Why did the Barr Foundation survey the New England education community?

In 2016, the Education Program at Barr launched an new regional strategy focused on a new vision for secondary schools in New England. We sought to inform this strategy by learning from the expertise and experiences of education stakeholders from all six New England states and from a variety of education organizations. The goal of this initial survey, administered in the spring of 2016, was to gather informal data from stakeholders working in, supporting, or collaborating with at least one public high school in New England about what they do, the challenges they faced, and which topics they wanted to learn more about. By doing so, we hoped to better understand where support could be most helpful.

What did Barr want to know?

The survey was designed to provide insights about high school innovation and design. We also wanted to better understand how the four school design elements, in which Barr aims to advance, manifests in high schools in New England: personalization, student agency, links to college and career, and strategic partnerships that expand learning opportunities and supports for students. Respondents provided individual perspectives by answering a number of questions, including:

- How do you define and measure success in your high school?
- What does high school innovation include? How innovative, in your opinion, is your high school?
To what extent is high school design a priority in your work?
To what extent does your high school demonstrate evidence of the four school design elements?
Can you provide examples of each school design element in your high school?
To what extent is enhanced implementation of each school design element a priority in your high school?
What topic areas within the four school design elements, if any, would you be most interested in exploring further?

We also sought to understand the challenges that respondents faced when doing high school design work as well as what types of support would be most helpful, through questions such as:

- What policy or systems topics impede progress on your current and future work on high school design?
- In the absence of barriers to participation, what is the likelihood of your participation in learning and networking opportunities, such as webinars, trainings, summer institutes, and visits to high schools nationally and regionally?
- Are there topic areas related to high school design, redesign, and/or innovation in which you are interested and/or want additional information and support?

Who responded to the Barr survey?

In May 2016, we were grateful to have received responses from 125 diverse stakeholders working in, supporting, or collaborating with at least one public high school in New England. Below highlights the demographics of the respondent pool.

- **Organizational representation**: The majority of respondents work within the local public school system (71%). Other organizations represented in
the survey include community-based organizations, state agencies, technical assistance providers, and institutions of higher education.

- **Geographic distribution:** Respondents worked in states across all of New England, with the largest proportion working in Massachusetts (47%), and in urban areas (38%). There was a fair share of suburban and rural high schools represented as well, 34% and 28% respectively.

- **High school characteristics:** The majority of respondents (60%) work with high schools that have 251-1000 enrolled students. About half of the respondents work with high schools with over 50% low-income students.

- **High school innovation:** Although less than 15% of respondents described their high school as highly or mostly innovative school-wide. However, the majority indicated that high school design or redesign that includes innovative elements is a “high” or “top” priority.

- **Network participation:** Over half indicated that they are part of at least one cross-community regional or statewide group or network related to high school. The most frequently mentioned groups include the League of Innovative Schools and the New England Secondary School Consortium.

**What did we learn?**

1) **Multiple definitions and measures of student success.** While achievement of academic standards and subjects remain essential to student success, additional competencies are required for students to succeed in high school and beyond. Yet, survey participants most frequently indicated that their high schools have **defined** student success traditionally (e.g., making strides in academic progress and

- **81%**
  - Percent of respondents that say that their high schools measure student success by high school academic achievement.

- **Only one in five respondents indicated that high school success was measured by post-secondary outcomes.**
achievement). Similarly, respondents most frequently indicated that their high schools measure student success by high school academic achievement such as “good grades.” A small number of respondents indicated that their current measures of student success also includes socio-emotional learning competencies. Such findings are indicative of the traditional ways that high school student success is defined and measured, while also provides some limited evidence of an emerging definition that includes both competency of academic standards and additional competencies that enable students to persist in postsecondary education and career environments.

Students are placed in courses based on demonstrated skill and content knowledge, not grade level or age. Courses are culturally relevant and engaging. Students progress academically based on demonstrating competence on content/skill. — School Administrator

2) Emerging evidence of personalized learning in New England’s high schools. A number of respondents shared current practices related to personalized learning. As noted in our What is Personalized Learning Anyway? blog, our goal is that personalized learning approaches are implemented across all aspects of a school, recognizing that it is a long-term undertaking and there are aspects of personalized learning that can be implemented as building blocks. We saw evidence of these building blocks in respondents’ examples, which included personal and individual learning plans, an advisory or counseling structures for students, extended learning opportunities beyond the traditional school day, flexible schedules and pathways, and project-based learning.

[My students participate] in project-based learning classes, where they work as a team to address a problem. It is entirely student driven. Portfolio defenses and conferences are entirely student-led.

— High School Teacher
3) **Strong interest in exploring approaches to increasing student agency in high schools.** Student agency is the capacity and propensity for students to own their learning and development. Compared to the other innovative elements we asked about, respondents expressed that they had relatively low levels of implementation of approaches that support student agency. On the other hand, some respondents shared evidence of student agency and pointed to instances where students’ are given opportunities to exercise choice, power, and leadership over their learning experiences. Respondents provided a range of topics that they are interested in exploring further; for example a teacher shared that they are interested in “including students in understanding and evaluating graduation standards” and a school administrator noted that his or her school is focused on “continuing to find ways to add agency into classroom practices around curriculum choices.”

4) **Some evidence of strategic partnerships and also links to college and career opportunities for high school students.** Examples of strategic partnerships included partnerships with local community organizations as well as employers and businesses that provide students with job shadowing and internship opportunities. Most of the examples of strategic partnerships were, however, short-term opportunities for a relatively small subset of students. College tours, college counseling, work-based opportunities to explore careers, and dual enrollment were all referenced as examples of links to college and career. Respondents were most interested in exploring how to grow and deepen partnerships, especially those that provide exposure to career and higher education opportunities.

> We have a strong network program that allows students many opportunities to visit, explore, and hear from colleges and career fields throughout the year.
> — High School Teacher

5) **Policy and system conditions may impede progress on high school design.** We also asked respondents to reflect on the system conditions that impede progress on high school design. High percentages of respondents reported
that a lack of flexibility around financial resources time and human capital posed the biggest current barriers. Among those respondents that work in high schools with over 50% low-income students, nearly all stated that flexibility around financial resources was a barrier. In the open-ended responses, respondents frequently cited lack of leadership support as hampering school innovation.

6) **High interest in connecting and learning with and from others across New England.** Stakeholders expressed that site visits to other high schools, facilitated networking, and training opportunities related to innovative high school models would all be particularly helpful.

**What’s next?**

We are excited about the interest expressed in our initial survey, and the potential to support more communities in deep processes to design or redesign excellent high school options. In 2017, we will continue to learn from and engage
with the education community in New England, and maintain a commitment to providing learning and networking opportunities for those interested. We look forward to your continued participation and partnership focused on ensuring all students find success in and beyond high school.

For more information about the Barr Foundation’s Education Program, please visit us at www.barrfoundation.org/education.