reconnecting students with the main school. The presence of daily group counseling and weekly individual counseling sessions for enrolled students will also be a critical component of the alternative program.

Like many elements in our reimagined school, the availability of an alternative program could be a source of revenue for the district, especially because the focus will be middle school aged students and early high school. Right now, there isn't strong (or any, really) local programming that serves this population. It's an age, however, where future school failure and struggle can be identified early, and if targeted interventions are available just as early, can be improved.

### **Elimination of Grade Levels**

Our reimagined school will be a student-centered, proficiency/competency-based school where students progress based on demonstrated mastery rather than seat time or biological age. This makes sense in that students learn at different paces and are stronger (and more passionate about) some topics over others. Let them go ahead when they are engaged and doing well, and slow it down when they need more support and reinforcement.

The revitalized program of studies will be opened up so that introductory courses at the CTE Center and electives would be offered to all students in middle school to help them know whether or not CTE and/or an Academy would be right for them. In addition, middle school students who believe they will choose to obtain an Associates Degree will be encouraged to take Algebra I and Geometry in order to have time to complete the college credits. These are courses that have not traditionally been available to middle school students, simply because of their age. In our reimagined system, students who are ready and willing to learn, will have options available to them and not be held back because of their age.

### **Flexible Schedule**

After engaging in at-home/remote learning for several months last year, the counselors see the potential for a better use of instructional time during the academic day. Prior to this, there had been conversation about developing an alternating day schedule. They feel that further flexibility in scheduling will act as a unique and creative way to increase course offerings by creating additional instructional times outside of the traditional instructional day. One can argue that there is a lot of wasted time within the current structure (as seen during at-home learning) and staff members whose talents could be used in different ways to provide more targeted learning opportunities for students.

A flexible schedule will vary to allow more or less time depending on the course or learning experience and do away with a routinized bell system. This system would be similar to the scheduling module at most colleges and universities so our students pursuing higher education would be familiar with it and better able to plan and organize their time.

One essential benefit, of the many, to a flexible schedule is the allowance of free periods during the day. These free periods can be used for lunch, study hall, collaborative projects, online learning, extracurricular activities, research, work-based learning and even socializing. Students will have greater access to the community, its resources, their teacher, and each other through a flexible schedule and varied course structure.

This schedule will help students become more self-reliant. They will be more engaged in their time at school because they will have a direct hand in how their time is spent. They will be able to interact more closely with their teachers, and have more one-on-one conversations and not have their afternoons and evenings act as a continuation of the school day.

Having this flexibility will serve other areas like guidance, administrative, specialized instruction and other student services. Time at the high school level that doesn't impact academics to address social, emotional, behavioral and learning needs would be a huge asset.

Lastly, through the flexible schedule, the availability of intensive (boot camp style) courses can be offered. Students can completely immerse themselves in a course or topic and complete it in a much faster period of time - perhaps even a week. This way of learning coincides with "girl-led" initiatives, like the Girl Scouts or "mini-versity" offerings as seen on many college campuses.

### **Conclusion**

When all of the elements summarized above are combined, it's clear that an overarching goal of our reimagined school system is to untether teaching from seat time. We do not want our students grouped together based on age nor do we want them taught at a uniform pace. We want students progressing through skills, mastering them, and enriching them. We want our students to plot their own academic pathways and be active participants in their education.

A new high school should successfully redesign its curricula while retaining some elements of a traditional high school experience. Efforts must drive toward key learning goals to help students gain robust knowledge and skills; become independent, lifelong learners who are critical and creative thinkers; develop a sense of self-agency; and grow to be civically and socially engaged citizens. High-quality college and career-ready experiences should also support students to identify their individual interests and create a plan for after high school. The flexibility of the schedule and learning academies will accomplish this through a collaborative, equitable, and personalized learning environment where every student has the opportunity to be actively involved in the learning process.

An additional benefit of our reimagined school system would be to the teachers, as this would allow more collaboration among them, providing additional support as they work together in meeting cross-content proficiencies. Professional development and collegiality will improve. Instructors from diverse disciplines will collaborate. There will be teaming and true professional learning conversations taking place. Flipped classrooms, flexible seating, and co-teaching are likely outcomes of this reimagined system.

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