

## University of Northern Iowa

**College of Education White Paper: High School Reform**  
**Bridgette Wagoner, Instructor, Malcolm Price Lab School**  
**Dave Smith, Director, Malcolm Price Lab School**  
**bridgette.wagoner@uni.edu**  
**dave.smith@uni.edu**  
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American high schools are in the spotlight. Critics point out that the way most schools are structured hasn't changed much since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This archaic structure is inadequate to prepare today's highly diverse graduates for a global economy and ever-changing workforce. Currently, an effort to reform America's high schools is underway, centering on rigor, relevance, and relationships.

Nationally, there has been a call for high school reform since the 1987 SREB publication "High Schools that Work." More recently, NASSP's *Breaking Ranks II* (2004) provided the vision and the process for transforming high schools. At the heart of the vision is the goal of graduating students who are life, work, and college ready.

As early as 2001, Iowa began the journey toward High School Reform with the Urban Education Network's "Redefinition of High School: A Vision for Iowa." Since then, the State Board of Iowa, and the Governor's Office added to the process. The Iowa Department of Education kicked off an intensive effort to address Iowa High Schools with its publication "Improving Rigor and Relevance in the High School Curriculum" (2005). This paper provided Iowa educators with a tool for common understanding and common vocabulary to improve both rigor and relevance, Daggett's Rigor and Relevance Framework.

At the core of the high school reform effort are several beliefs. Those interested in High School Reform believe that every high school student should be held to high expectations for achievement and higher order thinking. They should be engaged in rigorous and relevant learning experiences in environments that are appropriate in size, time, and adult resources. Every student should feel a sense of belonging in his or her school and have a personal adult advocate. Finally, all students should be challenged intellectually; learn to solve complex, real-world problems; and be wholly prepared for life, work, and post-secondary pursuits.

To accomplish this end, every high school must strive to create caring communities that are focused on students and their individual needs. They should involve teachers in the identification and development of their reform goals, invest in teacher leaders, and provide teachers with many and sustained opportunities for professional development. These processes must be a part of an ongoing improvement process that is driven by data.

The University of Northern Iowa (UNI) and Price Laboratory School (PLS) are statewide leaders on issues of High School Reform. The Iowa Department of Education (DE) has established a close partnership with PLS to develop, implement, and share materials aimed at improving instruction throughout the state. Among other things, PLS has provided ICN broadcasts, created model units and DVDs, and contributed to the creation of Iowa's *Core Curriculum*. PLS faculty have shared their understandings with attendees at the Statewide High School Summit in several recent years and the 40 member schools of the Iowa High School Project. PLS is working with the DE to pilot Authentic Intellectual Work, a new initiative to further support effective instructional decision making. Schools and Area Education Agencies across the state have looked to UNI and PLS to provide unique, practitioner-provided professional development. In 2006-2007 PLS teachers worked with 87 Iowa schools and more than 1200 Iowa educators, ultimately impacting more than 30,000 Iowa students.